



# FORTRESS NEW YORK

Security Checks are Everywhere, but  
the Militarization of the City has a Price

*By Harvey Molotch*

**T**he September 11 attacks live on in the everyday security artifacts and practices that remain in their wake. Even as there is a decline in U.S. boots on foreign grounds, there are guards at entries to museum lobbies, subway stations and airport departure gates in the homeland. There is also a heavy security component in how buildings are being constructed. Rather than blindly accept the inspections, intrusions and blockages, Americans, and people in other countries similarly affected, should call them into question.

The security measures exact huge costs; financial and otherwise. Organizations and individuals are put through complex and tedious maneuvers. Agencies change how they run and people have to alter their lives. And there is good reason to doubt any net positive results. So it is not a matter of a ‘trade-off’ between security and other life goals. It’s just a net loss.

## “See Something, Say Something”

Let’s look down in the New York subways, a place that my co-researcher Noah McClain and I examined closely over a two-year period with funding from the National Science Foundation. We were able to apply some common (and not so common) social science techniques to learn how the various security protocols were doing in the real world of turnstiles, train cars and waiting areas. We spent a lot of time interviewing more than one hundred workers in the system, including train conductors and drivers, cleanup crews, and station agents (the people who sit in the booths dispensing information and keeping an eye out for trouble). We also spent many hours just watching on the platforms, examining workers’ routines and their interactions with passengers, looking in particular for the ways they

◁ Officer of the Hercules anti-terrorism bureau of the New York City Police Department, Aug. 24, 2011. *Lucas Jackson/Reuters/Corbis*

deal with danger. In some instances, we took up employees' invitations to observe them on the job to see just how they worked equipment and dealt with challenges as they arose in real time. Finally, to gain some vantage 'from the top,' we met repeatedly with officials and security officers of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the agency that runs the trains and buses of New York.

The New York subway system has hundreds of stations and thousands of entrances, platforms, corridors and tunnels—too many and too complicated to fully patrol. But this very obvious vulnerability does not cancel out the felt need, and indeed official dictum, that something *must* be done. This need to *do something* is a common reaction when facing radical ambiguity, regardless of the complexity of the tasks or the improbability of effectively taking them on. And here's the critical background fact in the case of the subways: although police have come up with some plots against New York City targets through intelligence and informants—a 2009 Al-Qaeda plot allegedly against the subway system was foiled by a tip received by the FBI—the anti-terror apparatus in the subways has not resulted in a single person being so charged. It is highly unlikely that the multiple programs and procedures aimed at forestalling attacks are the reason why. One piece of evidence for this is that those whose job it is to enact the programs and procedures, the subway workers we dealt with, do not take them seriously. As we learned, they have better things to do.

Perhaps the most famous MTA security initiative since 9/11 is the "See Something" campaign—much imitated and used in facilities of all kinds around the world. Signs say it everywhere and in numbers of different languages: If You See Something, Say Something. The intercoms on platforms and in trains announce it with automated constancy. A problem with the announcements is that they are often so garbled nobody can figure out what is being said. They add to the din of screeching train cars, loud talking and (sometimes) musicians working the system. Not only are the garbles an annoyance, but they could well interfere with announcements pertaining to real danger, including some that might be made by subway workers straining to use their own voices to maintain order.

The "See Something" posters are also visual pollution, interfering among other things with the clarity of signs that actually tell people how to get out and the names of the various exits. The warning words are even on step-risers in staircases. Some "See Something" posters are taped on the glass enclosures of station agents' booths, interfering with workers' ability to see what is happening in the entrances and on platforms. Signage experts will tell you that time spent glancing at one sign means less time spent taking in another. Every sign added thus subtracts from the ones, including mighty important ones, already present.

When the signs do 'succeed' in generating response, those who say something often create irrelevant contacts with workers and security personnel. This can deter

workers from dealing with actual urgent needs. What are those urgent needs? People have heart attacks and strokes in the subways. Children wander off from their guardians. Depressed people attempt suicide (seventy-eight of them, over the last three years, with success). Others fall onto the tracks and meet death that way (a total of 140 people were hit by trains in 2012, fifty-five of them with fatal result). There is, despite substantial declines in the New York crime rate, crime in the subways: robbery, assaults and murder. Fires break out, with smoke conditions following on. Subway workers do come to the rescue, often in ways they invent on the scene and on their own.

We don't know how many people have called the hotline to report something suspicious—a package left standing alone or a person who, for one reason or another, is doing something out of line. In one of its publicity campaigns, the MTA ran advertisements on the sides of its buses and other places proclaiming, “Last year 1,944 New Yorkers saw something and said something.” I am convinced this number came out of the air. No official at the MTA could trace its source, and the *New York Times* reporter who similarly tried to pin it down also failed. We can surely conclude that, especially given the nature of New Yorkers to see and say things, there have been many calls. In some cases, callers used the hotline to finger a person against whom they held a grudge, according to one security official with whom we spoke. Other cases involved profiling people who ‘look Arab.’

