

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3130
February 2, 2011

TSA Privatization Freeze: More Politics Than Security

Jena Baker McNeill

On January 28, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) head John Pistole announced with little warning or explanation that the Screening Partnership Program (SPP), which allows airports to privatize their security forces, would no longer expand to additional airports.

This action makes no sense. Private security screeners, under the oversight of TSA, are a perfectly legitimate and secure method for handling the screening of airline passengers. This move—as well as recent changes in the primary screening process, including the extensive deployment of full-body scanners (and/or physical pat-downs), at U.S. airports—raises serious concerns about the Administration's aviation security strategy.

The Screening Partnership Program. Currently, 16 airports take advantage of the SPP. Several other airports have applications pending. The program allows airports, upon approval by TSA, to use private security personnel rather than federal workers to perform security screening services. The private companies are required to maintain the same security standards, training, and equipment as government-run security operations and are subject to extensive oversight.

Friday's announcement was that TSA would not approve the application of Springfield-Branson Airport in Missouri. Pistole emphasized that he would not “expand the program beyond the current 16 airports as I do not see any clear or substantial advantage to do so at this time.” Such a move is directly contrary to the Aviation and Transportation

Security Act of 2001, which statutorily grants this ability to airports through TSA. TSA, on its own Web site, has even touted (and continues to tout) the program as a successful endeavor that maintains security while giving airports flexibility over their security workforces.

Security Politics. Pistole, for his part, has given little explanation as to why the program would no longer add any additional participants. Several public-sector employee unions, however, praised the measure. These are the same groups that not only have rallied against the SPP but have aggressively lobbied Congress for collective bargaining rights for these same government screeners. On this matter specifically, they have argued that privatization is a threat to security.

The insinuation, however, that effective security can be accomplished only through a government-directed and -run operation is ludicrous. Privately run security operates around the country in a variety of sectors and yields excellent results. But more specifically, privatized airports under SPP have had the same success as their government-run counterparts in terms of security operations: A TSA study found that the performance of

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3130>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the Views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

SPP participants was roughly equivalent to that of their federal counterparts.¹

Politics has no place in the nation's security policy. If airports want the flexibility to improve their customer service or have additional reasons why they want to privatize in a manner that maintains security, the government should encourage this effort.

Realigning Priorities. This action is another move by TSA that simply does not make sense. In recent months, it has received tremendous criticism for its extensive deployment of full-body scanners and/or pat-downs in primary inspection lines. This has significantly tarnished the image of TSA with the American public—and Americans are rightfully upset. Requiring more and more passengers to choose one of these screening methods sends a message that everyone is a terrorist risk when, in fact, almost everyone is an innocent traveler.

Foiled plots over the past years since 9/11 demonstrate that stopping terrorism does not begin at the airport screening line; instead, efforts need to focus on improving information-sharing and the ability of law enforcement to track down leads. The right next steps for TSA to reset its course would be to:

- *Embrace the SPP.* There is no reason why this program should stop—TSA should resume the application and approval process.
- *Reassess the primary inspection process.* Previously, full-body scans and pat-downs were

reserved for the secondary inspection line. This is the appropriate place to perform these measures, recognizing that most individuals going through the airport screening line are innocent travelers. TSA should of course retain the flexibility to change its security procedures as it needs to in order to respond to changing threats; however, the move toward blanket scanning of every passenger is a waste of resources and will not make Americans safer.

- *Resist collective bargaining for TSA screeners.* Current law gives the TSA Administrator discretion over whether to collectively bargain with airport security screeners. However, TSA should resist doing so. TSA screeners already have the opportunity to belong to a union, and the TSA withholds dues for screeners who request it. But collective bargaining would increase bureaucracy in a way that would hurt the agency's ability to defend Americans.

The Politics of Privatization. TSA needs to reassess its aviation security policy and invest in what actually works in terms of preventing terrorism. Getting caught up in the politics of privatization is another step backwards.

—*Jena Baker McNeill is Policy Analyst for Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

1. TSA performed a cost and performance study in 2008 for the Screening Partnership Program. The Government Accountability Office (GAO), on request of members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, performed a review of the study. The results are summarized and analyzed in U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Aviation Security: TSA's Cost and Performance Study of Private-Sector Airport Screening*, GAO-09-27R, November 12, 2008, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0927r.pdf> (February 2, 2011).