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 achieve Legitimation, 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 disparaging 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.

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(a) 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.

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

(c) Achieving Legitimacy: the stage in which the field achieves widespread public acceptance and support.

1. By recasting the (1) functional, (2) psychological, (3) technological, and (4) authoritative premises that have underlay the U.S.’s screening regime for over 40 years, policymakers and the public can rebuild this realm into one that can viable overcome the obstacles that have continually hindered the realm’s ability to achieve legitimacy.

2. By examining the history of passenger screening as an ongoing process of emergence, it becomes evident that the profession’s partial fulfillment of the Preemption and Institutionalization stages of this process has led to the practice’s progressive development and increasing acceptance. However, the realm’s persistent inability to overcome the Legitimation stage of development has resulted in security screeners remaining a subject of distrust and derision.

3. Through the above-mentioned strategies, policymakers can work to reevaluate the premises that have fueled the continued instability of the realm, demonstrate the need to divert from such futile approaches, and thereby achieve the realm’s stability.

4. Finally, 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.

5. 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.

6. I contend that screening’s perceived instability is a direct consequence of its inability to achieve Legitimation, 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.