### Fear of Flying

The world's airports have become, with U.S. authorities certainly in the leadership, the mother of all modern security regimes. They have brought to the act of flying a special choreography and paraphernalia setup. Again the huge background fact: despite all the hullabaloo of metal detectors, surveillance cameras and ‘routine questions,’ U.S. airport security—like the subway apparatus in New York—has yielded up no terrorists, nor charges of terrorist intent. There really have been people who have tried to blow up planes. But when they are caught, it is because fellow passengers or flight attendants detect something wrong and take direct action (again, as our subway workers routinely do in regard to less draconian threats). On American Airlines Flight 63 from Paris to Miami, it was the flight attendants who spotted Richard Reid trying to ignite his shoe bomb; with the aid of several passengers they bound him up with seat belt extensions and headphone cords. A physician on board then shot him with a tranquilizer from the plane's first-aid kit. During the commandeered flight over Pennsylvania on September 11 (United Flight 93), it was the passengers who fought the hijackers and who were able to alter the plane's trajectory toward the White House or Capitol Building (the exact target is not known).

In the official systems, there are obvious and gaping holes left unaddressed and former top Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials, several of whom

I have interviewed, acknowledge them as confounding. Here is a key instance: the security gates themselves gather up a large crowd—before any inspection. The queue can contain more people than will ever be on a plane. It may be that it is the logistic possibility of creating the security choke point that makes it somehow seem an effective thing to do. Meanwhile, any car driver can mow down innocent people at pedestrian thoroughfares all over America. We avoid facing that problem because it would be so awkward to take on, just like the problem of searching air passengers before they can crowd at the gates. A security apparatus is put in place, this implies, not because it secures but because it is feasible to set up.

Security systems also follow from political expedience. TSA authorities know that planes are full of articles far more lethal than the contraband at the gates. On board, soft drink cans could be stripped into razor-sharp instruments; duty-free liquor bottles are weapons in waiting. Flight crew flashlights (large and heavy) along with all manner of other accessible onboard objects are potential assault weapons. Prisoners have a long history of innovative transformation of even the most mundane products into lethal weapons (like pieces of bed spring). The TSA itself tried to start allowing passengers to carry scissors on board, but flight attendants, passenger groups and some political leaders waged successful counter-campaigns.

Meanwhile, all travelers experience massive inconvenience, anxiety and risk of delay as guards root through their belongings. There are inevitable risks of racial and ethnic profiling (ridiculously misconceived at times) which often alienate people who need to be, whatever the nature of a threat or danger, allies. It is a harsh experience, as one wonders if metal is somewhere on (or in) our bodies; did we forget to pull our cell phone back out of the bin? The yelling of the guards, the fretting of children, and frustration with keys, luggage, shoes and other life elements increase fumbling and nervousness.

The consternation further throws the system out of whack: guards who see a nervous passenger will have to distinguish between somebody made anxious through nefarious intent versus a person just nervous from security itself. Confusing and chaotic conditions work against being able to distinguish the devious plotter (should they exist) from background normality. And woe to those who make jokes about it; they risk being detained, especially if they get near words like ‘bomb,’ ‘gun’ or ‘ridiculous.’ Vociferous complaint, so common for New Yorker subway users, is under fearful constraint. My moments in security give me at least a glimpse of a fascist order. Vulnerable to the guards around me and standing with no shoes and my most valuable possessions in a bin beyond my reach, I bottle up frustration and move on.

But maybe, some wonder as with the absence of attacks at the subways, isn’t all this exertion and, yes, sacrifice, the reason there have been no assaults on air travel? I doubt this one too. We seem to think ‘our’ terrorists specialize in airplanes and that’s it. But,

as terrible experience indicates, terrorists do not so limit themselves to one particular venue: they blow up churches, schools, coffee houses, shopping malls and temples. They mow down bystanders with an ordinary passenger vehicle. I don't believe, again in the American context and at least in the present era, that they are there.

Another possible explanation: maybe the security apparatus finds miscreants but then removes them from our view by, for example, charging them with lesser crimes that then do not gain media coverage. This doesn't compute because of the very showy announcements that are made when a real live suspect is apprehended including, a very common circumstance, when the threat turns out to be at least questionable. For example, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and New York Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly held a widely covered press conference to announce the arrest of alleged terrorist Jose Pimentel in 2011—who continues to face trial on bomb-making charges. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) refused to participate in the case, one which turned out to involve charges against a hapless individual who, according to the FBI, lacked the “predisposition or the ability” to carry out the alleged plot. Security is a no-lose issue for public officials; they pile onto a popular bandwagon, perpetuating anxiety and the programs purporting to address it. If there were indeed people being caught, we would know about it.

### **Freedom Tower**

Security now enters the very make-up of buildings in New York and elsewhere too, and nowhere more prominently than in the construction of the new World Trade Center skyscraper nearing completion at ground zero. An office building by function, it is a security apparatus by design. There is no other way to make sense of its architecture or its internal configuration. After the 9/11 attacks, there was a wondrous international competition that drew in the world's most illustrious design firms, with many thousands of people coming to exhibitions with extensive citizen feedback workshops (an early gigantic enterprise was called “Listening to the City”). A star-studded design jury chose the team THINK—itself an assemblage of world-class architects—as the winner. A prominent element of their scheme was a vast ground-floor crystal lobby open to the rest of the site and downtown Manhattan.

