

# VANITY FAIR

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# ARNOLD

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Flying blind: The author encounters the frisking community.

off, and I don't. And because I am going to be flying on this plane, and you are not." "Are you trying to be funny?"

Flying is already funny enough. There are the bargain supersaver fares. ("Some restrictions apply.") There is the food. There is the numbing crush around the capsule-size bathrooms at the rear, where you run the risk of pulling down someone else's zipper, or indeed pulling up someone else's pants. There is the get-to-know-your-neighbor seating plan. ("My God! My leg! It's lost all feeling!" "That's my leg, Big Boy.") And then, of course, there are the planes themselves. ("Some assembly required.") But the greatest diversion must be the examination process whereby your fitness to fly is determined by America's least hand-picked and least qualified profession: the frisking community.

"Is that a laptop computer?" (Right answer: "Yes, sir/ma'am." Wrong answer: "No, it's a spring-loaded plastic copy of *The Satanic Verses*.") "Turn it on, please." Of course, no bomb-factory genius could make a device that wasn't activated by the "on" switch, and that's just as well, considering that, since he couldn't, any explosion would therefore occur in a densely packed boarding area. "I need to see at least one form of government-issued photo ID." Whew—thank heaven they remembered that. The terrorist isn't born who can get hold of a New Jersey driver's license.

"Heightened security." Such reassuring words. And such familiar ones, too, as each "heightening" requires upward revision. The first big recent heightening came on October 1, 1995, when then transportation secretary Federico Peña ordered a package of "newer, tougher" measures. Parking your car farther from the terminal, picture-ID parades, more questions about luggage . . . the usual salad. This was in response to the conviction of Sheikh Omar's likely lads in New York. These former Afghan freedom fighters, you will recall, had blasted the World Trade Center and hatched plans against the United Nations building and the Lincoln Tunnel. So, what more logical and natural than further stupid reactions at provincial American airports?

**T**he great American airport has a distinction shared by no other national institution. When lined up at the New York Bank for Waiting, for example, you can laugh all you like about making an "unauthorized withdrawal" at pistol-point. While detained by the pitiless warders of the Department of Motor Vehicles, you are allowed to joke about the relative merits of the Albanian Ministry of Tourism. But while passing through the sausage machine of aviation "security," it is a Federal Requirement that you keep a poker face. Jokes are not just frowned upon. They are unlawful. ("Hey, you know that material they use to make the black box? Why can't they make the whole plane out of that stuff?" "You have the right to remain silent . . .")

I am finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the requisite silence. On checking in, I want to be able to ask the following perfectly serious questions of the ground staff. "Did you pack your own bags today? Have they been with you at all times? Did anybody give you anything to bring to the airport?" I actually did ask this the other day, to see if they would ask me why I was asking. They did, and I had my answer ready. "Because you have access to the plane, the ramp, and the luggage before take-

## AIRPORT INSECURITY

Curiously, in the wake of the ValuJet and TWA disasters, it's the passengers who are getting grilled and inspected before every flight: "Did you pack your own luggage?" Perhaps it's time the airlines—and the F.A.A.—got asked a question or two

Meanwhile, if you wanted to drive a truck into the Lincoln Tunnel, you were free to do so with no questions asked. After all, this is still a free country and, what's more, traffic would be a real bitch if all drivers were interrogated on their way in.

Ahead lay the two stellar moments of Secretary Peña's term in office: the gatorward plunge of ValuJet 592 into the Everglades, and the detonation of TWA 800 off Long Island. It is the latter calamity in particular that has inaugurated the most recent "heightening" of "security" and triggered the hasty work of Al Gore's vice-presidential commission on the subject. Yet the findings of both actual inquiries look to be substantially the same. In each case, a long train of negligence and inattention preceded the catastrophic failure of aircraft in flight. The problem was not "security." It was safety. The poor wretches who boarded the ValuJet flight on May 11 did not know that Federal Aviation Administration inspectors had yelled at their own agency on the previous February 16, urging it to address "known safety-related issues" affecting the airline. Instead of meekly submitting to a lot of silly questions from bored and indifferent "security" personnel, and then to an inspection of themselves and their belongings, the paying customers should have been asking for a look at the plane. But if they had done so with any jocularly in their nervousness, they could have been arrested and strip-searched on the spot. Which is more than has happened since to ValuJet's board, who with more than \$250 million in cash on hand nevertheless admitted to 43 breaches of airline-safety rules, including a misconnected tail cone and weather radar that was reported as defective 31 times before being repaired.

