

TSA SECURITY STILL NOT SECURE BUT MAYBE WE CAN KEEP OUR SHOES ON SOON

The Senate Appropriations Committee is holding a hearing to discuss results of a still secret IG audit of TSA screening, featuring testimony from both TSA Administrator Peter Neffenger (who was only confirmed in July) and DHS's IG, John Roth.

While neither will explain the results of the audit, Roth's testimony makes it clear the audit did not turn out very well.

Our testing was designed to test checkpoint operations in real world conditions. They were not designed to test specific, discrete segments of checkpoint operations, but rather the system as a whole. The failures included failures in the technology, in TSA procedures, and in human error. We found layers of security simply missing.

Neffenger's testimony provided more details which make it clear TSA had been emphasizing screening speed over security, especially as passenger volume and the incentive to carry on luggage has gone up.

The team's initial conclusion is that the screening effectiveness challenges noted by the Inspector General were not merely a performance problem to be solved solely by retraining our officers. Officer performance is but one among many of the challenges. TSA frontline officers have repeatedly demonstrated during their annual proficiency evaluations that they have the knowledge and the skill to perform the screening mission well. Nor was this principally a failure of the AIT

technology. These systems have greatly enhanced TSA's ability to detect and disrupt new and evolving threats to aviation. AIT technology continues to perform to specification standards when maintained and employed properly, and we continue to improve its detection capabilities.

The challenge can be succinctly described as a set of multi-dimensional factors that have influenced the conduct of screening operations, creating a disproportionate focus on efficiency and speed in screening operations rather than security effectiveness. These challenges range across six dimensions: leadership, technology, workforce performance, the environment, operating procedures, and system design. Of these six, strong drivers include leadership focus, environmental influences, and system design.

Pressures driven by increasing passenger volume, an increase in checkpoint screening of baggage due to fees charged for checked bags as well as inconsistent or limited enforcement of size requirements for hand-carried bags and the one bag plus one personal item (1+1) standard¹ create a stressed screening environment at airport checkpoints. The challenges also include the range of complex procedures that we ask our officers to employ, resulting in cognitive overload and personnel not properly employing the technology or a specific procedure. The limitations of the technology, the systems detection standards, TSA officers' lack of training on equipment limitations, and procedures that failed to resolve the alarms appropriately all undermined our ability to effectively screen, as noted by the Inspector General's report.

There's a lot in both that addresses leadership (and Roth's testimony makes it clear he kept raising the alarm under former TSA Administrator John Pistole), so hopefully Neffenger will do better at this.

The great news is Neffenger is looking at technology that will both work more efficiently without sacrificing security. Of particular note, he says there is a way to scan for shoe explosives without forcing us to take our damn shoes off.

So maybe we'll move away from security theater in upcoming months and years?