

THE STRAITS TIMES INTERACTIVE

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July 1, 2005

Security at US airports? That's a laugh

By Ivan Png

For The Straits Times

IN THE past four weeks, I have made two round trips between Singapore and Los Angeles, and one between Los Angeles and Newark, New Jersey.

The current state of US air travel security is laughable. Almost as laughable as three years ago, but for quite different reasons.

In 2002, I was subject to three identification checks at an airport. At the check-in counter, at a security barrier before the gate and, finally, at the gate itself.

There were two physical checks - at the security barrier on the way to the gate and again at the gate.

The second check was supposed to be random, but somehow I always managed to be one of the 'lucky' ones.

I would have to remove my notebook computer, pass it separately through an X-ray machine and then switch it on to show that it did indeed work.

The laughable part? On board the flight, we were not allowed to use metal knives. We had to use steel forks with plastic knives. Never mind that the 9/11 hijackers used box cutters, not dinner cutlery.

And US rules forbid passengers from 'loitering' in the aisle lest they plot an attack on the cockpit - never mind deep-vein thrombosis.

The situation today? At the airport, there was only one identification check - at the security inspection.

I presented an expired driver's licence and was waved through, no problem.

I carried four tins of green tea as presents and was concerned that they might trigger the attention of the security officers. Again, no problem.

The security officer raised a different issue - that I should have put my backpack directly on the conveyor belt for inspection instead of 'wasting' one of the grey rubber bins. That meant more bins for her to carry to the start of the conveyor belt.

Ahead of me at the gate, a woman passenger told the ground staff she had lost her boarding pass. No problem. The helpful ground staff just told her to say her surname and a replacement boarding pass would be printed.

Effective security depends on two principles - well-thought-out procedures and consistent application. It seems that the US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is blessed with neither.

Whoever thought up the 'procedure' on plastic knives and loitering in the aisles?

As for consistency, well, I passed through the airport security four times and my computer was noticed only once.

Security inspections are performed by the TSA - a federal agency which is supposedly the US Congress' solution to low standards among private security personnel.

But what about the thousands of workers in restaurants, bars and other retail concessions on the airside of terminals?

And what of the multitude of airport cleaners, attendants, other employees and contractors? Can they all be required to be federal employees?

To cap it all, I overheard a TSA officer in Los Angeles ask another: 'If you are so smart, why yer working for the TSA?'

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