Sentiment grows for privatizing airport screening – again!

By Steve Lasky
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Security and political critics alike are pressuring the TSA to either clean up its act or get out of the screening business

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has to be the most maligned federal agency in history. Everyone who flies seems to have their own version of TSA hell, spanning the security line purgatory of incidental groping and rude behavior to theft and intrusive scanning.

I do fly on a regular basis, and I will say that my negative experiences with TSA agents have been minimal. Except for the metal rods and plates in my surgically repaired left leg, my groping experiences hardly raise a red flag. However, it is interesting to assess the level of professionalism (or lack thereof) of TSA staff when doing the security line shuffle in airports across the country. Certain cities have earned a well-deserved reputation for shabby performances and lethargic TSA screeners, while a lesser number receive high praise for professional conduct.

As frustration with TSA screening practices and perceived security lapses continue to grow not only with the general flying public, but with political heavyweights in Washington D.C., the cry for the return to private security screeners in our nation's airports is reaching an audible pitch.

Certainly no one is saying the job TSA faces is an easy one. In 2013, the agency screened 638,706,790 passengers, which was almost 1.5 million more than the previous year. Close to 2,000 firearms were confiscated from carry-on bags at checkpoints across the country, with 81 percent of those being loaded. My home base – Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International – had the distinction of topping the list in 2013 for most firearms intercepted with 111.

The TSA also suffered its first fatality this past year when TSA officer Gerardo Hernandez was killed in the line of duty at LAX by a gunman specifically targeting a TSA agent.

Yet the pressure mounts for either the return to privatization or for major overhauls in how the TSA operates. The $1.1 trillion spending bill that was recently passed by the U.S. Congress has renewed the privatization discussion since new appropriation measures will prevent the TSA

from using federal funds to hire additional screeners if they exceed the cap of 46,000 employees now on the payroll.

When you combine this new budget restraint with a vocal campaign by several lawmakers to return to private security in our airports, along with a scathing government aviation study released last November by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) that proposes the elimination of the TSA's flawed SPOT security program -- Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques, 2014 could prove to be a contentious year for the agency.

The most damning aspect of the GAO's findings was it called for the elimination of the expensive SPOT program because it finds no "scientifically validated evidence" for the $200 million annual expenditure, and that it was deployed without the TSA conducting any cost-benefit analysis.

Since its creation following the events of 9/11, the TSA has ballooned into largest DHS employer and has been mired in bad press with its air marshal program, the intrusive full-body scanning machine debacle and now the SPOT program.

Many critics claim the TSA has underperformed and has been no more effective than the previous system using the private sector. Now that 16 U.S. airports have been given the green light to return private security contractors (albeit the majority are smaller airports), the comparison between TSA and the private sector are increasing. In fact, a report released by the House in 2011 said that San Francisco International's private screeners actually performed better than TSA at LAX.

In a recent article written by Chris Edwards, editor of www.DownsizingGovernment.org at the Cato Institute, and author of the study Privatizing the Transportation Security Administration, he states that the government has an important oversight role to play in aviation security, but the TSA's near-monopoly on screening has resulted in it getting "bogged down in managing its bloated federal workforce," as one congressional report concluded.

Edwards continued that Congress should abolish TSA. Activities that have not shown substantial benefits -- such as SPOT -- should be eliminated. Airport screening -- which represents about two-thirds of TSA's budget -- should be moved to the control of airports and opened to competitive contracting. And the remaining parts of TSA should be moved to other federal agencies.

Gerry Connelly, a House Democrat from Virginia has been among the most vocal political critics of the TSA in recent months. During a committee hearing on the TSA's Screening Partnership Program, Connelly said he didn't appreciate agents "barking orders" at people in airports, adding the less polite an agent is, the more likely they are to encounter resistance from the public

Connelly went on to say that there was no excuse for someone barking orders continuously at the public at any airport in America who is an employee of the federal government, or a contractor for the federal government. Connelly said he'd lose his job if I treated the public that way.

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla, who is head of the Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee on government operations, said last week he plans legislation "one way or the other" to privatize all federal screeners within two years. Like many critics of the agency who want to take the screening process away, Mica is in favor of leaving TSA in charge of gathering intelligence, setting standards and running audits.

"If you come to Orlando airport or Sanford airport, what is going on is almost criminal to American citizens, the way they are treated," said Mica. "This is the mess we've created."

But not all aviation security experts are ready to throw TSA screeners under the bus. Even those who have been sharp critics of the aviation industry's security infrastructure don't follow the lead of those calling for private sector intervention. Billie Vincent, a veteran of the Federal Aviation Administration and whose last position in the FAA was the director of the Office of Civil Aviation Security from 1982 to 1986, does not agree that the present system has failed.

 "The current U.S. TSA aviation security (AVSEC) system is far superior to the pre-9/11 AVSEC system that resulted in the deaths of almost 3,000 people. That is not to say that elements of the current TSA AVSEC system cannot be improved. Airports, airlines, and selective members of Congress that are advocating a return to a privatized AVSEC system are not doing so with the primary purpose of improving AVSEC – they have other motives," warns Vincent.

"Other proponents are laboring under the mistaken impression that privatization would improve AVSEC. However, privatizing the current TSA AVSEC system makes absolutely no sense whatsoever and would essentially be reverting to the failed pre-9/11 AVSEC system and all of its attendant problems," concludes Vincent.

The jury may still be out on whether or not the TSA should retain control of screening operations. However, little doubt remains that the cry for agency reform is loud and not to be ignored.