

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Abolish the TSA

By: Veronique de Rugy – December 3, 2013

Two weeks ago, the Government Accountability Office published a report concluding that the \$200 million the TSA spends every year on the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques program (SPOT), intended to spot terrorists, isn't working and should be ended. Today, two scholars make the case that the entire TSA should be abolished.

First, Cato Institute's Chris Edwards has a new study entitled "Privatizing the Transportation Security Administration." Edwards explains:

TSA's main activity is operating security screening at more than 450 commercial airports across the nation. The agency also runs the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS), analyzes intelligence data, and oversees the security of rail, transit, highways, and pipelines. TSA has 62,000 employees and an annual budget in 2013 of \$7.9 billion.

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. 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."

We would be better off without a monolithic federal agency that controls all major aspects of aviation security. 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.

Glenn Reynolds, a professor of law at the University of Tennessee, reaches the same conclusion in a *USA Today* piece. He writes:

Airlines don't want to irritate their customers, or to make flying an unpleasant experience in general.

Federal employees have no such incentives, and it often shows. If people miss their flights, or just give up on flying because it's too much hassle, the TSA doesn't suffer. Even if bombs or hijackers get through, the most likely consequence isn't a bunch of higher-ups at TSA losing their jobs — when does anybody in the government get fired for failure these days? — but rather an increased budget and more staff "to make sure this won't happen again." The incentives don't align.

Most other advanced nations use private screening services, and their security is just fine — and, according to most accounts, less of a hassle for travelers. Some American airports, from San Francisco to Jackson Hole, are already trying out that approach. Why not take that national?

One reason, of course, is that the TSA's bloated unionized workforce will oppose it. But the TSA is also one of the most unpopular agencies with the public. What's more, as Bruce Schneier notes, it has never caught a terrorist. It's not about security, but about "security theater" designed to give the appearance of security. I think the traveling public has caught on to that, and travelers account for more votes than screeners do.

Unfortunately, evidence that the TSA should be abolished goes against the interest of its 62,000 employees and the unions that support them. So I won't be holding my breath that the SPOT program or the whole TSA will be abolished. It is too bad.