It's time to abolish the TSA

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Tens of millions of Americans will be flying this weekend, as they take advantage of the Thanksgiving holidays to visit with family. Tens of millions more will fly in December, as Christmas approaches.

And they'll be subjected to screening by the Transportation Security Administration. Perhaps many will realize that, based on all we've learned in the more than 12 years after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, we should return those screening duties to the private sector.

"After more than a decade of experience, it is clear that the creation of TSA and the federal takeover of airport screening was a mistake," writes the Cato Institute's Chris Edwards. "Auditors have found that TSA's screening performance has been no better, and possibly worse, than private screening. And TSA has become known for mismanagement, dubious investments, and security failures. Former TSA chief Kip Hawley noted last year that the agency is 'hopelessly bureaucratic.' And recent congressional reports have blasted TSA for 'costly, counter intuitive, and poorly executed' plans and for having an 'enormous, inflexible and distracted bureaucracy.'"

Passenger and baggage screening should be done by the airports and the airlines, he says. In fact, that's the way those things used to be done. The Federal Aviation Administration oversaw screening, and hired private companies to do it on behalf of the airlines.

Rep. John Mica, a Florida Republican, helped write the legislation that created the TSA and gave it enormous powers. He's now one of its biggest critics.

"The whole program has been hijacked by bureaucrats," says Mica, who chairs the House Transportation Committee. "It mushroomed into an army. It's gone from a couple-billion-dollar enterprise to close to $9 billion."

Has it made us safer? Mica says not even that fact is clear.

"They've failed to actually detect any threat in 10 years," he says. "Everything they have done has been reactive. They take shoes off because of (shoe-bomber) Richard Reid, passengers are patted down because of the diaper bomber, and you can't pack liquids because the British uncovered a plot using liquids. It's an agency that is always one step out of step."

He sees a different role for the agency, which has about 58,000 workers (at nearly 450 airports).

"The TSA should not be conducting the screening," Mica says. "They should be setting the standards, conducting the oversight. TSA should be a security and intelligence agency."

That makes sense - if the TSA remains in existence at all. Cato's Edwards says we simply don't need it anymore.

"We would be better off without a monolithic federal agency that controls all major aspects of aviation security," he writes. "Most airports in Europe and Canada use private companies for their passenger and baggage screening. That practice creates a more efficient and innovative security structure, and it allows governments to focus on gathering intelligence and conducting analysis rather than on trying to manage a large workforce."

We should abolish the TSA and let airports and airlines secure their own facilities. Government can set standards, but let's take the gloves off - literally. No more federal pat-downs.