

Who Guards the Guards?

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service - December 10, 2003

Got your plane tickets? Caveat Emptor. Let the buyer beware.

The ancients measured the quality of a civilization by its treatment of strangers. And authors of holy texts judged peoples' goodness by how they treated outsiders. By these yardsticks, America is falling short.

In our airport terminals, we accept the idea that fundamental liberties may be sacrificed to quash our fears. So we walk around without belts and shoes, and we dutifully forfeit tweezers and fingernail clippers. Our bags and bodies are searched and scanned because we must submit for the sake of stopping terror. Humiliation is a steep price, but we go along, because we're afraid.

That's not enough. We demand this dread be shared by the world. "The New York Times" reports that a French co-pilot was arrested, jailed, and charged for an "inappropriate" comment this summer. A passenger witness said he made a flip remark ("What do you think, I have a bomb on me?") when required to pass through the metal detector a second or third time. The flight was cancelled and 350 people stranded overnight. The offender learned the limit of American "free" speech that now punishes joking or sarcasm that challenges our culture of fear.

I headed the American embassy in Austria for four years, where we dealt with visa questions of all sorts; so I'm particularly sensitive to the trials and tribulations of international comings and goings. I cringe when I hear about an 80-year-old British woman returning home to the U.S. (where she'd lived more than five decades), who had "suspiciously" chosen not to acquire U.S. citizenship, although her husband and children were Americans. She was pulled aside at an airport and sent to a separate area for questioning. Although she was eventually cleared of nefarious intent, when guards asked her to go to the interrogation room, did any of us say, "Should you be wasting my tax money or your time hassling old folks?" Of course not. We just thought we were lucky it was someone else, not us. Or, we thought, her name must be on a computer—and that can't be good.

People have been stopped from entering the U.S. because our government didn't have a record of their departures after a previous trip here. But past data collection on those who left our country was poorly done—one reason given for changes since 9/11. So why do we enforce our laws based on unreliable pre-9/11 data? In one case, a woman who'd just stepped off a transatlantic flight was required to leave on the next plane, because we had no proof she'd ever left the United States. No proof—but also no logic, no reasoning, no common sense.

When an individual arrives without the right papers, security guards have three choices: return the traveler to the airline to be flown back immediately; waive the traveler into the U.S. with a fine; or fingerprint, search and confine the visitor in a separate area without any communication with family, lawyers, or consuls, until, at our convenience, she can be sent home. In May, the U.S. required Belgians to use a new, more fraud-proof passport, if they wished to travel to the U.S. without a visa. The old passport, sufficient for more than a decade, was now a security risk, said officials. When a family of four arrived at one of our airports and the mother was carrying the older Belgian passport, the guards chose the harshest option available.

The woman was fingerprinted, interrogated, held in detention, then sent home for a new-style passport.

The family had traveled to the U.S. months earlier without incident. They'd received no warning when they boarded the airplane. So why did we choose the most humiliating treatment? Were the guards afraid they'd get in trouble if they didn't? I wonder if they'd have done the same if they'd had an audience. My bet is if we'd been there, we'd have kept our mouths shut. These days we are more intimidated by those sworn to protect us than we are concerned about losing the freedom we're trying to protect.

Are the tests of a civilized society—how guests are treated—mere relics of earlier times? Being a bully doesn't make America safe. And allowing ourselves to be bullied isn't part of the American character. It's time we consider another ancient question, which the Romans raised when debating freedom and power: "Who guards the guards?"