

Op-Ed

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Libertarian Party

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FEDERALIZED AIRPORT SECURITY IS JUST TOO RISKY FOR AMERICA

GOVERNMENT WORKERS HAVE A DISMAL TRACK RECORD

BY STEVE DASBACH (774 WORDS)

How's this for a "solution" to the problem of airport security: Force people to wait in longer lines, pay higher ticket prices, deal with arrogant, incompetent employees — and potentially face an even *greater* threat of hijackings.

Obviously, that's no solution at all. Yet that's exactly what the plan to federalize airport security would do.

While the Sept. 11 hijackings made it clear that something is wrong with airport security, there's absolutely no reason to believe that a federal takeover would solve the problem.

As H.L. Mencken once said, "For every problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and *wrong*." Federalizing airport security is just such a solution.

This week, the U.S. House is expected to consider a bill that would leave airport security screening to private firms, rather than turning the nation's 28,000 airport security personnel into federal workers. The bill would require the Federal Aviation Administration to set standards for airport security, and more closely monitor the process.

That bill is in conflict with already-approved U.S. Senate legislation, which would federalize airport security forces at an estimated cost of \$3 billion a year.

But if the goal is greater safety for airline passengers, turning airport security personnel into government employees is not the way to do it. Based on the government's track record, federalized workers would be:

■ **Not very secure:** This week, the Project for Government Oversight revealed that mock terrorist attacks on Department of Energy nuclear facilities succeeded more than half the time. In May 2000, the General Accounting Office (GAO) announced that investigators posing as law enforcement officers were able to bypass federal security and penetrate the Pentagon, CIA headquarters, and the Justice Department.

■ **Susceptible to corruption:** Over the past few years, Immigration and Naturalization Service employees have been arrested for exchanging green cards for cash bribes, printing counterfeit checks, and selling templates of Border Crossing cards to document counterfeiters. Customs officials were convicted of helping drug dealers smuggle cocaine into the country. Government Services

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Administration employees were arrested for stealing government property, extorting bribes from contractors, and accepting kickbacks. And Social Security Administration employees were convicted of taking bribes to issue phony Social Security cards.

■ **More expensive:** According to Martin L. Gross, author of *The Government Racket 2000*, federal employees earn 40% more than average American workers, and get benefits that are 75% greater than the average worker. Overall, an average federal worker costs taxpayers about \$85,000 a year in wages, benefits, and retirement liability.

And unlike private sector workers, federal employees can be almost impossible to fire because of civil service protections. Anyone who doubts this should try to file a complaint about those ornery employees down at the local DMV.

■ **Prone to sloppiness:** Over the past few years, the GAO reported that the IRS could not account for \$3 billion in expenses; the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had paid out at least \$900 million in excess subsidies; and the Federal Aviation Administration had lost \$245 million in spare parts.

■ **Badly trained and hostile to customers:** A 2001 study by the Treasury Department found that IRS employees at walk-in centers gave taxpayers incorrect or insufficient information 73% of the time. A similar 2001 study by the IRS found that customers were turned away without service 21% of the time. And in 1998, Senator Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) described the actions of overzealous IRS agents trying to collect past-due taxes as “government violence directed against citizens.”

Of course, not *all* government employees are corrupt, sloppy, or hostile. But when you consider their poor track record, you realize that government workers are certainly not more efficient, more honest, smarter, or harder working than private-sector employees.

Besides, if federalization is really such a great idea, why don't we see:

■ Residents of private apartment complexes demanding a federal takeover, so they can live in public housing projects run by HUD bureaucrats?

■ Workers with bulging 401k retirement accounts scheming for a way to turn their life savings over to the Social Security Administration for safekeeping?

■ Parents of children in private schools who dream of someday enrolling them in government-run schools?

Instinctively, we all know why: Because even with its flaws, the free market still functions far *better* than the government does. And the fact that the nation's worst terrorist attack happened to occur at airports doesn't change that fundamental reality.

Instead of acquiescing to politicians who reflexively demand more government in response to every problem, we should learn from past government failures.

With the lives of millions of Americans at stake, putting airport security in the hands of federal bureaucrats would be a catastrophic blunder.

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NOTE: A photo of Mr. Dasbach and an electronic version of this essay are available.
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