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Getting Touchy at the Airport

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[The Thread](#) is an in-depth look at how major news and controversies are being debated across the online spectrum.

Tags:

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Ah, Thanksgiving is almost upon us. We can look forward to a full belly, good wine, [bad football](#) and the worst travel day of the year. And in 2010, apparently, it will be the worst travel day in the history of mankind: “In the three weeks since the Transportation Security Administration began more aggressive pat-downs of passengers at airport security checkpoints, [traveler complaints have poured in](#),” reports The Times’s Susan Stellan. “Some offer graphic accounts of genital contact, others tell of agents gawking or making inappropriate comments, and many express a general sense of powerlessness and humiliation ...It remains to be seen whether travelers approve of the pat-downs, especially as millions more people experience them for the first time during the holiday travel season.”

But we’re an innovative people — if we’re worried about inappropriate contact, we can find a technological alternative that makes everybody happy, right? **Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.**

Travelers are furious with the T.S.A. But are we safer in the air?

There are plenty of [horror stories](#) (and one [full-fledged martyr](#)); they tend to get repetitive, although some stand out for [their excellent documentation](#) and others [actually achieve humor](#). [Pilots’ unions](#) are not pleased, some politicians [want the T.S.A. removed from the scene](#), Ron Paul thinks [there oughta be a law](#) and some [airports are even trying to opt out](#). (At least somebody’s [having a laugh](#).)

This is not to say everybody finds the scanners intrusive, dangerous and a potential privacy concern. Here some [poll data](#) from CNET’s Declan McCullagh:

A Rasmussen poll released November 2 suggests that 69 percent of Americans would rather go through full-body scanners rather than be subjected to pat-downs that can involve genital touching usually reserved for intimate partners. An even higher percentage of Americans support full-body X-ray machines, according to a subsequent CBS News poll, but the wording of the question only referenced “electronic” screening, without mentioning health or privacy worries.

The Times’s Nate Silver, however, warns that we should [take the polling with a healthy](#)

[dose of salt](#): “I would guess that only somewhere between 1 and 5 percent of Americans have so far traveled through a security line where such machines were in use; it will probably take some time before we know where public opinion settles in on this topic. Another issue is that most of these surveys are asking about the full-body machines in a vacuum. I’d be curious to see what the results were if respondents were asked to pick between full-body machines and traditional metal detectors.”

And McCullagh finds an expert who [thinks we’re right to be worried](#). “A University of California at San Francisco professor of biochemistry told CNET today that the Obama administration’s claim that full-body scanners pose no health risks to air travelers is in ‘error,’” he reports. “The administration’s defense of the controversial machines, which use X-rays to perform what critics have dubbed naked strip searches, has ‘many misconceptions, and we will write a careful answer pointing out their errors,’ said John Sedat, a UCSF professor of biochemistry and biophysics and member of the National Academy of Sciences.”

What could go wrong, professor? “Air travelers over 65 years old are especially susceptible to the ‘mutagenic effects of the X-rays’ ... as are HIV and cancer patients, children and adolescents, pregnant women, and men (because the X-rays can penetrate skin and put the testicles ‘at risk for sperm mutagenesis’). Eyes could also be at risk because X-rays can penetrate the cornea.”

Ouch. Yet Michael Dorf of Findlaw’s blog thinks the [health concerns are highly exaggerated](#):

A typical dental X-ray exposes the patient to about 2 millirems of radiation. According to one widely cited estimate, exposing each of 10,000 people to one rem (that is, 1,000 millirems) of radiation will likely lead to 8 excess cancer deaths. Using our assumption of linearity, that means that exposure to the 2 millirems of a typical dental X-ray would lead an individual to have an increased risk of dying from cancer of 16 hundred-thousandths of one percent. Given that very small risk, it is easy to see why most rational people would choose to undergo dental X-rays every few years to protect their teeth.

More importantly for our purposes, assuming that the radiation in a backscatter X-ray is about a hundredth the dose of a dental X-ray, we find that a backscatter X-ray increases the odds of dying from cancer by about 16 ten millionths of one percent. That suggests that for every billion passengers screened with backscatter radiation, about 16 will die from cancer as a result.

Ann Althouse surmises that instituting the body searches was [part of a psychological agenda](#):

It seems to me that these 2 things happened together: new machines that see you naked and newly intense body searches. Am I wrong to believe that the new groping procedure

was intended to get more people into the scanners they would otherwise resist? Someone, at some level of the Obama administration, decided that the only way to channel people into the see-you-naked machines was to make the alternative more offensive to nearly everyone. Personally, I'd take the grope over being seen naked, but I did a poll yesterday, and I see that the scanner is significantly more popular than the grope. I suspect that was the calibration. And I suspect that if too many people choose the grope over nakedness, the plan is to intensify the grope until they get the scanner acceptance rate they need.

She's also interested in [following the money](#):

* In 2008, former U.S. Department of Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff authored a 38 page report warning of terrorists exploiting our security deficiencies – including air travel ...

* After the [Christmas Day] 'bombing attempt' Chertoff made a flurry of media appearances suggesting that the "attempted bombing incident" could have been avoided if all airports were using full body scanners.