A dear comrade of mine was on board Pan Am 103 when it exploded over Lockerbie, so I don't feel in an especially jokey mood about this. The Lockerbie horror was caused by a bomb, though the "security" experts are still arguing about whose it was, and how it got through "security." But how might I feel, as a TWA 800 relative, to learn now that the plane's center fuel tank was a disaster waiting to happen? And that the industry considers the problem too expensive to fix?

For the right to be patted down and patronized and jerked around at the check-in, you pay—by means of a special airport excise tax levied on every ticket. For safe planes and proper baggage screening, the airlines and the airport authorities would have to pay. And

this, many of them are distinctly reluctant to do. Those ridiculous beeping scanners, which pick up the change in your pocket and the tinfoil on your Roloids, are not equipped to detect plastic explosives of the kind that brought down Pan Am 103. They are there not to protect you but to give employment to the semi-employable and to give you the illusion of protection. In 1990, Congress mandated a three-year deadline for the F.A.A. to develop and install scanners that could

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screen for plastic explosives. That deadline passed some time ago. There is a machine that can do the job. And it is slowly and begrudgingly being deployed. It is called the CTX5000 SP and it's made by InVision Technologies. The trouble is, it's rather costly (approximately \$1 million). A spokesman for InVision put it crisply: "The airlines don't want to do it, and the F.A.A. won't force them." Had there been a plastic-explosive bomb at J.F.K. on the night that TWA 800 was boarding, there was no technology to prevent it from getting on the plane. So another question to ask as you are squeezed through "security" is this: "Does this scanner have a plastic-detecting capability?" Only, do be careful to keep any note of sarcasm out of your voice. Stay on the right side of the law.

It would probably be illegal, too, to inquire about Gregory May. This character was a California shrink hired by the F.A.A. to conduct "stress management" sessions for its officials. An investigation by Mary Schiavo, the former inspector general for the Department of Transportation, found that he was holding cultish sessions, based on the teachings of a New Age fruit bat named J. Z. Knight, who purported to channel the spirit of a 35,000-year-old sage and warrior by the name of Ramtha. This manly, shimmering figure manifested himself to her as she was conducting a yogurt experiment in her kitchen in Tacoma, Washington, in 1977. Ramtha turns out,

like so many adepts these days, to be an inhabitant of the lost continent of Atlantis. It is somehow depressing to read of his effortless "ascent" to another "plane" at a stage in our century when "ascent" is just what our "planes" find most challenging. It is no less depressing to learn that J. Z. Knight was born in Roswell, New Mexico—the crash site of choice for alien craft from all galaxies.

In a shattering chapter of her new book, *Flying Blind, Flying Safe* (Avon), Mary Schiavo tells us that her investigation of cultishness at the F.A.A. turned up repeated reports of seminars where

May and other trainers screamed [that the managers] were "assholes, jerks and idiots" during classes; deprived them of sleep and food; forced them to discuss sexual habits, personal relationships, abuse or other trauma during group therapy sessions; and tied them together for days at a time and made them shower or go to the bathroom in that way.

Before they sent the managers off, rested and refreshed, to supervise air-traffic-control computers that have been evaluated as several decades out-of-date. According to Schiavo:

Over 4,000 senior FAA managers volunteered for or were required to attend these courses and meekly endured the outrageous rituals because they were convinced May wielded such power with their bosses that he could make or break their careers.

Going along to get along—just like you when you wait in line to have your privacy and intelligence invaded and insulted by mediocre nonentities. ("Did you pack your own bags?" Well, I'd sure crack if I were a bomber and I heard *that* tough question.) Managers trained by May and Ramtha are still in place, though May himself, having been fined and jailed for mail fraud, has been terminated. (His contract had been worth \$1.4 million: about \$500,000 more than the cost of a CTX-5000 SP plastic-explosive detector.) An agency that knowingly runs on wing-and-prayer safety measures is obviously easy prey for guilt-ridden superstition, but still—this is ridiculous. You presumably have the right to ask, when you decide to fly, if the local F.A.A. manager is a disciple of Ramtha and is counting on his good vibrations to keep the plane aloft.

