



Published on *Washington Examiner* (<http://washingtonexaminer.com>)

[Home](#) > Gene Healy: Conservatives share blame for TSA's 'freedom fondle'

By *Gene Healy*

Created Nov 23 2010 - 9:05pm

Gene Healy: Conservatives share blame for TSA's 'freedom fondle'

Comments (2)

Last fall, flying out of Chicago O'Hare, I ran into that rarest of breeds: a Transportation Security Administration agent with a sense of humor. In her "Da Bears" accent, she moved the line along with a good-natured, "awright: who's my next victim?"

At least they're allowed to joke about it. If a rubber-gloved fed cups your -- er, I prefer the term "treasures" -- just turn your head and cough politely. Don't dare try to ease the awkwardness with a wisecrack, lest you get arrested under the TSA's no-joking policy.

Sometimes, when I manage to pull my eyes away from my twinkly smartphone and look around, I think, "Wow, if you squint a little, this could be a sci-fi dystopia!" (It happened again just recently, as I was passing through the gates at my local Metro station, and Janet Napolitano's voice boomed ominously from the loudspeakers, ordering me to say something if I see something.)

Thankfully, the growing anti-TSA backlash shows that for many Americans, there isn't a Soma dose high enough to get them to grin and bear the bureaucratic feel-up.

In fact, even some of our most rabid terror-warriors, like former Sen. Rick Santorum and neocon stalwart Charles Krauthammer, now say they've had enough.

Santorum and Krauthammer blame a politically correct mentality that prevents profiling. But the Christmas bomber was Nigerian; the shoe bomber, a Brit with a Jamaican father. Should we just give the "freedom fondle" to anyone vaguely swarthy?

I have a different explanation for how we got here.

For nearly a decade, Krauthammer, Santorum and too many others on the Right have relentlessly hyped and politicized the terrorist threat. But when every bungled attack -- no matter how inept -- gets the screeching siren treatment on Drudge, what do you expect that political dynamic to produce? Sober, sensible policy?

Conservatives could stand to think more clearly about ideas and consequences, cause and effect. Take last week's comments from Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., a congressional father of the agency: "When the TSA was established, it was never envisioned that it would become a huge,

unwieldy bureaucracy."

Really, who could have known?

And when prominent conservatives brush off constitutional concerns with the bromide "the Constitution is not a suicide pact," (or, as Mitt Romney put it in 2007, "Our most basic civil liberty is the right to be kept alive") is it so surprising that liberty and dignity get sent to the back of the line?

Like it or not, we live in the world the alarmists have made.

Yet, in reality, we're remarkably safe. In 2009, terrorists caused just 25 U.S. noncombatant fatalities worldwide. That's 25 too many, but "existential," it's not.

My colleague Jim Harper points out that, since 9/11, "in 99 million domestic flights, transporting 7 billion people, precisely zero domestic travelers have snuck an underpants bomb onto a plane. (The one that we have seen -- which did not work -- came from overseas.)"

Surely the existence of the TSA -- hapless and bureaucratic as they are -- deters some potential bombers. Even so, the agency won't -- likely can't -- identify a single genuine terrorist they've caught, and it's not at all clear, according to the Government Accountability Office, that even the nude machine would have exposed the Christmas bomber.

We're safe -- but not perfectly safe. Hyping and politicizing the terrorist threat won't deliver us perfect safety. Nothing can. But, as we're learning, it can put us on the path toward a society that no longer looks like America -- one where you're endlessly prodded and poked -- and ordered not to joke about the poking.

That's something worth being alarmed about.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

[Columnists](#) [Gene Healy](#) [NEP](#)

Source URL: <http://washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/2010/11/gene-healy-conservatives-share-blame-tsas-freedom-fondle>