NO PREP

Keeping the Skies Safe After 9/11

The TSA

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

The TSA: Keeping the Skies Safe After 9/11

The System That Failed on September 10

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To understand the TSA, start with what airport security looked like on September 10, 2001. Screening was run not by the government but by private companies hired by the airlines — contractors competing on cost, paying near minimum wage, with employee turnover at some checkpoints exceeding one hundred percent per year. Screeners hunted for guns and bombs; small knives and box cutters were permitted items. Cockpit doors were lightweight and often opened in flight. No system matched passenger names against terrorist watchlists in any rigorous way, and checked bags were rarely screened for explosives at all. The hijackers did not so much defeat this system as walk through it: several were flagged that morning by the era's modest prescreening program, with the sole consequence that their checked bags were held until they boarded. Nineteen men with permitted blades took four aircraft in under two hours. The lesson written in that morning was structural: aviation security had been an airline cost center, and it needed to become a national security function — which is precisely the transformation Congress ordered before the year ended. The pre-9/11 system's failures were not for lack of warning. Government commissions through the 1990s had flagged screener performance, and undercover tests routinely slipped weapons past checkpoints; a 1999 audit found screeners missing a fifth of dangerous test objects. But every proposed fix collided with the same economics: security added cost and passenger friction to an industry competing on price and convenience, and no airline could unilaterally toughen screening without losing travelers to laxer rivals. Economists recognize the structure — a collective action problem, solvable only by a rule-setter that binds everyone at once. That is the analytic case for

federalization that September 11 converted from seminar argument into emergency law.

Sixty Thousand Hires: Federalizing the Checkpoint

The Aviation and Transportation Security Act, signed November 19, 2001, created the Transportation Security Administration and gave it deadlines historians still marvel at: federalize passenger screening at more than 400 commercial airports within a year, and screen all checked baggage for explosives by the end of 2002. The TSA hired roughly 60,000 employees in its first year — one of the fastest civilian mobilizations in American government history — replacing the contractor patchwork with a trained federal workforce under national standards. Airports installed minivan-sized explosive detection machines in lobbies while construction crews rebuilt baggage systems around them. Meanwhile, the aircraft themselves were hardened: reinforced, locked cockpit doors became mandatory — arguably the single most effective fix of the era, making a 9/11-style cockpit takeover physically implausible — and the Federal Air Marshal Service expanded from dozens of officers to thousands riding armed and anonymous on select flights. Pilots could volunteer to be armed; flight attendants were trained in defense; and passengers themselves, after Flight 93, became an acknowledged last layer of security no hijacker could plan around. The mobilization's growing pains were real and instructive. Hiring sixty thousand people in a year meant training pipelines built mid-flight, checkpoint wait times that tested public patience, and explosive-detection machines deployed faster than the software matured — false alarm rates ran high, and lobbies filled with re-scanned luggage. Congress extended the baggage deadline for some airports when physics and construction schedules proved stubborn. Historians of administration study the TSA's first eighteen months as a case in standing up a large agency at speed: the lesson is not that it went smoothly — it did not — but that clear statutory deadlines, visible public purpose, and single-mission focus can build in months what ordinary bureaucratic time would schedule across a decade.

Layers, Not Walls: The Security Philosophy

The TSA's governing doctrine is 'layered security' — the recognition that no single checkpoint stops every threat, but overlapping imperfect layers multiply the chances of catching one. The layers begin before the airport: intelligence agencies feed watchlists, and the Secure Flight program matches every passenger manifest against them before boarding passes print. At the checkpoint: identity verification, X-ray and CT scanning of carry-ons, millimeter-wave body scanners, and explosive trace detection swabs. Behind the scenes: 100 percent screening of checked bags, canine teams whose noses remain among the most sensitive explosive detectors ever fielded, air marshals aloft, hardened cockpit doors, and armed pilots. Each layer has known weaknesses — which is the point of having the others. The doctrine also concedes something civics students should notice: security is probabilistic, not absolute. The system's goal is to make a successful attack improbable and expensive, not impossible — because 'impossible' would require measures no free society would board a plane to endure.

An Arms Race Measured in Shoes and Liquids

The TSA's history since 2001 reads as a call-and-response between attackers and screeners, each adaptation visible in the ritual of the checkpoint. In December 2001, Richard Reid boarded a Paris-to-Miami flight with explosives built into his shoes — passengers and crew subdued him, and shoe removal entered the American security liturgy. In 2006, British police broke up a plot to destroy airliners with liquid explosives smuggled as soft drinks; carry-on liquids have been capped at travel sizes in clear bags ever since. In 2009, the 'underwear bomber' attempted to down a jet over Detroit with explosives no metal detector could see, accelerating deployment of full-body scanners that image the body's surface. Each measure drew criticism — for privacy, for delay, for fighting the last war — and each critique carries some truth: red-team audits have repeatedly smuggled test contraband past checkpoints, feeding the charge that some measures are 'security theater.' The agency's answer is the layered doctrine itself: deterrence does not

require perfection at any layer, and no attack has succeeded against the layered system in over two decades.