Another good and legitimate question to pose would be: "Excuse me, but does this airline do its own maintenance?" Last June, former F.A.A. administrator David Hinson admitted that the subcontracting, or "outsourcing," of

aircraft maintenance was a bit of a problem. (It was a banner month for admissions on his part: he had vouched for ValuJet's integrity the day after the crash and then, on second and third thoughts, grounded it entirely.) His now sacked safety director, Anthony Broderick, told Congress in March 1986 that "the proliferation of contract maintenance . . . has been difficult to deal with." He could safely say that again. The 1982 Air Florida crash in Washington, where a plane departing from National Airport made an unscheduled stop in the freezing waters of the Potomac, resulting in 78 deaths, was caused by a failure to de-ice the aircraft. Maintenance, it turned out, had been subcontracted to another carrier, which, in the dry words of one account, "had only limited familiarity with 737s." And before that, a DC-6 operated by Mercer Airlines had failed to defy gravity over Van Nuys, California. The unhappy episode was caused by a bum propeller blade, faultily inspected by an outside contractor. Yet at a press conference only last June, Federico Peña managed the brave insight that "in many, many ways, the industry today is far more complex. . . . It used to be that airlines performed their own maintenance."

A question or two about the age of the aircraft might not come amiss, either. Lewis Jordan, a co-founder of ValuJet, boldly announced that there is "absolutely nothing wrong with a 25-year-old plane that has been properly maintained." Let us skip over the maintenance question (above) and the fact that the plane now resting in the Everglades was 27 years old. How can he answer for the pedigree of planes that he bought from a Turkish airline that had no further use for them? Former inspector general Schiavo, who is also a pilot, now tells us that she knew how to avoid flying "marginal airlines" and that she keeps "seeing the holes in the safety net—gaps in regulation and oversight that can produce spectacular cases like ValuJet. . . . We recently discovered that rather than checking every aircraft, many inspectors simply examine whatever plane happens by when they are on duty. One plane was inspected 200 times in one year; others not at all." That's good to know.

Yet in spite of the accumulation of such evidence, the conclusion of our betters is always the same. Let's inspect the passengers! Forget a computerized baggage-matching system (too costly). Concentrate on the consumers.

In this world of "virtual" security and simulated safety, the figure of Al Gore looms like a colossus. Selected perhaps for his perfect adherence to the no-jokes



**Line of inquiry: "Did you pack your own bags today? Have they been with you at all times?" The author interrogates the interrogator.**

rule, he and his fellow commissioners have come up with a report that might escape prosecution on the grounds that its humor is at least unintentional.

Take, just for an instance, the Gore recommendation that children under the age of two be assigned their own seats. Now, some of us might not miss the lap-top child on a crowded flight, whilst others of us would have to take a train because of the increased cost of family-values flying. But what does this have to do with safety or security? Perhaps an unsecured child could become a projectile in the event of a steep downturn toward the Everglades, but at that point . . . The thing becomes even more ludicrous a few pages later on, when the recommendation for an "automated profiling system" is made manifest. Your "profile" is more suspect if you buy your ticket in cash or at the last minute, or if you are headed to an unusual destination. But you get a break if, for example, you have a return ticket or if you are traveling with a child! Of course, no suicide bomber would dream of taking a helpless kid with him. And, of course, no terror monger will have the wit to

buy a return ticket. Nor, we may be sure, will any master of subversion bother to anticipate the "passenger profile" guidelines with intent to circumvent them. But the following things will happen. If I show up at a backcountry airport on return from vacation, wearing only what I stand up in and carrying a ticket and no luggage, I will be denied boarding because I have no ID. Already, people like Yuri Tadesse, an Ethiopian-born aide to Jesse Jackson, and other people with funny names have been pulled from boarding areas without explanation and told that they cannot fly that day. (Unless, of course, you give your name as Ramtha, in which case you can clamp on your propeller beanie, shoulder your Uzi, and be waved right through.) Friskers can turn quite nasty if asked to give an account of their arbitrary decisions. Especially if the victim opposes the mantra of "security" with the least attempt to be funny. You read a lot of pompous and masochistic talk about the "trade-off" between freedom and security. Yet here is an obvious sacrifice of freedom, for no concomitant gain in security *at all*. Indeed, it might be argued that paying a lot of people to look for the wrong things and ask the wrong questions is blunting the edge of security in the first place.

So here's the plan: more and more witless and pointless big government on the ground, to make it harder and harder to board planes that are less and less safe. Among the last screams from the ValuJet crew were "Smoke in the cockpit, smoke in the cabin." During the Gore-commission hearings, one of the commissioners asked why the F.A.A. had not pressed for a simple anti-smoke device that has been available since 1990. The question should have been taken seriously, since it came from Victoria Cummock, who is president of the association of relatives of Pan Am 103. But Gore himself ridiculed the idea. In a letter of dissent included in the commission's final report, Ms. Cummock observed that most of its work had been spent on measures that reflect "a clear commitment to the enhancement of aviation at the expense of the commissioner's mandate of enhancing aviation safety and security." Bear this in mind when you are next subjected to stupidity at an airport. □