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By **Cato Institute** on Jul 21, 2011

By *Jim Harper*

It's tempting to believe that the Transportation Security Administration's move to [change the software in strip-search machines](#) is a response to the [court ruling finding that it violated the law](#) in rolling out the machines, but it's almost surely coincidence.

The new software will show items that the software deems suspicious on a generic outline of a body rather than showing a detailed body image. The change will indeed reduce the invasiveness of the machine strip-search

process. And because the image is less revealing, it can be viewed in the screening area instead of at a remote location. That means there doesn't need to be a person dedicated to looking at denuded images of travelers. A major cost of running these machines—payroll—drops by a substantial margin.

The software will almost certainly not do as good a job of discovering hidden weapons as a human looking at a detailed image would. If it's calibrated to over-report, TSA agents will rightly start to ignore its alerts on belt buckles and underwire bras. If it's calibrated to under-report, well, it might fail to alert on an actual weapon or bomb. But those things are exceedingly rare, and the increased risk probably won't make a difference.

In fact, that's the interesting thing happening here: the TSA is allowing a small increase in risk in exchange for large gains in privacy and cost savings. The reason it took years of complaints, litigation, legislation, and other conflict is because the TSA did not analyze the risks and its responses before going forward with strip-search machines as it did. Trial-and-error isn't costly to the government. The taxpayer fronts the money and gives up the privacy.

None of this means the TSA has now gotten the balance right. The airport security gauntlet will still be an overwrought mess and an affront to constitutional liberty. We will have to remain insistent on principle, on dignity and privacy, and on sound risk management while TSA gets a public relations bump from being less awful than it was before.

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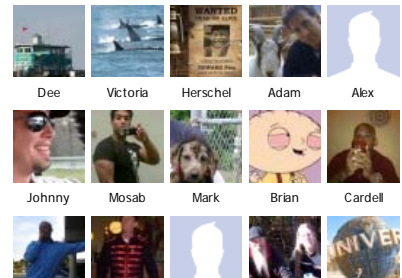
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