

We Can Dream, Can't We?

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A new study from the Cato Institute asks the question many travelers have pondered after a pat-down gone awry: Can't we replace the TSA? The agency's embarrassing record of waste and mismanagement makes a compelling case.

In more than one instance, the agency has wasted tens of millions on technology that ended up being a flop. It bought hundreds of explosive-detector machines that turned out not to work outside the lab.

A few years ago, defying public outcry, it installed full-body scanners that produce graphic images of passengers' bodies. According to Cato, the agency never bothered to do any kind of cost-benefit analysis. Since then, independent scholars have done such analyses, and found that the costs far outweigh the gains. The Government Accountability Office called it "unclear" whether the machines can detect the hidden bombs they are supposed to thwart.

Congress created the Transportation Security Administration in the panicked wake of 9/11. Since then, its former chief has called it "hopelessly bureaucratic," and despite a budget of nearly \$8 billion, a report from the House Homeland Security Committee's transportation security subcommittee blasted the agency for "failing to meet taxpayers' expectations."

The Cato report, "Privatizing the Transportation Security Administration," also details some of TSA's internal troubles: management caught reimbursing extravagant expenses, dozens of employees fired at a time for failing to adhere to procedure, hundreds fired for theft.

A few U.S. airports are not under the TSA's watchful eye. There are 16 airports that have opted out and use private screening, although still regulated by the federal government. The DHS inspector general and a TSA consulting firm determined that the private screeners had about the same rate of competency as, or slightly better than, the TSA.

The majority of European and Canadian airports employ private screening companies. Cato comments, "In many ways, the United States has become a laggard in commercial aviation." Privatizing security could allow screening companies to compete and eliminate waste. Airports could customize their security based on traffic flow and other factors that might be unique to their location. The federal government could focus on intelligence and analysis.

In 2005, the DHS inspector general concluded, “The ability of TSA screeners to stop prohibited items from being carried through the sterile areas of the airports fared no better than the performance of screeners prior to September 11, 2001.” Airport screening has unquestionably become more of a hassle under the TSA, by several degrees of magnitude. But according to these reports, we’re not any safer.