The Balancing Act: Risk, Time, and Trust

The TSA's third decade has been defined by a quiet philosophical shift: from screening everyone identically to screening by risk. PreCheck, launched in 2013, lets travelers who submit to background checks keep shoes on and move through expedited lanes — an explicit admission that treating a vetted grandmother and an unknown traveler identically wastes scarce screening attention. Computed tomography scanners now build 3-D images of carry-ons, and algorithms flag anomalies human eyes miss; facial recognition at document check speeds identity verification while igniting fresh privacy debates. The economics remain contested: an $8-billion-a-year agency funded partly by passenger fees, whose benefit — attacks that never happened — resists measurement, and whose costs include not just budgets but billions of passenger hours. Yet the checkpoint also functions as something subtler: the most visible daily ritual of the post-9/11 state, where every traveler personally transacts the security-liberty trade this unit keeps examining. Students who understand why the line exists, what each layer does, and what it costs are equipped to judge the next generation of measures — which will arrive, as they always have, one thwarted or successful plot at a time. The international dimension completes the picture: aviation security is only as strong as its weakest departure lounge, since a bomb loaded abroad flies wherever the plane does. The United States therefore exports its standards — TSA inspectors audit foreign airports with U.S.-bound flights, international bodies harmonize screening rules, and intelligence sharing tracks plots across borders — while foreign practice sometimes leads: Israeli-style behavioral interviewing, European trusted-traveler schemes, and Asian airports' automation all shaped American adoption. The result is a globally interlocked system in which a liquids plot in London changes carry-on rules in Omaha within weeks — a standing demonstration, usefully concrete for students, of how security policy globalized in the twenty-first century.

Key Information: The TSA and Aviation Security

Detail	Information
Before 9/11	Private contractors; box cutters permitted items
ATSA signed	November 19, 2001 — created the TSA
First-year hiring	~60,000 federal screeners at 400+ airports
Cockpit doors	Reinforced and locked — the era's most effective fix
Shoe removal	Response to Richard Reid's 2001 shoe bomb attempt
Liquids rule	Response to the 2006 liquid explosives plot
Body scanners	Accelerated by the 2009 underwear bomber
PreCheck (2013)	Risk-based screening for vetted travelers

Case Study: Officer Diaz and the Bag That Lied

Rosa Diaz, 29, had been a TSA officer for three years when a carry-on crossed her X-ray screen looking almost right. Almost. A laptop, cables, toiletries — and a dense mass tucked inside a hollowed hardcover book. Her training kicked in: she did not touch the bag or its owner, but keyed the image to her supervisor and called for a bag check. The passenger, a college student, went pale as the explosives-trace swab came back negative and the book yielded — a brick-sized block of modeling clay, hollowed out to hide a birthday gift of cash from airport thieves. Everyone exhaled; the line had stalled eleven minutes. At debrief, her supervisor replayed the image for trainees: 'Rosa couldn't know it was clay. On this screen, clay and plastic explosive are cousins. The system worked exactly as designed — flag, isolate, resolve, release.' Rosa tells trainees the two lessons she keeps: false alarms are the price of real vigilance, and the passenger deserves the same professionalism at minute eleven as at minute one. 'Every bag is innocent until resolved,' she says. 'And every bag gets resolved.'

1. Why is Rosa's false alarm considered a success of the screening system rather than a failure?

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2. What does the clay-versus-explosive ambiguity reveal about the limits of any single security layer?

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Multiple Choice

1. Who ran airport passenger screening before 9/11?
    a) The FBI
    b) Private contractors hired by airlines
    c) The U.S. military
    d) Local police departments and state law enforcement

2. Which measure is widely considered the era's single most effective aviation fix?
    a) Removing shoes at all airport checkpoints
    b) The liquids rule
    c) Reinforced, locked cockpit doors
    d) In-flight meal restrictions

3. What is the core idea of 'layered security'?
    a) One perfect checkpoint stops all threats
    b) Security should be completely invisible to passengers at all times
    c) Screening only international flights
    d) Overlapping imperfect defenses raise the odds of catching threats

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ ATSA	A) Covert test smuggling contraband to probe checkpoint weaknesses
2. ___ Secure Flight	B) Risk-based expedited screening for vetted travelers

3. ___ Federal Air Marshals	C) Program matching passenger manifests against watchlists
4. ___ Red-team audit	D) November 2001 law that created the TSA
5. ___ PreCheck	E) Armed officers riding anonymously on select flights

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Before 9/11, small knives and box _____ were permitted items.

2. The TSA hired roughly _____ employees in its first year.

3. The 2006 liquid explosives plot produced today's _____ rule.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why did Congress conclude that airport security had to become a federal function? Use pre-9/11 evidence.

_____

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_____

2. Trace two checkpoint rules to the specific plots that produced them. What pattern do they show?

_____

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3. Is 'security theater' a fair criticism of the TSA? Argue with evidence from the reading.

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