



Business travel

Gulliver

Pat-downs for six-year-olds When following procedure goes wrong

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PERHAPS lost in the hubbub over sleeping air traffic controllers (http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2011/04/air-traffic_control) this week was the news (http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/tsa_congress_vow_to_review_pat_down_of_6_year_old_girl/2011/04/13/AFZD9LYD_story.html?wpisrc=nl_cuzheads), on Wednesday, that America's Transportation Security Administration and its critics in Congress are planning to review controversial "enhanced pat-down" screening procedures. They're doing that because [this](http://youtu.be/-3sH1GaO_nw) (http://youtu.be/-3sH1GaO_nw) happened:

If you can't see the video, it shows a uniformed TSA officer giving an enhanced pat-down to a six-year-old girl. Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah), who, along with Rush Holt (D-N.J.), is among the TSA's fiercest critics in Congress, [said](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/tsa_congress_vow_to_review_pat_down_of_6_year_old_girl/2011/04/13/AFZD9LYD_story.html?wpisrc=nl_cuzheads) (http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/tsa_congress_vow_to_review_pat_down_of_6_year_old_girl/2011/04/13/AFZD9LYD_story.html?wpisrc=nl_cuzheads) the incident was "another example of mistreatment of an innocent American at the hands of TSA."

The TSA [said in a statement](http://blog.tsa.gov/2011/04/screening-of-6-year-old-at-msy.html) (<http://blog.tsa.gov/2011/04/screening-of-6-year-old-at-msy.html>) that the screener "followed proper current screening procedures."

That statement from the TSA really raised the hackles of Julian Sanchez, a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and sometime *Economist* blogger. Mr Sanchez has written [a wonderful piece](http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/all-part-of-the-plan-national-security-wisdom-from-the-joker/) (<http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/all-part-of-the-plan-national-security-wisdom-from-the-joker/>) explaining the parallels between the TSA's worldview and that of the Joker, a character from the Batman franchise. It's really [worth a read](http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/all-part-of-the-plan-national-security-wisdom-from-the-joker/) (<http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/all-part-of-the-plan-national-security-wisdom-from-the-joker/>). Here's my favourite bit:

“ While I suppose it would be disturbing if individual agents were just improvising groping protocol on the fly (so to speak), the response suggests that TSA thinks our concerns should be assuaged once we've been reassured that everything is being done by the book—even if the book is horrifying. But in a sense, that's the underlying idea behind all security theater: Show people that there's a Plan, that procedures are in place, whether or not there's any good evidence that the Plan actually makes us safer. ”

Read the whole thing (<http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/all-part-of-the-plan-national-security->

[wisdom-from-the-joker/](#)) .

The TSA now says that it has been reviewing its "one-size-fits-all" screening procedures and could announce changes later this year. I would just note that while prohibiting or at least discouraging pat-downs of six-year-olds isn't likely to fix all or even most of the problems with TSA's policies, it would at least improve the airport security experience for six-year-olds. That's not something to sniff at, and folks who keep an eye on the TSA should make sure to follow up with the agency in the weeks and months to come to see if any progress is being made on this front.

Too often, the promise of a "review" is just that—the promise of a review. It doesn't necessarily lead to change. Readers, travellers, and the media should keep up the pressure on the TSA to make sure it follows through on its promises. After all, if critics of security theatre can't get the TSA to stop patting-down six-year-olds, we might as well just pack it in entirely.

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