



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 26, 2011

Why the U.S. Should Bring Down the Curtain on Airport “Security Theater”

Schneier could, of course, have been referring to any of dozens of government programs. In this case, however, he was speaking of the federal government’s post-9/11 airport security measures — measures that Schneier, a security expert, has dubbed “security theater,” defined as “actions that accomplish nothing but are designed to make the government look like it is on the job.”

“Probably [the Transportation Security Administration’s] most relentless critic,” [Vanity Fair’s Charles C. Mann](#) called Schneier, whom he recently met at Reagan National Airport for an on-location critique of federal airport security. The picture Mann paints, with Schneier supplying the pigments, is one of wasted taxpayer dollars; futile security measures; and needless, time-consuming, and humiliating — not to mention unconstitutional — inconveniences for passengers.

“Since 9/11,” Mann wrote, “the U.S. has spent more than \$1.1 trillion on homeland security,” much of it directed toward securing airplanes, the weapon of choice on that fateful day. Yet for all that money, Schneier maintained, “The only useful airport security measures since 9/11 were locking and reinforcing the cockpit doors, so terrorists can’t break in, positive baggage matching” — which Mann describes as “ensuring that people can’t put luggage on planes, and then not board them” — “and teaching the passengers to fight back. The rest is security theater.”

Those worthwhile measures were accomplished at a very modest cost; passengers themselves figured out they needed to fight back while the 9/11 attacks were still in progress and have done so on at least two occasions since. What, then, of all the billions of dollars spent on airport screening checkpoints and air marshals?

The first requirement at a TSA checkpoint is to have a boarding pass — no more accompanying a departing loved one to the gate or being there to greet an arriving one. But faking a boarding pass is as simple as downloading an image from an airline website, modifying it with Photoshop, and printing it on a laser printer. Mann, who said he is “not a photo-doctoring expert,” was able to accomplish the task in under an hour. “Feeling safer?” Schneier asked him after his “boarding pass” had passed muster with the TSA.

Then there are shoe removal and explosives testing, both of which, Schneier pointed out, even the most





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lackadaisical terrorist could easily outsmart. First, don't put any explosives in your shoes. Second, wear latex gloves while making a bomb. You'll sail right through every time.

Want to sneak some explosives onto a plane? Take an empty saline-solution bottle, fill it up with liquid explosive, and shrink-wrap it. "The TSA doesn't open shrink-wrapped packages," Schneier explained.

The skeptical reader might think, "Terrorists can get past those security checks, but what about the body scanners? Surely they couldn't sneak anything past those." In fact, it would take very little ingenuity to fool the scanners. Scanner deployment was greatly accelerated after the foiled "underwear bomber" plot in 2009, in which a would-be terrorist smuggled the plastic explosive PETN onto a plane in his skivvies. But, wrote Mann:

The scanners cannot detect PETN directly; instead they look for suspicious bulges under clothing. Because PETN is a Silly Putty-like material, it can be fashioned into a thin pancake. Taped flat to the stomach, the pancake is invisible to scanning machines. Alternatively, attackers could stick gum-size wads of the explosive in their mouths, then go through security enough times to accumulate the desired amount.

In short, passengers are being subjected to leering eyes and [potentially carcinogenic amounts of radiation](#) so that the government can make a show of "doing something" to prevent terrorism.

Another relatively recent addition to the security theater cast is "behavioral detection officers," who are supposed to be able to tell who is a terrorist just by examining his facial expressions. As unlikely as this is to believe, it becomes even more preposterous when one realizes that U.S. airlines carry roughly 700 million passengers a year. Penned Mann: "In the last 10 years, there have been 20 known full-fledged al-Qaeda operatives who flew on U.S. planes (the 9/11 hijackers and the underwear bomber, who was given explosives by a Yemeni al-Qaeda affiliate). Picking the right 20 out of 700 million — or, even more accurately, out of about 7 billion over 10 years — "is simply not possible, Schneier says."

This all assumes, of course, that terrorists would even take the risk of undergoing the normal TSA screening process. Schneier told Mann that "the security bottlenecks are regularly bypassed by large numbers of people — airport workers, concession-stand employees, airline personnel, and T.S.A. agents themselves." Most of those being low-wage jobs with high turnover, any would-be terrorist could easily obtain one and blow by the TSA checkpoint without so much as a by-your-leave. From there, sneaking a bomb, with or without the bomber, onto a plane would be only moderately more difficult than faking a boarding pass.

Beyond the airport checkpoints, the federal government also pours \$1.2 billion a year into 4,000 air marshals, whose job is to fly all over the country, ever on the alert to thwart terrorist attacks. The job is so boring — a good thing from passengers' standpoint — that few stick with it for very long. "Worse," added Mann, "the program has had no measurable benefit. Air marshals have not saved a single life, although one of them did shoot a deranged passenger a few years ago."

The most effective airport security measures, then, have already been accomplished and no longer require the government's involvement. The rest are either useless or counterproductive — but very lucrative for the burgeoning homeland security industry.

From now on, said Mann, "what the government should be doing is focusing on the terrorists when they are planning their plots." That means doing hard investigative work, not [paying informers to instigate phony plots](#) so that the government can claim credit for "busting" them. Airport security should be turned over to the airlines themselves, who have the greatest incentive (profits) to ensure that security



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measures are effective but not intrusive. And security theater — not just at airports but at [train and bus stations](#), [highway rest stops](#), [sporting events](#), and even [school dances](#) — needs to go the way of vaudeville.



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