

Don't Sweat the TSA

Has anyone noticed that the various “anti-terror” measures we see everywhere are just security theater—that is, utterly ineffective for their purported purpose and

staged for political reasons?

On Washington’s subway, the PA system admonishes passengers over and over to watch each other and report any unusual behavior to Metro personnel. “Let’s be prepared, not scared,” the recording says, the phrase sounding as if bought from an ad agency. We are to watch for unattended parcels and so on. Nobody, of course, pays the slightest attention.

This mummery of watchfulness sounds like a security measure but isn’t. Report strange behavior on an urban subway? At 1 a.m.? You see paranoid schizos talking with their little voices, swarthy men speaking unknown languages, bearded young wearing Che T-shirts. Any terrorist not still in a garage band would of course be careful to look normal. They are not stupid.

At rush hour, when a terrorist would strike, the system is a madhouse. Suppose that in a jammed car of irritated people you see someone “behaving strangely.” You get off at the next stop and find a guard, by which time the train has left. You tell him, “Hey, I saw someone strange.” “What do you mean, strange?” he asks. “Well, he kept kind of looking around, and I think he was sweating.”

What does the guard do? Sound an alarm, shut down the Metro, and call in SWAT teams to look for a sweating guy? Hardly. He will brush you off.

Report unattended packages at rush hour? Oh sure, that will work. Upon seeing the orphaned briefcase, do you

shriek “Bomb!” in a packed car, whereupon three people are crushed to death in the panic, the system shuts down, and you go to jail when the explosive turns out to be a bag lunch and a report on locust infestations in Chad?

Of course, any terrorist with a solitary functioning neuron would use a three-minute fuse so that when his bomb went off between Rosslyn and Pentagon Station he would be walking down Wilson Boulevard.

This comedy never stops. I recently read that police armed with “machine guns”—presumably meaning submachine guns—will patrol the subway system of New York. What could be a better idea? Half-trained rentacops opening up with automatic weapons in a rush-hour mob. At what? Someone acting strangely? Sweating, maybe? Automatic weapons are totally useless against suicide bombers or package-leavers. What then are they for?

I see that Amtrak stations on the D.C.-NYC corridor will shortly be visited without notice by teams that will randomly search waiting passengers. Oh, splendid. It’s rush hour. Thousands jam the station. Let’s assume our clowns search 2 percent of these people. The terrorist has one chance in 50 of being caught. How appallingly secure.

The funniest part is this: if a passenger refuses to be searched, his ticket will be refunded and he will have to leave the station. This ensures that a terrorist won’t be caught. He will simply go to the next station and... boom.

Most of the security at airports is equally pointless. Today everybody knows that if you buy a one-way ticket, you will be hassled endlessly by marginally competent TSA Nazis amazed that people actually have to pay attention to them. Any terrorist will have a roundtrip ticket, but if you fly to Boston to take a job, you will be bullied unmercifully.

Baggage is not inspected for explosives until after the passenger has entered a crowded terminal. For purposes of getting publicity and shutting down the airlines, a terminal is as good a target as a plane. And so on.

No, I’m not giving ideas to terrorists. Everything I’ve said is obvious. Ask any sophomore in high school.

What then are the reasons behind all of this? Two are money and turf. Homeland Security is now a huge agency providing lots of jobs for air marshals, security screeners, and bureaucrats. It also hands out fortunes to companies that design explosives-sniffers and X-ray machines. It is a bonanza. The trough is open for business.

But those at the top are smart enough to know that this is only theater. What is the underlying purpose? To frighten the public into supporting the president’s wars?

Or is the aim, as the more paranoid have it, to train the public to accept unrestrained police powers? If so, it is working. We now know better than to question the attitude of a TSA goon as we will miss our flight—something they know and use.

Everything about you is now the business of Homeland Security, and there is no recourse. Carry a book on the Taliban in your carry-on luggage? God help you. ■

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