



Insecurity: The Boston Bombings Create a Revival of Security Theater in S.F.

By: Joe Eskenazi – May 1, 2013

Metaphysical debates aren't your standard ballpark fare — but, as we've been told so often, 9/11 changed everything.

In the wake of the terror attacks, Major League stadiums instituted "no backpack" rules — leading to high-decibel philosophical exchanges between stylish women and beleaguered attendants over whether ladies' squab-sized bags were backpacks (verboten) or purses (kosher). Your humble narrator witnessed several such disputes outside of an Oakland Athletics game in 2001; the offending item was declared a backpack and its owners were denied entry. Women toting purses resembling suitcases ambled past. Not long thereafter, a security guard explained to me that the \$30 fee to gain entry to a civic landmark was a terror deterrent. The notion that multiple terrorist syndicates *could* pool their resources to purchase a \$30 ticket came to mind — but one tends to avoid witty banter in a security line.

This kind of "security" attains the rare two-fer of being both moronic and oxymoronic. And, alas, it's not a vestige of a bygone era. On Friday, April 19, thousands of people — perhaps even tens of thousands — massed outside AT&T Park. First pitch was already in the books, but the swelling crowd on Willie Mays Plaza was more tightly packed than a ballpark-bound N-Judah and growing larger and denser by the minute. Black-and-orange-clad fans spilled into the crosswalks and across the intersections. Lines blended into other lines; listless fans slowly perambulated around the plaza in a Möbius-shaped path.

It was a maniacally frustrating moment — and not merely because the throngs had been essentially standing still, cheek-to-jowl, for the better part of an hour and were now missing the game they'd paid to see. More substantively: In reaction to an attack directed at many thousands of people packed alarmingly tightly into the streets of Boston, AT&T Park security measures resulted in many thousands of people being packed alarmingly tightly into the streets of San Francisco.

"They created a perfect crowd scene for killing the maximum amount of people," reflects Ohio State professor John Mueller, co-author of *Terror, Security, and Money*. "It's basically absurd." But not uncommon — or unexpected. "This is so stupid. And it happens all the time," says security expert Bruce Schneier. "It's very standard: Something must be done.

"This is Something. Therefore, we must do it."

Schneier famously coined a term for overt displays of security intended to bolster the impression that Something Is Being Done, even if Something actually makes people less safe. He called it "security theater." Air travelers compelled to doff their footwear, surrender their keychain Swiss army knives and snow globes, or transfer 400 milliliters of liquid into four 100-milliliter containers are painfully familiar with this concept. AT&T Park has served as this city's Carnegie Hall for security theater — and, on April 19, it was a show not everyone wanted to see. As the claustrophobic conditions on Willie Mays Plaza worsened, ticket-holders began to peel away. The general attitude was summed up by a few deserters: Fuck it.

And yet, by the bottom of the first inning, the frozen lines thawed and fans trickled through the gates. Faced with a massive backlog, ballpark personnel simply curtailed the "wandering" and "enhanced bag checks" that constituted beefed-up security and merely undertook cursory glances into backpacks. "You have to have flexibility with your security measures," explains Staci Slaughter, the Giants' vice president of communications. The swarm conditions of April 19 have not recurred.

Yet it would seem the flexibility in the team's plan is to simply stop doing it. On several subsequent visits to the park last week, front-line security personnel candidly explained that the security wands are turned off when crowds swell or game time nears. "We gotta stop," explained one elderly attendant. "It's nearly first pitch." Another monitor noted that "right when we open the gates," he'll use the wand and scrutinize the bags of early arriving fans. But not later. "It's weird to me too," he said with a laugh.

A terrorist who insists on catching batting practice is walking into a baited trap. But anyone with ill intentions showing up with the crowd or a bit late — par for the course at Dodgers Stadium, incidentally — likely won't face security measures any different than those meant to ferret out clandestine beer.

God protect us from a sleeper cell of Dodgers fans.

A system in which thousands of people are pushed into the streets and rendered soft targets, followed by the predictable abandonment of that system after it produces a backup, can hardly be described as effective — or even much of a system. "A minimum of analysis tells you this doesn't work," surmises Schneier. The collective, near-ritualistic onerousness of measures like this "makes us feel like we're helping."

So, there's that. If security theater is useless — or, indeed, worse than useless — doesn't it at least make us feel better? According to multiple reports, no.

In a 2006 paper, engineering professor Kevin Grosskopf analyzed a pair of relevant University of Florida studies. He notes that visible security measures comfort and reassure people when placed in the context of deterring conventional crime — a cop in a bank, say. But the "guns, guards, and gates" approach to terror prevention made respondents feel exposed, vulnerable, and fearful. Grosskopf tells us there are two things "we don't like to see" when it comes to security measures: people being spooked by the notion that terror is a real and imminent threat rather than an unlikely possibility, and "people being shepherded into large, concentrated groups, making them even more vulnerable."

Following that April 19 game — and a number of thrilling, walk-off wins thereafter — fans spilled out of the ballpark far happier than when they trundled in. Many headed back to the parking lot to attempt to cheat death: "The ride to and from the ballpark is still the most dangerous part," notes Schneier. More Americans die in auto crashes every month than Al Qaeda has ever killed. "If you drove to the game, it's hard to increase your overall risk for that day."

The best advice for our times: Keep calm and carry on. And take Muni.

