



On air security, we are the ones we've been waiting for

Updated 14m ago

By David Rittgers



By John Moore, Getty Images

By the time you read this, you could already be cruising at altitude, enjoying the marvels of modern air travel. It wasn't all free coffee and hot towels, though. On the way to the plane, you were either run through a virtual strip search machine or given a rub and a tug by TSA screeners — government employees whom Transportation Security Administration Administrator John Pistole calls "the last line of defense."

Pistole is wrong. TSA screeners aren't the last line of defense. You are.

That's right: You are the last line of defense against would-be hijackers and bombers.

Passengers have been holding their own as a check on terrorists quite admirably ever since the traveling public learned that the rules of the hijacking game had changed.

The passengers on [United Airlines Flight 93](#) immediately took action on [Sept. 11, 2001](#), storming the cockpit and stopping another terrorist attack at the cost of their own lives. Three months later, two

flight attendants and a defensive line of international travelers sacked would-be shoe bomber [Richard Reid](#) before he could score.

Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) was right when she said that "the system worked" after a Dutch filmmaker tackled the would-be Christmas Day 2009 bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab. The system did work, if you count the passengers as part of "the system."

The TSA does, listing passengers as the last of 20 layers of aviation security. Unfortunately, some of the other 19 layers of security either aren't performing as well or don't justify the money we spend on them.

What works, what doesn't?

The body scanners, advertised as a means of finding liquid and powder explosives, aren't as effective as their manufacturers and the TSA would have you believe. The GAO issued a report in March questioning whether body scanners would have detected Abdulmutallab's suspicious package.

Whether they work is moot anyway; the terrorist organization that supported Abdulmutallab has already employed a suicide bomber with explosives hidden inside his body. (Note: [Scanners](#) can't address this threat. Please don't tell the TSA.)

The GAO recommended a cost-benefit analysis before spending \$300 million on scanner machines and \$340 million more each year in additional staffing to run the equipment. Nevertheless, bureaucratic inertia ensured that federal dollars

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funded the blanket body scanner policy.

at the *Cato Institute*.

The need for more screeners to run the infernal machines comes at a time when the incoming Congress is looking at a reduction in federal payrolls across the government, including at the [FBI](#).

The same GAO report identified cargo screening as a weak link in aviation security that needed attending to, but it took bombs in printer toner cartridges to get the TSA to shift some focus toward this threat.

While we're at it, we should note that [federal air marshals](#) are unlikely to stop a bomber on your flight. Marshals are present on fewer than 10% of flights and have not been on targeted planes. Airlines have asked the federal air marshals service to stop placing its agents in first class. It costs too much to give them the best seats in the house, and hijacking is a threat we have addressed sufficiently — all cockpits now have reinforced doors, a significant number of pilots have jumped through the TSA's hoops to keep a gun in the cockpit (the TSA has never been a fan of this cost-effective program), and, once again, you the passenger have risen to the occasion enough times to deter a hijacking attempt.

The terrorist threat has evolved to bombers of the shoe and underwear variety, and they aren't trying to detonate them near the cockpit.

Where do we end up? You.

As cost-effectiveness goes, the air marshal service leaves a lot to be desired. The whole of the agency averages four arrests per year (at a cost of \$215 million per arrest) and have proved to be little deterrent for the current threat. Again, passengers are the real first responders, tackling bombers (and even drunk and belligerent travelers who might be bombers) reliably since late 2001.

To return to the thesis: You are the aviation security force you've been counting on all along. No matter what the government does, some threats will always slip through when we are dealing with an adaptive, learning enemy.

So, sit back and enjoy the in-flight service. Don't get too complacent out there, though. We're all counting on you.

David Rittgers is an attorney and legal policy analyst

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