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Terminal Insecurity: Passenger Screening's Historical Journey toward Landing Legitimacy

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Overview: In this paper, I contend that screening’s perceived instability is a direct consequence of its inability to achieve legitimacy, expound upon the various programs and strategies that have been—and are currently being—employed in attempts to establish the discipline’s legitimacy, and demonstrate the need to divert from such continually futile approaches. Next, I contend that overcoming the stage of legitimation and thus achieving the realm’s stability is a practicable goal whose attainment depends on policymakers’ reevaluation of the premises that have underlay previous—and continue to drive current—screening approaches. Finally, I present what I believe to be four concrete strategies that would enable policymakers to rebuild screening into a more respected discipline that can effectively transcend the obstacles that have historically hindered its ability to achieve legitimacy.

Thesis: To thoroughly understand the prevailing perceptions that plague the United States’ airport passenger screening system, one must begin by exploring airport screeners’ historical quest for authority. Passenger screeners’ continued failure to gain stability and authority is the result of their discipline’s inability to successfully complete all three stages of emergence; for over forty years, passenger screening has remained fixed in the stages of transition.

Methodology: To aid in this enterprise, this paper traces the historical processes through which paradigmatic fields have emerged to become perceived as authoritative and, using their 3-stage progressions as models, explores the mechanisms through which airport security screening can achieve analogous degrees of stability.

Legitimacy:

1. Preemption: the early stage in which an area of knowledge formerly accessible to the general public, or a particular group, becomes esoteric and is consequently transferred to the possession of a different, more specialized group.

2. Institutionalization: the stage in which structures and behaviors within the field are established in an attempt to cultivate certain relationships.

3. Legitimation: the stage in which the field achieves widespread public acceptance and support.

Concerns over the effectiveness, morality, reliability, privacy and failures of screening’s traditional object focus:

- 2014 tests “revealed continuing weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the screening system” despite ATSA and Advanced Imaging Technology.

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