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Summary

There are calls for the creation of a federal security authority for all airports, however that solution will not make Americans safer. Instead we should follow the European model and hold airport owners / operators accountable for every aspect of security.

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Improve security: Hold airports accountable

By Robert W. Poole, Jr. and Viggo Butler

In the wake of the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, the federal government is proposing to take over passenger screening at airports. Unfortunately, changing the uniforms of the people who watch the X-ray machines will not make our airports safer. In fact, such efforts focus on the wrong target. More serious problems lie behind the scenes.

In 1999, federal agents were able to sneak through security doors 46 times at four major airports and walk around on the tarmac, or board planes unchallenged. According to one Federal Aviation Administration official, Boston and Newark airports “leak like a sieve.”

The most fundamental problem with airport security is fragmentation. It is the joint responsibility of the FAA, airport operators and airlines. Everybody is responsible for security—which means nobody is really in charge. We need a single point of responsibility at each airport, held accountable for every aspect of security. That responsible and accountable party should be the airport owner/operator.

We already can see how much better this model works, because it’s done this way in Europe. London’s airports, especially Heathrow, have long taken seriously the threat of terrorism. Airport owner BAA trains and employs the passenger screeners itself. Every single bag is X-rayed (which has never been done for domestic flights in this country), and there is positive matching of bags with passengers.

London typifies a large-scale trend in Europe toward a more professional model of airport management. In Europe today, an airport is seen as a business: an enterprise run by qualified (and highly paid) professionals, serving a number of different customers, and expected to make a profit (and pay taxes) by doing so.

A growing number of these airports have been shifted into private ownership over the past decade. Since Margaret Thatcher converted the former British Airports Authority into the publicly traded BAA in 1987, a total of 17 U.K. airports have shifted into the private sector. On the continent, privatized airports include Athens, Copenhagen, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Naples, Rome, Turin,

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Vienna, and Zurich, with Amsterdam and Berlin soon to follow. In each case, the corporate model has led to more professional management and increased resources for meeting numerous customer needs—including security.

Some of these European airports contract with private firms for some security functions, including passenger screening. But they insist on background checks, provide meaningful training and pay decent wages. Turnover there is but a small fraction of what it is for U.S. passenger screeners.

It would not be that difficult to “corporatize” U.S. airports, and then allow their state or municipal shareholders, over time, to decide whether or not to sell shares to the public or to sell a significant stake to one of the global airport companies.

Until that kind of institutional change comes about, we can still take immediate measures to provide much stronger incentives for security accountability. Instead of trying to micromanage security procedures from Washington, the FAA should set forth stringent, outcome-based requirements and make each airport operator solely responsible for compliance. (That would relieve the airlines from the unwanted duty of running passenger screening and farming it out to the lowest bidder.)

The FAA should carry out far more frequent security tests, on a random basis, like those done recently by the General Accounting Office and the Inspector General’s Office. Airports that flunk security tests should face huge financial penalties and even the threat of shutdown. If the FAA can yank the operating certificate of an airline that doesn’t measure up on safety compliance, why not hold airports accountable in the same way?

Creating a huge new workforce of federal civil servants for passenger screening would be a big mistake. It’s very hard to fire federal employees who don’t work out, or to reduce their numbers when technology automates some of their job functions. Technology holds great promise for improving and streamlining screening. The last thing we should do is put new obstacles in its way.

In short, the United States has an airport security problem for two reasons. First, none of us realized the degree of threat posed by 21st-century terrorism, so we did not make security a high enough priority. But in addition, we have less airport security than in Europe because we’re still using an obsolescent model of airport management. “Federalizing” airport security is not the answer. Dramatically increasing accountability of airport owner/operators is a far better approach. It works in Europe, and it can work here as well.

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