

"The Real Threat to America"

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LONDON — The full-body scanners and intrusive pat-downs that are fast becoming the norm at U.S. airports — just in time for Thanksgiving! — do at least provide the answer to what should be done with Osama bin Laden if he's ever captured: Rotate him in perpetuity through this security hell, "groin checks" and all.

LONDON — The full-body scanners and intrusive pat-downs that are fast becoming the norm at U.S. airports — just in time for Thanksgiving! — do at least provide the answer to what should be done with Osama bin Laden if he's ever captured: Rotate him in perpetuity through this security hell, "groin checks" and all.

He'll crumple fast and wonder that 19 young guys in four planes could so warp the nervous system of the world's most powerful nation that it has empowered zealous bureaucrats to trample on the liberties for which Americans give thanks this week.

In his stupor, arms raised as his body gets "imaged," arms outstretched through "enhanced" patting, bin Laden might also wonder at just how stupid it is to assemble huge crowds at the Transportation Security Administration's airport checkpoints, as if hundreds of people on planes were the only hundreds of people who make plausible targets for terrorists.

It seems Abdulmutallab, a name T.S.A. agents must now memorize, is to blame. Abdulmutallab is the failed Nigerian "underwear bomber" of last Christmas. He joins the failed shoe bomber and failed shampoo-and-bottled-water bombers in a remarkable success: adding another blanket layer of T.S.A checks, including dubious gropes, to the daily humiliations of travelers.

Whether or not these explosive devices were ever actually operable remains a matter of dispute, just as it remains a mystery that the enemy — if as powerful as portrayed — has not contrived a single terrorist act on U.S. soil since 9/11. What is not in doubt is an old rule: Give a bureaucrat a big stick and a big budget, allow said bureaucrat to trade in the limitless currency of human anxiety, and the masses will soon be intimidated by the Department of Fear.

Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's notorious secret police chief, once said, "Show me the man and I'll find you the crime." The T.S.A. seems to operate on the basis of an adapted maxim: "Show me the security check and I'll find you the excuse."

Anyone who has watched T.S.A. agents spending 10 minutes patting down 80-year-old grandmothers, or seen dismayed youths being ordered back into the scanner booth by agents connected wirelessly to other invisible agents gazing at images of these people in a state of near-nakedness, has to ask: What form of group madness is it that forsakes judgment and discernment for process run amok?

I don't doubt the patriotism of the Americans involved in keeping the country safe, nor do I discount the threat, but I am sure of this: The unfettered growth of the Department of Homeland Security and the T.S.A. represent a greater long-term threat to the prosperity, character and wellbeing of the United States than a few madmen in the valleys of Waziristan or the voids of Yemen.

America is a nation of openness, boldness and risk-taking. Close this nation, cow it, constrict it and you unravel its magic.

There are now about 400 full-body scanners, set to grow to 1,000 next year. One of the people pushing them most energetically is Michael Chertoff, the former Secretary of Homeland Security.

He's the co-founder and managing principal of the Chertoff Group, which provides security advice. One of its clients is California-based Rapiscan Systems, part of the OSI Systems corporation, that makes many of the "whole body" scanners being installed.

Chertoff has recently been busy rubbishing Martin Broughton, the wise British Airways chairman who said many security checks were redundant — calling him "ill-informed." Early this year Chertoff called on Congress to "fund a large-scale deployment of next-generation systems."

Rapiscan and its adviser the Chertoff Group will certainly profit from the deployment underway (some of the machines were bought with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act). Americans as a whole will not.

Rapiscan: Say the name slowly. It conjures up a sinister science fiction. When a government has a right to invade the bodies of its citizens, security has trumped freedom.

Intelligence has improved beyond measure since 9/11. It can be used far more effectively at airports. Instead of humiliating everyone, focus on the very small proportion of travelers who might present a threat.

You can't talk down fear simply by calling terrorists "violent extremists," or getting rid of the color-coded terrorism alert system, as the Obama administration has done. During the Bosnian war, besieged Sarajevans had a word — "inat" — for the contempt-cum-spite they showed barbarous gunners on the hills by dressing and carrying on as normal. Inat is what Americans should show the jihadist cave-dwellers.

So I give thanks this week for the Fourth Amendment: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

I give thanks for Benjamin Franklin's words after the 1787 Constitutional Convention describing the results of its deliberations: "A Republic, if you can keep it."

To keep it, push back against enhanced patting, Chertoff's naked-screening and the sinister drumbeat of fear.