

Transparent Attempt to Violate Privacy

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At one point or another, every little boy has dreamed of being Superman. The Man of Steel's super powers let him do almost anything. He's faster than a speeding bullet; more powerful than a locomotive; able to leap tall buildings in a single bound – plus, he's got a flashy, red cape.

What 10-year-old boy being chased by a dog wouldn't want super-speed? Super-strength would come in handy for dealing with neighborhood bullies. Super-breath would help raking leaves in the yard, while laser-heat-vision would be great for clearing the snow off the driveway. And don't even get me started on flying.

Finally, one of Superman's coolest and most overlooked powers is his x-ray vision. Ever the gentleman, Superman never used his x-ray vision inappropriately, for he would never think of violating anyone's privacy. In the hands of a prepubescent boy, I wouldn't be quite so sure.

How about in the hands of the federal government? Once again the government is faced with the dilemma of weighing our right to privacy against our national security as the Transportation Security Administration begins implementing "whole body imagers" to scan passengers at U.S. airports.

Instead of using x-rays, the new imagers utilize electromagnetic waves that emit less energy than a cell phone, and can literally see people's bodies beneath their clothing. Forty new imagers have been installed in 19 airports across the country, including San Francisco. Next year, the TSA plans to install 250 more of the \$170,000 machines in many American airports.

The TSA originally intended to use the body imagers as an alternative to pat-downs for passengers who set off a metal detector or who were selected for extra, so-called "secondary" screening. Passengers will now have the option of either passing through the body imager as their "primary" screening or going through a traditional metal detector.

The imagers have the advantage over metal detectors of picking up pieces of plastic hidden on people that are commonly used in improvised explosive devices. But that's not all they see – and that's why privacy advocacy groups view the new imagers like Superman does Kryptonite.

The TSA, however, contends that privacy isn't really being invaded. The TSA official who directs a passenger through the imager does not see the scan. Instead, the image is viewed by a screener in another room, however, the passenger's face is blurred. Theoretically, because the screener couldn't see our faces, Brad Pitt and I would look exactly the same if we both went through the new imagers. Once the scan is completed, the image is deleted and can never be captured, printed, transmitted or otherwise stored.

The new imagers will also replace the "puffer machines" used in airports for the last five years. The TSA spent \$29.6 million on the devices that were supposed to detect explosive residue by blowing air on passengers, and 94 were installed in 34 airports. They are now being removed because of unreliability due to humidity and dust breaking them down, even after \$6.2 million was spent maintaining the machines.

Any shy airline passengers may soon have to look into lead clothing, or their privacy may go up, up and away.