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Privatize the TSA to improve safety

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Just in time for summer travels, the Transportation Security Administration has longer than ever lines, causing passengers to miss flights. Perhaps this is a good time to talk about privatizing the agency.

“Travel can be a pain even in the best of times, and bottlenecks at Transportation Security Administration checkpoints are making things even worse than usual,” CNN reported. “This summer, air travel is expected to draw the most people ever, with 220 million expected to fly. And officials say the problem won’t ease until at least mid-June.”

TSA officials now recommend passengers arrive at the airport three hours before their flight is scheduled to board. That’s longer than most domestic flights, and it makes travel by car seem like a logical alternative, for many. From Tyler, for example, a drive to Dallas takes about half that - an hour and a half - or two hours to DFW Airport. A trip to Houston, likewise, can be made in about four hours - about what it would take to arrive, wait in line for screening, and fly.

But what those long lines don’t do is make us any safer.

Here’s a report from the Washington Post last summer, at the height of summer travel season: “Last week, agents at U.S. airport security checkpoints intercepted 45 guns, an assortment of knives and brass knuckles, and several deactivated hand grenades. Two weeks ago, the count was 53 guns, and the week before that, it was 57 ... This week, the acting head of the Transportation Security Administration got bounced from his job because in 95 percent of test cases, real guns or fake bombs made it past the TSA.”

The new director, Peter Neffenger asked for - and received - more money from Congress for his agency, enough to hire 1,600 new TSA workers. But fake weapons (and presumably real ones) still get through.

A better answer, one that’s working elsewhere, is to privatize the duties of the TSA.

“The solution is to dismantle TSA and move responsibility for screening operations to the nation’s airports,” said the Cato Institute’s Chris Edwards. “The government would continue to oversee aviation safety, but airports would be free to contract out screening to expert aviation security firms.”

There’s plenty of evidence that private screeners do a better job.

“All major airports in Canada use private screening firms, as do about three quarters of Europe’s major airports,” Edwards said. “That practice creates a more efficient security structure, and allows governments to focus on aviation intelligence and oversight.”

Of course, the gold standard for transportation security is Israel and the El Al airline. As The New York Times pointed out, “No El Al plane has been attacked by terrorists in more than three decades, and no flight leaving Ben Gurion [Airport] has ever been hijacked.” Security is handled by the airline itself - a private company.

“Over a decade of experience has shown that the nationalization of airport screening under the Bush administration was a mistake,” Edwards said.

It’s something to think about, maybe while standing in line at the airport.