In the end, nobody won. A first ‘compromise’ occurred when the governor of New York overruled the selection of THINK, deciding instead to give the award to Berlin-based Daniel Libeskind. But the then-leaseholder of the site, Larry Silverstein—who actually had the power to decide—hired his own architect, David Childs of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, to do the job. Even the much-watered down design that Childs then provided was to be eroded further still. After preparations were well underway for groundbreaking, security authorities required the building's location be moved sixty feet from the chosen site. This was to keep it away from potential truck

bombs from an adjacent street. And then, at an even later moment and out of the same concern over truck bombs, authorities required the bottom twenty stories to be encased in solid concrete with no windows (eliminating their potential use as offices). This makes it a unique building in the world.

The structure's top portion was never slated to be rentable space, given the anxieties of its target potential. So the uppermost 408 feet are antenna spire, that's about thirty floors of a normal office building and twice the height of the spire atop the Empire State Building. Boastfully and patriotically 1,776 feet tall to recall the year of American independence (the building had been initially dubbed "Freedom Tower"), it would be the highest building in the United States. But it is a building with nothing on the bottom and nothing on the top. Rather than a display of American power or authority, it taunts with bluster. The architecture critic of the *New Yorker*, Paul Goldberger, called it "Fear Tower."

The bellicosity at ground zero was accompanied by the xenophobia that often comes with threat. So plans to build an Islamic community center, called Cordoba House, a few blocks distant were met with condemnation. The facility was to contain meeting rooms, a theater, fitness center and swimming pool, as well as a prayer space—hence earning the sobriquet "ground zero mosque." Families of 9/11 victims called it "a gross insult" to the memory of their loved ones, and politicians—Mayor Bloomberg was not among them—voiced energetic opposition as well. Resistance to anything Muslim contrasted with affirmation of anything to do with making the site militarily secure, including intense electronic visual surveillance and gauntlets of guards checking visitors for weapons or incendiaries. One might argue, and as indeed some advocates for the Islamic center have done, that bringing more knowledge of the Muslim world into America might increase understanding in the country and also, no small matter, make the United States more attractive to people who otherwise might be disaffected. In other words, inclusion—relaxed inclusion—can enhance safety.

An amazing thing about 9/11 was the survival of so many people, even as the twin towers flattened like pancakes. About 17,000 individuals who were on site got out. They did so not through fancy technologies or guards hunting for malefactors, but through some very old-fashioned practices. They went down the stairs. They could literally see where to go and understood the route to take—facilitated to be sure by prior drills for workers in the building. They helped themselves and one another, as is also routine practice in the subways and on airplanes.

### **Mundane Stuff that Works**

Such simple elements as stairs and mutual helping are not usually thought of as part of security systems. Instead, security is more typically run as a military operation and

with a lot of aggressive hardware. But the stairway-as-hero tips us off to a deeply alternative way of thinking, including what to do, what to build, and how to do it. So in the subways we should create better ventilation. Simple. That would mean more survival no matter what kind of device or noxious substance got loose in the environment. It would improve health and chances for survival no matter the source of danger. Quite crucially, it would provide better air quality as an amenity of everyday life (maybe even air conditioning in the summer, heat in the winter!). Likewise, the sound and sign systems: by making information delivery clearer, exiting would be more efficient in case of an emergency but in the meantime—day in and day out—people would have a better chance of knowing where they are going. Ditto lighting: bring it on stronger and fewer people will fall onto the tracks, trip down the stairs or slip in the long hallways.

And there is a list for the airports. Each encounter should be consciously designed to enhance calm and provide help for those in need rather than a way to herd and command. Lines that assemble targets need to be shortened or done away with altogether. Restrictions of what to take on board should be intelligently informed by actual risks and dangers, not make-believe scenarios. People ought even to be able to make jokes—jokes do give information about the jokester, especially if it is correlated with other available cues.

TSA guards (or other airport employees) should be right there to help people hoist their packages onto the conveyer belts and hold prams while parents adjust to their children's needs. There should be helping hands. Like the jokes, helping *informs*. Anyone who has helped a child put on a jacket knows that is when you find there may be a pain or injury, a fever, or that the pocket contains a stolen cookie (or heavy instrument!). As it is, TSA employees are for security *only* with helping (or pleasantness, or wit, or heaven help us *beauty*) regarded as the opposite of security rather than facilitating it. At budget times, governments treat improvements like ventilation and helpfulness as the opposite of security, or at least irrelevant to it. That is bad thinking.

Instead, interventions for security should always be based on good design and recognition that organizations and people have multiple goals, with getting from one place to another being one of them. At the airport and everywhere else, anything done in the name of security should improve the routines of life, no matter what happens including if nothing happens—which is the far most likely outcome. Given the ambiguity of what to do anyway, why not do something decent?

Threats do exist, of course, and it is reasonable to be alert. But vast enterprises of intelligence gathering exist to deal with them and they deserve (and receive) appropriate critique and examination. For everyone, including those in the rich and placid countries, they decrease the sum total of life quality and with little, if anything, positive to show for it.