* The Washington Post printed an article on January 1, 2010, calling Chertoff out for using his government credentials to promote a product that benefits his clients. It was revealed that Rapiscan Systems, the manufacturer of the naked body scanner Chertoff was recommending, was a client of Chertoff's security consulting agency.

* Rapiscan has since received over \$250 million in scanner orders.

David Rittgers, writing at The New York Post, thinks the scanners are a waste of money and give a [false sense of security](#):

Despite what their proponents would have us believe, body scanners are not some magical tool to find all weapons and explosives that can be hidden on the human body. Yes, the scanners work against high-density objects such as guns and knives — but so do traditional magnetometers.

And the scanners fare poorly against low-density materials such as thin plastics, gels and liquids. Care to guess what Abdulmutallab's bomb was made of? The Government Accountability Office reported in March that it's not clear that a scanner would've detected that device.

Even if the scanners did work against low-density materials, the same group linked to the Christmas bomb, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has already found another way to defeat the technology: hiding bombs inside the human body: A would-be AQAP assassin tried to kill a senior Saudi counterterrorism official with a bomb hidden where only a proctologist would find it.

His claims have support from somebody who knows of what he speaks, according to Canwest's Sarah Schmidt:

A leading Israeli airport security expert says the Canadian government has [wasted millions of dollars to install “useless” imaging machines](#) at airports across the country. “I don’t know why everybody is running to buy these expensive and useless machines. I can overcome the body scanners with enough explosives to bring down a Boeing 747,” Rafi Sela told parliamentarians probing the state of aviation safety in Canada.

“That’s why we haven’t put them in our airport,” Sela said, referring to Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion International Airport, which has some of the toughest security in the world.

Doug Mataconis at Outside the Beltway thinks the T.S.A. is [“fighting the last war”](#): “As we’ve learned in London and Madrid, though, terrorists can and do find other ways to attack. Forcing everyone to stand in long lines, take off their shoes, and subject themselves to groping by someone who most likely has their job because they couldn’t get into college or the police academy doesn’t accomplish much of anything, and the American people are waking up to that fact.”

Still, the concerns over the scanners pale in comparison to the outrage over the body searches. Elusis at Live Journal has a theory for the [timing of the uproar](#):

The thing is that nothing about this is new. Private citizens being arbitrarily singled out for intrusive searches and rough treatment by authority figures because of their appearance, their “attitude,” or just a momentary need for an endorphin rush by a small-minded bureaucrat? Welcome to the lives of people of color, the phenomenon of Driving While Black, the lives of women, of transpeople, of disabled people (oh hai, Canada!).

It is no accident that women have been complaining about being pulled out of line because of their big breasts, having their bodies commented on by TSA officials, and getting inappropriate touching when selected for pat-downs for nearly 10 years now, but just this week it went viral. It is no accident that CAIR identified Islamic head scarves (hijab) as an automatic trigger for extra screenings in January, but just this week it went viral. What was different? Suddenly an able-bodied white man is the one who was complaining.

It’s not only the able-bodied — The Washington Post’s Charles Krauthammer [is also fed up](#): “This has nothing to do with safety – 95 percent of these inspections, searches, shoe removals and pat-downs are ridiculously unnecessary. The only reason we continue to do this is that people are too cowed to even question the absurd taboo against profiling – when the profile of the airline attacker is narrow, concrete, uniquely definable and universally known. So instead of seeking out terrorists, we seek out tubes of gel in stroller pouches.”

(I wonder if Krauthammer has [seen this story](#).)

There are a few voices who think may be the price to pay for safety. [“With our troops](#)

risking not just their genitals but their lives to prevent 9/11 style attacks, I find the more extreme protests of both Muslims (to profiling) and members of the general population (to the new machine) a bit jarring,” writes Paul Mirengoff at Power Line. “To be sure, people who are singled out for special procedures for no good reason have a legitimate gripe. So do people whose privacy is momentarily invaded to no legitimate end. But most of the bitching I hear tends not to focus with clarity on the extent to which profiling or use of the machine advances the goal of preventing terrorist attacks. It focuses instead on the fact that the complaining party simply doesn’t like what is being done to him or her. That’s not surprising given the grievance oriented state of our society, but it’s not reassuring either.”

But Mirengoff, along with [The Los Angeles Times editorial board](#), is in a decided minority on the Web, where the rage is bipartisan and, in some cases, a creepily portentous. “[My problem with what’s unfolding at our nation’s airports](#) runs a lot deeper than the misfortune of genital encroachment,” adds James Poulos at Ricochet. “My problem is that we’re racing down an inherently absurd road. Set aside for a moment the dismaying way in which every new advance in security measures involves a retreat for civil liberties and traditional definitions of decency. Our logic of escalation appears to mean that every new solution actually creates a new and dramatically worse problem — one which calls, of course, for dramatically more invasive and comprehensive countermeasures. Where does it end? As a matter of logic, it ends with a free people dehumanizing themselves in a way their own enemies cannot quite manage to do.”

Well, maybe. Or maybe the T.S.A. can just teach its employees to use a little more tact and those who don’t trust the scanners can take the train. After all, as odious as you may find today’s security measures, it’s not as though [flying was a terribly pleasant experience](#) before 9/11.