



TSA Isn't Just for Airports Anymore

Travelers hoping to retain their dignity by taking buses, trains, or cars instead of airplanes are in for a rude awakening. "The Transportation Security Administration," writes the Los Angeles Times, "isn't just in airports anymore. TSA teams are increasingly conducting searches and screenings at train stations, subways, ferry terminals and other mass transit locations around the country."



"We are not the Airport Security Administration," Ray Dineen, the air marshal in charge of the TSA office in Charlotte, North Carolina, told the *Times*. "We take that transportation part seriously."

Indeed they do. No longer content to violate the rights of airline travelers alone, the TSA's Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response (VIPR) teams "have run more than 9,300 unannounced checkpoints and other search operations in the last year," the newspaper says. That's 9,300 times the government has deliberately ignored the Fourth Amendment's requirement that it have probable cause and a warrant to search someone and has instead engaged in mass searches of the traveling public. The number of individuals searched during these operations surely reaches into the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Add to that the roughly 700 million airline passengers also probed by the TSA in a year, and it's clear that, as far as the government is concerned, the Constitution is no obstacle to getting what it wants.

The *Times* cites several examples of VIPR's "increasingly active" operations in the past 365 days:

In Tennessee in October, a viper team used radiation monitors and explosive-trace detectors to help state police inspect trucks at highway weigh stations throughout the state. Last month in Orlando, Fla., a team set up metal detectors at a Greyhound bus station and tested passengers' bags for explosive residue.

In the Carolinas this year, TSA teams have checked people at the gangplanks of cruise ships, the entrance to NASCAR races, and at ferry terminals taking tourists to the Outer Banks.

At the Charlotte train station on Dec. 11, Seiko, the bomb-sniffing dog, snuffled down a line of about 100 passengers waiting to board an eastbound train.

All this would be bad enough if the TSA were responding to genuine security threats and successfully thwarting them, but it is not. A Tennessee official said the [October searches](#), which also recruited truck drivers to serve as TSA snitches, were "not based on any particular threat," the *Jackson Sun* reported at the time. Similarly, the officers at the Charlotte station told a passenger that the extra security was not prompted by a terrorist threat. Nor can the agency point to any success in preventing terrorism, says the *Times*: "TSA officials say they have no proof that the roving viper teams have foiled any terrorist plots or thwarted any major threat to public safety. But they argue that the random nature of the



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 27, 2011

searches and the presence of armed officers serve as a deterrent and bolster public confidence.”

“It’s a great way to make the public think you are doing something,” Indiana University law Professor Fred H. Cate, who writes on privacy and security, told the paper. “It’s a little like saying, ‘If we start throwing things up in the air, will they hit terrorists?’”

It’s also a great way to keep the citizenry in line, as [Becky Akers](#) observed:

Governments benefit enormously from searching their subjects — especially when those searches can ensnare anyone at any time in any place. Such random rubbings guarantee that almost everybody will obey his rulers’ decrees....

But searches enhance government’s power far more enormously and insidiously through the humiliation they inflict. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, subjects of even the most despotic regimes usually assume that whomever the authorities bully must have done something to deserve it. No one wants to be pulled aside for a search and implicitly branded a criminal; it’s human nature to feel deeply, excruciatingly shamed at such attention — let alone the potential for either physical or psychological harm and sexual abuse when a stranger manhandles your body.

Most people will do anything to avoid such embarrassment. They try not to stand out from the crowd, and they keep their head down lest they catch an official eye; they dare not protest their own or their neighbor’s abuse; they accept whatever other horrors government dishes out in silence, too.

As if to prove Akers’ point, the *Times* remarks that “no one” at the Charlotte train station “seemed especially perturbed by the TSA team.” One passenger thought it was “probably overkill”; another was “mostly curious”; and a third, frighteningly, said, “It’s cool. They’re doing what our tax money is paying them to do.”

The TSA is having such a grand old time spending our tax money — \$110 million of it for “surface transportation security” in fiscal 2011 — to search, ogle, and grope us that it’s asking Congress for even more: an extra \$24 million for VIPR, including funding for 12 more teams, plus another \$5 billion for aviation security (which, by the way, is just as [pointless](#) as VIPR from a security standpoint). What Congressman or Senator is going to take a chance on being labeled a terrorist sympathizer by voting against the extra funding?

Of course, these TSA operations are nothing new, but they are certainly on the rise. And Americans can’t say they weren’t warned. *The New American’s* [Raven Clabough](#) reported in November that Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, “after admitting that terrorists will eventually find a way past the naked-body scanners and enhanced pat-down procedures” in airports, told PBS’s Charlie Rose: “I think the tighter we get on aviation, we have to also be thinking now about going on to mass transit or to trains or maritime. So what do we need to be doing to strengthen our protections there?”

Americans need protection, all right — but far less from terrorists, whose numbers are infinitesimal, than from hordes of government agents prying into every corner of their lives, harassing and humiliating them whenever they travel, and generally making a mockery of the Constitution.

Photo: John S. Pistole, Administrator of the United States Transportation Security Administration (TSA).



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