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Homeland Security and the TSA: They had just one job to do and they blew it

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The head of the Transportation Safety Administration announced recently that the agency has a plan to deal with the long lines at many of the most important airports in America.

The plan is to warn us that the lines will get even worse this summer.

This is just the latest outrage that makes a lot of travelers hate the TSA. That feeling was buttressed for me when I was talking with a guy I went to high school with at Donovan Catholic in Toms River during the late 1960s.

After 9/11, this guy got a job with the TSA as a "behavioral officer." There are 3,000 of these. They walk around airports looking for people acting who are acting suspiciously.

The airport he walks around is O'Hare in Chicago, the busiest airport in America and the one with the longest lines. When I asked him how many potential terrorists the behavioral officers at O'Hare had caught, he said none.

But they and the customs agents there sure did miss a couple big ones. That would be Syed Farook and his Pakistani-born, Saudi-reared fiancée Tashfeen Malik. They sailed through customs there on July 27, 2014, after traveling from Saudi Arabia and then switched planes for California.

The photo of them at O'Hare that went viral later became an embarrassment to the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees TSA as well as customs and immigration.

She was wearing a veil and her eyes were bulging out. As for him, he was dressed in full Mideastern garb as well – even though he was born in America

The reason that photo went viral was an encounter the two later had with another guy who went to Donovan Catholic, Nicholas Thalasinis. After graduating in 1981, Thalasinis eventually moved to California and got a job with the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health.

By then, Thalasinis had become a Christian fundamentalist. Reports say he often argued religion with his co-worker Farook, who was born in America but later embraced a militant form of Islam more common to the Mideast.

One such argument at a pre-Christmas party in 2015 became the spark that led Farook and his wife to massacre Thalasin and 13 others.

It could have been much worse. After the couple were killed in a shootout, police found they had the material to make pipe bombs that could have spread much more terror if they had been more methodical.

The FBI later found that as far back as 2013, before the couple had met, there were signs in the communications between the two of "their joint commitment to jihadism and to martyrdom."

But Department of Homeland Security screeners didn't catch that, and Malik was issued a fiancée visa.

After 15 years, the DHS still hasn't managed to come up with a system for screening out the tiny percentage of people who might be terrorists while permitting the rest of us to get on our planes quickly and with a minimum of fuss.

That led me to call Chris Edwards. He's an expert in bureaucracy with the free-market Cato Institute in Washington who recently authored a piece titled "[Airport Security Lines and Centralized Bureaucracy.](#)"

The latter are the cause of the former, Edwards told me. Nothing shows that better than the role played by those behavioral officers.

Chris Christie's trying to outdo the Donald with his plan to treat foreign visitors like FedEx packages. But another Donald from here in New Jersey points out that the governor's done a complete 180 on immigration

A recent federal audit of the program, which is formally titled [the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques](#) program, found that the TSA "deployed SPOT nationwide before first determining whether there was a scientifically valid basis."

There isn't, said Edwards.

"They looked at the science behind it and there is no science behind it," he said. "They've never caught a terrorist with those officers."

If the TSA put those 3,000 people to work screening passengers then the lines could be reduced immediately, he said. That's what a private business would do. But the TSA is a bureaucracy, a Washington-based one at that.

"Bureaucracies don't learn," he said. "Businesses are under heavy competition. They have to learn from their mistakes. They fire the CEO and they get a new guy."

We crusty old conservatives hate the TSA. And now the youth of America are weighing in as well, as with this video. Here's my analysis and prediction: Whatever you think about Barack Obama, he ain't stupid. But he is a narcissist, just like Bill Clinton. Both rose very quickly in life by pleasing other people. Therefore, I predict, Obama...

In fact, airports can fire the TSA thanks to a little-noticed wrinkle in the enabling legislation for the TSA.

In the post 9/11 panic, the Democratic Senate passed a bill requiring that all screening be done by the TSA. But the Republican House inserted a proviso that permits individual airports to opt for private screening, as San Francisco Airport did long ago.

Port Authority officials have said that if the lines don't get shorter, they may ask the feds to permit private screening at Newark Liberty and other airports serving New York.

I always thought the TSA's performance was so bad that it couldn't get any worse.

But now that looks like the weary traveler's only hope.

ALSO: Here's [a post I wrote back in](#) the bad old days when Janet Napolitano was head of Homeland Security. first DHS erred in permitting the Shoe Bomber to get a U.S. visa despite a history of associating with radical Muslim groups. And then they compounded that idiocy by ordering all Americans to remove their shoes for screening - as if it were our fault instead of theirs.

Note the quote from Napolitano:

And then we have Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano stating "One thing I'd like to point out is that the system worked."

If I were the president, I would order Napolitano to immediately compose a no-idiot list. I would order her to include on it the name of every person who has helped assemble a system that puts innocent American citizens through pointless harassment every time they fly. I would especially single out the dolt who came up with the recent request that passengers stay in their seats for the final hour of every flight. Any terrorist could simply blow up the plane before that point. Meanwhile innocent Americans can't get up to take a pee.