



Another TSA document redaction failure

Posted by Seth on January 1, 2010

I really wish that these stories would stop cropping up. Don't get me wrong – they give me something to write about – but they are truly depressing when I realize that these are the folks I entrust my life with a hundred times every year. I know that the numbers are still very much in my favor, but it is really quite sad that they are able to continue to operate like this.

The failure today comes in the form of [another PDF document containing SSI that has been published online](#) without the appropriate redaction applied. Last time this happened there were hearings and a decent amount of general outrage. Here's hoping that something similar happens again. Actually, here's hoping that something more happens this time. It would be nice to see the Acting Director of the [TSA](#) actually required to answer questions rather than to simply say that she'll get back to the folks driving the inquest. It would be nice to hear that the organization will actually be held responsible rather than simply allowing the talking head to say that she is taking full responsibility, government speak for nothing will happen.

The document in question this time is a ruling from the US Merit Systems Protection Board. These are the folks responsible for handling whistleblower claims from government employees and ruling on whether the claimant actually has a case against the government. In this particular case the case is about a TSA employee responsible for testing the checked baggage screening procedures at airports around the country. He made a claim that a change to the screening procedure would negatively affect the safety of the traveling public and was reprimanded. The TSA claims that the reprimand was for other failures in his job, not for the claims made about the changes to the screening process.

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD**
2009 MSPB 75

Docket No. DC-1221-08-0274-W-1

Stanley J. Miller,
Appellant,
v.
Department of Homeland Security,
Agency.
May 4, 2009

The meat of the case is actually rather boring and reading the document is somewhat sleep inducing. Still, there are a number of bits that are listed as SSI and that are "redacted" in the

same manner as the last document was. A black box was drawn over the affected text but the underlying text was not removed from the document. Reading the original text is a trivial matter; it does not require any special computer 'hacker' skills.

What is important in this document is that it clearly outlines some of the policies that the TSA uses to define the screening of checked bags. It describes the process and frequency with which bags will be swabbed for traces of explosive residues (ETD check) and what the follow-on actions are should the test come back positive. Most notably, it describes situations where a positive ETD might not require further inspection. Properly redacted this information wouldn't be there.

Ironically, the initial action came about because the TSA agent thought that the changes to the search policies were decreasing the safety of the traveling public. Through their failed PDF skills the government has ensured such an outcome.

The document is dated May 4, 2009. It is not clear if the procedures described are from that time-frame or from around 2007. If the latter we will almost certainly hear the TSA claim that there is no risk because the policies have changed several times since this information was in play. But they always build on previous versions of their SOP so it isn't possible for us to really know just how much of the "redacted" policies are still in play.

You've failed again, TSA. How many more times can we expect this to happen before true, positive change comes to the organization? Why are you gambling with my life?

<http://boardingarea.com/blogs/thewanderingaramean/2010/01/another-tsa-document-redaction-failure/>