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February 28, 2005

Lions, Tigers, and Airline Security *An Alt7 exclusive guest column by [Clay Reynolds](#)*

An old joke starts out: A drunk is walking down the sidewalk slapping two large sticks together. When a cop sees him, he asks him what he's doing. "Keeping the lions and tigers away!" the drunk replies. "There's no lions and tigers around here!" the cop exclaims. The drunk draws himself up in pride. "See what a good job I'm doing!" he declares.

I was put in mind of this anecdote when I read about the Bush Administration's plan to charge airline passengers a surcharge to pay for the new security measures implemented in airports. The airlines, naturally, are in an uproar about the additional fees, claiming—correctly—that the cost of flying is already prohibitive for millions of Americans, and that adding what amounts to a usage tax on top of the cost of a ticket will discourage even more folks from taking to the skies, not only for pleasure excursions but also for business trips. The fears are well warranted.

Personally, I have avoiding flying for years. I have no fear of being in an airborne conveyance—actually, I find it sort of exciting—and I enjoy the convenience of traveling to a distant point in mere hours that might take me days to reach by ground transportation. But even before the traumatic events of 9/11 and the resulting panic that led to the hasty and ill-conceived bureau of Homeland Security and the slap-dash and highly inefficient measures employed at the nation's airports, flying had become a major hassle.

I recall that I was on an air trip back in 2000 and found myself changing planes in Kansas City. There was a considerable lay-over, so I went outside the security belt for a breath of smoke, and when I returned, an armed, uniformed officer who said she was an "air marshal," asked me if I would mind participating in an experimental procedure to check for drug contents in carry-ons. The process was a simple one, she said. As I was, as usual, transporting no contraband, I agreed. She dusted the outside of my bag with some yellowish powder, then she slid it through a machine that looked like a miniature iron lung. A row of colored lights went off as it went through the machine, and when it came out the other side, a bright green light illuminated. "You're okay," she assured me.

As it wasn't busy, I started talking to her about the effectiveness of this device, and ultimately of the other security measures—baggage screening, metal detectors, wandering, etc.—that were employed routinely at America's airports. She gave me a wry look, then sighed. "It's all for show," she said. "If somebody attempts to board with a firearm or large knife, we'll catch them. But the truth is that most people carry the means to bring down an airplane in their dop kits, and even if they don't know how to adapt them, the bottles, cans, and other implements people routinely carry can all conceal high explosives and deadly arms." She nodded toward the mechanisms surrounding the entry gate. "Think of it as Disney World," she said. "You feel better going on an expensive ride after you've stood in line and passed through some kind of turnstile."

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I can't vouchsafe the veracity of this officer, but I had long suspected that she's right. On 9/11, my suspicions were justified in a dramatic and horrific way. The simple fact is that barring a strip search and prohibition of any sort of carry-on, forcing passengers to change into paper coveralls and divest themselves of all personal items, including jewelry, there simply is no way to ensure that someone isn't transporting the means to commit mayhem aboard an airliner, to hijack it, to take it down. Airport security can confiscate all the nail clippers and eyebrow curlers it wants, but simple items such as a necktie, a ball point pen, a bottle of aftershave and a pipe cleaner are sufficient weapons in the hands of a committed and suicidal terrorist. For that matter, bare hands and good training are enough, if the individual is strong and determined.

My greatest fear when the Office of Homeland Security was created and the Patriot Act was passed was that the main effect it would have would be create a multi-layered, very expensive bureaucracy that would channel virtually all its energies and more than all of its budget into maintaining itself, with only a few shekles and very little serious thought being devoted to making air travel more secure for innocent passengers. Given the budgetary figures coming out of Washington these days, it appears that such fears were well founded. The result of the government's panic-driven mania to make things safe has been the creation of an unwieldy and clumsy giant. Airport security is a virtual joke to any frequent flyer. It's principally regarded as a major inconvenience, one that often results in missed connections and hastily unpacked and repacked luggage more than in providing any peace of mind. Moreover, it's unevenly applied.

On a recent round-trip to San Diego, we checked in curbside at DFW. Our luggage was tagged and taken without so much as a glance. We passed through security without having to remove our shoes or underwear, and while our carry-ons were X-rayed, no one questioned the bottle of liquor I had stowed in a bag or checked to see if it might contain something more volatile than alcohol. On the return flight, though, things were different. Our luggage was set off to one side, where it was opened and inspected for contraband. I presume, among the dirty socks and curios we were bringing home. I pointed out to the guard that we hadn't had to go through anything like this in Dallas. He said, "Sure you did," and that assured me that somehow, I had been duped into thinking we didn't by some sleight of hand at DFW. Perhaps they used smoke and mirrors—no, not smoke. Not in today's airport terminals!

