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## Trump's TSA Budget Fails to Cut the Obvious: Air Marshalls

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To fund President Donald Trump's fanciful plans for a massive southern border wall, his administration is scrounging around in the budgets of current US government programs. The results are evident in last week's [budget blueprint](#).

The administration has been looking to squeeze money from the budget of the Transportation Security Administration, which may represent an admission that some of the money slung at the terrorism problem in the United States might have been wasted.

Although such a reappraisal is a decade or more overdue, it isn't clear that Trump's budget staffers know what they are doing. In particular, in their quest to cut costs they have ignored an elephantine program, the Federal Air Marshal Service, which provides little security at great cost.

For some time, in books and professional articles we have been applying standard techniques of risk and cost-benefit analysis to domestic counterterrorism efforts. By those measures, we have repeatedly found that FAMS fails spectacularly at reducing risk enough to justify its cost.

The program involves paying people to fly shotgun on airliners to prevent or disrupt hijackings. Even though there are thousands of such marshals, there are too few to be on much more than 5 percent of all flights—though the service still wouldn't be cost-effective even if that number rose to 20 percent. The TSA insists marshals are placed on high-risk flights, but since no terrorist has boarded an airliner in the US with hostile intent since 2001, it is difficult to see how that "risk" is determined.

A 2015 CNN [investigation](#) found that air marshals were often medicated. Because of their hectic schedule they were also often sleep-deprived: 75 percent on domestic runs and 84 percent on international ones.

Crucially, the program is very expensive. It takes up some 10 percent of the TSA's budget, costing more than \$1 billion per year, including losses borne by airlines forced to provide free

seats (mostly in first class) for their uninvited guests. In general, spending one dollar on the service generates less than 10 cents in benefit.

We have assessed a policy mix in which the air marshal budget is reduced by 75 percent (still leaving hundreds around for special assignments), the inexpensive program to train and arm pilots to resist hijackers is doubled, and secondary barriers to the cockpit—easily deployable and stowable—are installed. The result: better aviation security and a savings of hundreds of millions of dollars each year for both the taxpayers and the airlines.

Whether the border wall makes sense or not, the Trump budget staff is on firmer ground with a couple of other suggestions. They want to dump the legions of “behavioral detection officers” (BDOs) who wander the airports looking for passengers with quirks like exaggerated yawning, excessive throat clearing, bobbing Adam’s apples, and downward gazes, while arriving late for flights, whistling during the screening process, making repetitive grooming gestures, and/or wearing improper attire. The BDOs have yet to waylay a single terrorist, visibly anxious or not.

After reviewing more than 400 studies about detecting deception, the Government Accountability Office found that “the ability of human observers to accurately identify deceptive behavior based on behavioral cues or indicators is the same as or slightly better than chance.” It also noted that, after years of implementing and testing, “TSA cannot demonstrate that the agency’s behavior detection activities can reliably and effectively identify high-risk passengers who may pose a threat to the US aviation system.”

Also dumpable are the VIPRs. Visible Intermodal Protection Response (we’re not making this up) consists of teams of air marshals, transportation security inspectors, behavior detection officers, explosives specialists, and local law enforcement and airport officials who coordinate to randomly screen aviation workers, property, and vehicles for terrorists. They have had about the same success rate as BDOs.

In our assessment, the costs of both the BDO and the VIPR programs considerably outweigh the benefits, even if we bend over backwards to assume they offer any of the latter.

Because the programs are so labor-intensive, they are quite expensive: about \$200 million per year for the BDOs and \$50 million for the VIPRs. The budget blueprint says the administration wants to reduce the VIPRs and eliminate the BDOs for savings of \$80 million, a number that doesn’t exactly add up.

However, the costs of these two programs clearly pale when they are compared to those of the monumentally expensive TSA program the Trump budget scroungers have clearly, and unaccountably, ignored: the air marshals.

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