

From the editorial advisory board: TSA screening

Posted: 11/27/2010 01:00:00 AM MST

This week's question: New airport screening procedures by the Transportation Security Administration, just in time for one of the busiest travel weeks of the year ignited a firestorm of controversy over safety and civil liberties. What are your thoughts?

Days before our nation was attacked on 9/11, I was personally confronted with weak security at the Jetport of Portland, Maine. To greet my husband at the gate, I stepped through the metal detector wearing a scoop neck shirt, when a smirking security officer leaned aggressively over me to sneak a peek down my front. My instant thought was he was too distracted (or dumb) for his job. I pictured this scene with sadness when learning that this gateway was exploited in our nation's worst attack.

Now we wonder if today's organized assaults on our privacy at airport security are distracting our protectors from doing their job effectively. There is evidence that the invasive scanning techniques have major safety failings. If true, all the hassle and perhaps trauma they provoke in passengers could be all for naught.

An analyst at the Cato Institute (among others) has argued that the new body scanners cannot reliably detect bombs made of thin plastics, liquids or gels, or when hidden in body cavities. A terrorist could hide a bomb in a cavity then board a plane to place it on the fuselage with lethal results as compared with last year's Christmas Day underwear bomber.

Meanwhile, survivors of sexual assault get to be re-traumatized by techniques that would be illegal in other contexts. Today's new security also adds shocking cost hikes in equipment and staff. Instead, how about training thousands of much loved bomb-sniffing dogs whose snouts are so fine they can sometimes detect cancer tumors?

Anne B. Butterfield

annebutterfield@yahoo.com