

Stanford: What's the point of treating us all like terrorists?

Jason Stanford, Local Contributor

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Even after Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab allegedly attempted to blow up his trousers on the Christmas Day flight, Americans are still better than 20 times more likely to be hit by lightning than they are to be aboard an airplane during a terrorism attempt.

Yet instead of firing whomever allowed someone on a terrorist watch list to board an airplane while wearing a bomb, the Transportation Security Agency seems determined to punish the same people who stopped the attack: passengers.

It makes no sense, makes us no safer and makes me hate and distrust our government's response to terrorism.

After 9/11, the federal government made some long-overdue changes to airline security, but since then al Qaeda has gone 0 for 3. The failed shoe bomber in December 2001, the failed 2006 plot to detonate liquid explosives on 10 airliners and Abdulmutallab's failed attempt to incinerate his pants on the Christmas flight to Detroit.

These attempts failed once because of good police work in England and twice because of vigilant passengers, yet our government responded by making the mistake that military strategists warn against: fighting the last war.

The prohibition against bringing liquids onboard in quantities greater than three ounces exceeds the limits of logic and my patience. Everyone who's been on a plane has a story of losing face wash, peanut butter and even bottled breast milk at security check points.

TSA personnel confiscate so many threatening shampoos that they have to keep large trash bins nearby, making the rule ridiculous on its face. If these are potentially explosive, shouldn't they treat them as potential bombs and not now-useless trash?

Frequent fliers know which airports rarely enforce the rule (Austin) and which ones always enforce it (Baltimore, Atlanta, Washington-Reagan).

Accidentally getting a big can of hair mousse or a bottle of water in one's purse through security is a common occurrence. Every participant in this charade knows that no one is made safer by the arbitrary enforcement of this rule. It's the anti-terrorist equivalent of, "I'm your mother \u2026 because I said so."

We are meant, in our daily sacrifice of so many hand lotions, to forget that the liquid explosive plot was thwarted without this stupid rule.

This brings us to a rule that literally stinks: removing one's shoes for X-ray. My teeth grind at the thought that we stopped the shoe bomber before this rule went into effect. My head hurts thinking about this Muslim convict's many trips to Pakistan and asking why he wasn't on a terrorist watch list to begin with.

And my throat hurts from screaming in frustration at learning that the X-rays would not have detected the high explosive PETN, pentaerythritol tetranitrate, that Richard Reid had hidden in his shoes. So we never would have stopped Reid with the rule that was put in place after we stopped him. We're not just fighting the last war, we're losing it.

Now, because the security apparatus screwed up and let someone on a terrorist watch list onto an airplane, we all have to suffer. We're told we mustn't go to the bathroom in the last hour of transatlantic flights, and we mustn't have our personal belongings on our laps either.

Taken literally, the government has responded to the successful thwarting of the Christmas attack by treating us like children: sit still; no, you can't go to the bathroom; stop fiddling with your things.

By applying this rule to those of us who aren't on terrorist watch lists, they are treating us all like potential terrorists.

This is a heck of a way to thank passengers, without whom this attack would have succeeded.

Inevitably, flight attendants will let a child go potty before landing, won't mind if you're listening to your iPod, or do any number of things that pose no danger to anyone except the idiots who came up with the new rules. I suppose we should be glad that we don't have to take off our pants to get through security.

The preeminence of bureaucracy over discretion does not work in screening out terrorists from the millions of vacationers and business travelers who, on most days, are the only people on the planes. The danger in making too many safety rules that have no relation to safety is that they cease to be rules and become arbitrary implements of bureaucratic rule. Stop treating travelers like terrorists; start preventing terrorists from getting on our airplanes; and consider firing a higher-up every time al Qaeda gets someone aboard an airplane.

Stanford is a frequent flier and a national Democratic political consultant based in Austin.

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