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The unvarnished truth about Un-American TSA

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We're either gonna look at you naked or feel you up -- your call." That's the choice the federal Transportation Security Administration offers any law-abiding citizen who wants to fly -- and the fact that we're willing to put up with it shows that there's something seriously wrong in America today.

Two items last week put the problem in stark relief.

First was the viral video of a 6-year-old's recent encounter with the agency in New Orleans. As ABC News described the clip, "It shows a TSA agent rubbing the young girl's inner thighs and running her fingers inside the top of the girl's bluejeans."

Then on Friday, CNN revealed a list of "behavioral indicators" TSA uses to scope out travelers who deserve extra manhandling. Among the agency's red flags are "arrogant" expressions of "contempt against airport passenger procedures."

Because, clearly, making a scene on the airport security line is sound strategy for anyone trying to sneak a bomb onto a plane.

There's been a lot of talk lately about "American Exceptionalism," and whether President Obama understands what makes America stand out among the family of nations.

I've always thought that what makes Americans exceptional is our ornery resistance to being bossed around.

But how long can that spirit survive the demands of modern "homeland security"? We're building a country where you're expected to stand by placidly while agents of the state run their rubber gloves under your innocent 6-year-old daughter's waistband.

Neoconservatives see America's uniqueness as an excuse to bomb any country that looks at us crosswise. But the original idea was somewhat less aggressive. With "every spot of the old world... overrun with oppression," America would be freedom's home -- an "asylum for mankind" -- as Thomas Paine put it in *Common Sense*.

In the 1992 film adaptation of "Last of the Mohicans," James Fenimore Cooper's novel about the Seven Years War, there's an exchange that illustrates American Exceptionalism at its best. An effete British officer berates the rough-hewn colonial "Hawkeye": "You call yourself a loyal subject to the Crown?"

"Don't call myself 'subject' to much at all," Hawkeye replies.

Alas, there were plenty of "loyal subjects" at the nation's airports last week. NBC observed a "mixed reaction" to TSA's kindergartner pat-down policy: "I see the pros and I see the cons," said one traveler at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

The TSA has "information that's not available to the general public," a grandmother at Salt Lake City International Airport offered; "you never know what some folks might be trying," the father of another 6-year-old observed.

No, you never do -- but you're still allowed to ask whether the risks justify the indignities. In his 2008 book "The Science of Fear," Daniel Gardener noted that even if terrorists crashed a plane a week, "a person who took one flight a month for a year would have only a 1-in-135,000 chance of being killed in a hijacking -- a trivial risk compared with the annual 1-in-6,000 odds of being killed in a car."

If we'd sold our birthright for the proverbial "mess of pottage," at least we'd have something to eat. It's more contemptible by far to betray our heritage in the name of "security theater" -- pointless restrictions that don't make us safer.

The president had an odd laugh line in his last State of the Union address. Pushing his high-speed rail scheme, he quipped that it would let you travel "without the pat-down." (Spoken like a man who has his own plane.)

Does Obama properly understand "American Exceptionalism"? Beats me. But he seems to find our current predicament pretty amusing.

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