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By *Gene Healy*

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More fun for area commuters: Last Thursday, DC Metro officials announced that "anti-terrorism teams" will immediately begin conducting random bag searches.

Metro released plans for a similar scheme in October 2008, but never implemented it. That month, in an online chat with Washington Post readers, Transit Police Chief Michael Taborn was woefully short on straight answers.

"Can I carry my pocketknife?" an Alexandria resident asked, "and what if I'm returning from the supermarket with lighter fluid for my grill?" Owners of "contraband" will be "subject to prosecution," Taborn replied: "If you are unsure of whether a particular item is contraband, you should seek legal advice."

So budget that into your travel time.

A D.C.-based reader cheered the policy, showing the sort of public spiritedness that built this company town: "The U.S. is becoming so dangerous we need to take precautions whenever possible. If you have nothing to hide then the search should not offend you." Taborn: "Thanks very much for your support."

Metro officials now say that about one of every three riders at designated stops will be pulled aside. Their bags won't be opened unless a residue-swab or a police dog indicates a potential threat. Even then, the rider can decline the search and leave.

It's nice that the searches won't be as invasive as an airport porno-scanner or a Transportation Security Administration agent's cold rubber glove. But if a hypothetical terrorist can walk his backpack bomb from Farragut North and board at Farragut West instead, what's the point?

Like so many other homeland security schemes, the only "logic" behind this one is a mindless bureaucratic imperative. It will add to the capital's growing security-state atmosphere without making us measurably safer.

Today, DC Metro passengers regularly hear Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano's flat monotone over the loudspeaker: "if you see something, say something." That's been such a success, apparently, that earlier this month, "Big Sis" announced she's having herself piped through Wal-Mart intercoms nationwide.

If we have to hear the DHS secretary's voice every time we schlep to work or shop at a chain store, we ought to at least pick a sexier voice. I nominate Scarlett Johansson. Security theater might go easier with a little Hollywood glamour.

Meanwhile, Monday's Washington Post features another installment in its valuable "Top Secret America" series on our post-9/11 "Intelligence-Industrial Complex." Over the past decade, the feds have issued \$31 billion in homeland security grants, paying local law enforcement to install surveillance cameras on city streets and purchase biometric scanners developed for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Maybe you thought "Operation TIPS" died in 2002, when Congress banned the snooping program in the bill creating the Homeland Security Department. But the Post reports that the FBI is building a massive database on thousands of Americans whose only "crime" is "acting suspiciously" around "a town sheriff, a traffic cop or even a neighbor."

These reports generate "a never-ending stream of information that is vague, alarmist and often useless." A top Los Angeles counterterrorism official compares it to "a garage you keep throwing junk into until you can't park your car" anymore.

Since terrorist activity is rare, many counterterrorism agents are finding "there is just not enough terrorism-related work to do." So they're using spy technology to fight ordinary crime -- and have even been caught monitoring Tea Party meetings and antiwar rallies.

The British Empire, it was said, developed in "a fit of absence of mind." So too with the bureaucratic empire we're building around counterterrorism. It's past time we thought consciously about the road we're on--before it's too late to turn back.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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