



Written by [Daniel Sayani](#) on March 21, 2011

TSA Will Now Scan Your Shoes at the Airport

Ironically, while the TSA will continue its pat-downs (which some compare to government-sanctioned groping), passengers will soon not have to remove their shoes, as the agency announced this week that it's accepting proposals for a "shoe scanner" device.

The agency is seeking companies to which they will award the contract for the shoe scanners, and according to the Office of Federal Business Opportunities, the [Shoe Scanning Device](#) (SSD) system currently sought by the TSA and the Department of Homeland Security "will be capable of detecting threat objects concealed in footwear without requiring passengers to remove their footwear as they pass through a security checkpoint. These threat objects include a wide variety of military, commercial, and homemade explosives or explosives devices."



A dozen companies have designed shoe scanning machines, and the TSA says it plans to buy 100 of the devices by next year.

According to *USA Today*, the [machines](#), which find metal weapons and explosives in shoes, didn't pass muster in tests three years ago. The developers of the latest generation of the machines promise better results, and the TSA says the technology will improve security.

Letting travelers keep shoes on "would help checkpoints run more smoothly and allow our officers to focus on other aspects of security," TSA spokeswoman Sterling Payne said. The agency is now reviewing information from the inventors.

One [company](#), IDO Security, has shoe scanners in more than 15 overseas locations, company President Michael Goldberg said. IDO's "MagShoe," which costs \$4,400 to \$7,000, also is used at a cruise-ship terminal in Florida to screen passengers, crew, and vendors, Goldberg said.

The TSA began forcing some passengers to remove shoes in late 2001 after "shoe-bomber" Richard Reid tried to ignite explosives in his boots on a U.S.-bound flight. Shoe removal became mandatory in 2006 after a foiled plot to blow up U.S.-bound planes with liquid explosives.

The TSA tested a scanner in 2007 at Orlando International Airport but pulled it after seven months because the machine missed too many weapons and bomb parts during tests. The scanner also troubled some passengers because it sounded alarms on shoes containing harmless metal. The TSA says travelers often rate shoe-removal as the biggest hassle of checkpoint screening.

The scanners tested in 2007 were produced through a partnership between the TSA and [General](#)



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[Electric](#). The TSA says they rejected the earlier GE contract because the shoe scanning feature on the machine presented for testing does not meet minimum detection standards. While significant improvements were made, the shoe scanner still does not meet standards to ensure detection of explosives.

The new machines range in size from a step stool to a turnstile. Some use electromagnetic fields to detect metal. Others use chemical sensors to detect explosives. The TSA said it wants a machine that finds metal weapons and explosives, but that could be difficult, Goldberg said. IDO's machine uses metal-detection technology that finds powdered explosives containing metal but not plastic explosives. "There is no technology today that can test for all explosives," Goldberg said.

In 2008, the TSA also tested a turnstile-style unit at Los Angeles International Airport, manufactured by L3 Communications. The L3 system, known as the [PassPort](#) explosives trace-detection systems, does not exactly function as a scanner, but instead works by sniffing them for signals of explosives. L3 says that their landmark energetic material detection (EMD) technology safely indicates the presence of any explosive exhibiting an exothermic decomposition, including TATP (triacetone triperoxide), PETN (pentaerythritol tetranitrate), nitrates, and others. L3's proprietary EMD technology detects explosives based on their unique thermal characteristics, without using carrier gases or radioactive sources.

The advantage to such a detection system (which the TSA does not seem to be considering in its current cycle of vetting contracts) lies in its ability to effectively identify and scope out such harmful chemical explosives.

The TSA [says that](#) the shoe scanning machines will help streamline the process of air travel, and will save time and money:

The removal of footwear takes time, reduces the efficiency of the checkpoint, creates safety concerns with footwear removal and contributes to passenger dissatisfaction. In addition, scanning footwear through the X-ray machine increases the volume of items that the Transportation Security Officers (TSO) at the X-ray machine must visually screen.

Not all security officials are convinced, however. Security [expert](#) Bruce Schneier calls the TSA's approach "security theater." Schneier says that the TSA is merely engaging in efforts such as shoe scanning as a means of implementing measures because they look and feel reassuring rather than providing meaningful security (according to his logic, such security measures are futile, because no matter how many restrictions are placed on airline travel, al-Qaeda will always be two steps ahead of U.S. intelligence, as they have a knack for constantly developing new methods to disguise explosives: "Of course it's not going to make anyone safer, but it will make the security theater go faster, and that's a good thing. We could all stand a little less undressing at airports these days."

The new policy is also intended to remedy previous inconsistencies and discrepancies observed in the TSA's former policy of only requiring that select passengers at select airports remove their shoes prior to wading through airport security checkpoints.

Several lawmakers have criticized TSA for requiring passengers — particularly frail, elderly passengers and U.S. soldiers — to take off their footwear before going through metal detectors, and the current proposal to utilize shoe scanners is intended to remedy these difficulties.

In addition, groups such as the ACLU have also [raised concerns](#) on the effectiveness and constitutionality of the shoe scanners:



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Measures taken in response to specific scenarios are mere guesses about what terrorists might do. And if you guess wrong, you've wasted your money. When Richard Reid brought explosives onto an airliner hidden in his shoes, the authorities made everyone remove their shoes. When security experts and other critics pointed out that this was "silly security," defenders argued that we must put up with it in order to block that particular kind of plot.

However, if terrorists even perceive that scanners will work, they take the next logical step and conceal explosives in their body cavities. Al Qaeda has already used this technique; in one case, a suicide bomber stowed a full pound of high explosives and a detonator inside his rectum, and attempted to assassinate a Saudi prince by blowing himself up. His shoes had nothing to do with it.

While the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 changed its policy, saying that screeners are instructed to encourage travelers to remove their shoes before entering the X-ray machines, but passengers are not required to do so, they hope that the new policy will improve security and speed up travel times for already time-strapped passengers.



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