

House bill on airport screening offers security mostly to corporate profits

John Burbank; News Tribune Columnist

Last week, two Washington Congressmen, George Nethercutt and Richard "Doc" Hastings, got taken for a ride by a couple of Texans - House Majority Leader Dick Armey and House Majority Whip Tom DeLay - to undermine the nation's security for the sake of big business.

It should not have come down to this, and it shouldn't have even been a partisan issue. In fact, in the Senate, 50 Democrats joined 50 Republicans to unanimously pass a bill to federalize the airport security screeners. But over in the House, the Republican leadership decided to protect companies that have histories of security violations rather than ensure that our nation's airports are safe.

Every day at Sea-Tac Airport, 40,000 travelers go through security checkpoints manned by privately contracted security guards whose average wage is \$8.05 an hour. Their turnover rate is 140 percent a year. It's ludicrous to require an annual re-test for "security" employees when the vast majority don't stick around long enough for the retest! Which explains how Sea-Tac had 576 violations of airport security last year.

The "security" firms at Sea-Tac include Argenbright Security, owned by a British company, and Huntleigh, owned by a Netherlands multinational. Our leaders in the House seem intent on saving privilege for these foreign companies.

We also have at Sea-Tac our own shortsighted American owner of Olympic Security, Mark Vinson, who stated, "When the government takes over, the quality of the product goes down and the cost goes up."

Think of that. He is talking about the quality of the product: Within four days in June 2000, undercover employees of the Federal Aviation Administration were able to carry a hand grenade and a dynamite bomb undetected through security checkpoints at Sea-Tac!

As for keeping costs down: Why not just turn over security to felons on work release? Then Vinson could pay even lower wages.

But wait - that already happened. A recent audit of Argenbright revealed that several of its screeners had criminal backgrounds, including a Sea-Tac worker convicted of charges of being a felon in possession of a handgun.

The Huntleigh Web site advertises jobs for airport security screeners starting at \$6.25 an hour - close to 50 cents less than Washington state's minimum wage.

Our friends DeLay and Armey have repeatedly cited European systems for airport security as good examples for our country. It is sort of funny, because any time someone mentions improving social programs like health care coverage, these two Texans will denounce them as European ideas, not fit for America.

But what DeLay and Armey are silent about, and what the House legislation is silent about, is what really differentiates the European airport screeners from those in our country: They are paid well, \$16.50 an hour on

average in Germany. They are trained to be professionals. They can make a career out of this work. Their governments have ultimate responsibility for screeners.

And this was exactly what DeLay, Arney and our own Nethercutt and Hastings voted against. The Senate bill that went down to defeat in the House would have raised salaries to \$35,000 and required 90 hours of training, plus an additional 200 training hours on the job.

So what does President George W. Bush say about this? The president maintains that allowing private contractors to run airport security would make it easier "to discipline or fire employees who fail to live up to the rigorous new standards."

Now, is this after they have allowed people to go through security with weapons, like a man did just last Saturday in Chicago armed with nine knives, a can of tear gas and a stun gun? Or perhaps President Bush means that we would be better off if public civil servants such as firefighters and police officers - all union members - were replaced with privatized Brinks guards or the fellows who roam the malls as security personnel?

As patriotic Americans, it is our right and duty to question President Bush when we think he is wrong. And with airport security, he is absolutely wrong.

Who is kidding whom here? President Bush does not depend on Wackenhut to guard him - he depends on the Secret Service, who, we know, will lay down their lives for him if necessary. So what about the citizens who depend on safe skies to conduct business and visit families? Don't they deserve dependable protection from terror?

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