As I watched a security guard rummaging through our suitcases, wrinkling that which had been carefully folded and flinging fragile personal items carelessly about while discussing with a colleague the possibility of a winning season next year for the Chargers, I noted that another family, obviously tourists from Asia, was standing nearby. They were watching with horror on their faces while a team of guards opened and dismantled their luggage. This group consisted of two well-dressed parents and three children under the age of ten. The most dangerous item in their bags was a pressure cooker and a set of pots and pans—indicating that they subscribed to a religious dictum that required that they cook their own food while traveling. The mother of the group was horrified as the ham-handed guard removed and inspected every utensil, banging them roughly, then stacking them on the floor as he dug deeper, doubtlessly in search of some hidden plastic explosive or incendiary device.

I wondered why they had been singled out for such meticulous inspection. The obvious answer was that they "weren't American," although there was no indication to me that this was the case. The bags were clearly tagged for transport to DFW, and our flight was not an international connection. I suppose it's possible that a group of dark-skinned, British-accented individuals might capture and blow up a plane while their children cheered them on, but I somehow doubted it. I wondered if in the manuals of the Homeland Security Office there is at least one paragraph advising officers to use a modicum of commonsense.

Probably not. Instead, the demand seems to be for more armed guards aboard an aircraft.

I wonder how effective that would be. I have a friend who is a thirty-year veteran pilot for a major airline. Trained in Special Forces' tactics, he is a crack shot with any weapon and is familiar with most firearms legally available for individual ownership. In fact, he has an impressive collection. Surprisingly, he is one of those who most strongly objects to armed guards—or pilots—aboard a commercial liner.

"Do you have any idea what would happen if you fired off a 9mm pistol in a closed cockpit at 75,000 feet?" he asked me. "Even if you hit the guy, there's an excellent chance that the slug would either blow out a window or smash some vital instrument, if it didn't kill some innocent bystander standing behind

him." He shook his head. "Some of these morons want to carry .357s and .44 magnums. Why not just give everybody an RPG and be done with it?"

He went on to point out that even a militarily trained marksman rated "Expert" with a handgun isn't necessarily prepared for close combat with a threatening assailant. "Killing a man," he said, adding, "which is something I've never done, thank God—although I've seen it done—requires a cold-blooded mindset that only a few people have. It's not like the movies. It's scary and it's messy, and it doesn't permit the slightest hesitation or doubt. Your object is to blow him into small, bloody pieces that won't get up again. That kind of mindset has to be engrained in most people, deep. I'm not sure I could do it—and I've been trained for it—but I doubt that Suzy Stewardess or Paulie Pilot could, either, no matter what the threat. Frankly, I doubt that most of the on-board air marshals could do it, either."

The point, of course, is that there really is no way to make air travel utterly secure and safe from terrorist attack. Measures to catch people with bombs and guns are all very well, but the rest of it, truly, is useless.

This new surcharge—or tax—designed to support what is probably a useless exercise in providing the public with some eyewash and false sense of security will probably pass in spite of the airlines' protest. The bureaucracy has become so large and so engrained in governmental mechanics, that it rolls like a juggernaut over any reasonable protests. In the meantime, no one seems to be asking if it's effective or efficient, if it's even doing what it's supposed to be doing. The sad truth is that it probably isn't.

Of course, the problem extends well beyond the airlines. The lining of metropolitan sidewalks with well-armed police during the recent political conventions indicates just how far this boondoggle is prepared to go to justify its expenditures. As I watched photos of these officers on television, I was somewhat amazed. Were they were wearing flack jackets, combat helmets, and carrying automatic rifles I wondered what they imagined they might face in the event of a terrorist attack? Did they imagine that some flotilla of landing craft would soon be approaching the shores of their city, each boat jam-packed with armed insurgents prepared to invade? Did they suspect that somewhere an army of armored vehicles might be secretly poised to attack the whole city? Were they prepared for some more or less innocent-looking individual to come by and blow himself up along with as many bystanders, including the well-padded officers, as could be reached by flying shrapnel? Again, I doubt it.

Security in the air and on the streets is important, and there's no question that the government has a responsibility to provide it. But one has to wonder about the effectiveness of such measures, particularly as time erodes the panic and blunts the vigilance that was aroused by 9/11. It may be time to scale back the bureaucratic morass that Homeland Security has become, to put into the hands of people who know what they're doing and who can take measures to make sure it works.

Actually, it might be time for the government to take a hard look at rapid development and deployment of high speed and efficient rail travel, not only between cities, but coast-to-coast. Of course, one can bomb or hijack a train as easily as one can do the same to an aircraft. But at last report, trains were confined to their tracks, and almost none led to the soaring towers of city skylines. Instead, the new budget calls for a reduction even in what rail travel we have, a further indication of the Bush doctrine's dedication to making sure that when the oil finally does dry up, we'll all be walking.

At the moment, it seems to me, the only rationale for continuing to pour money and energy into our present deployment of security measures for airlines is that, thus far, there have been no further terrorist attacks on the domestic scene. In short, Homeland Security is doing a great job of keeping the lions and tigers away. We can only hope they stay gone.

Native Texan novelist, scholar, and critic [Clay Reynolds](#) is the author of more than five hundred publications ranging from critical studies to novels to book reviews. His latest novel is "[Threading the Needle](#)".

Posted by Dean Terry at February 28, 2005 02:05 PM | [TrackBack](#)

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