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Checks -- and balances

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Checks — and balances



I'll be the first to admit that I had a wonderful Thanksgiving break, as I got to spend time with family in California. To get there, I had to fly, something I hadn't done since September 11. I was a little anxious, but ready for the journey.

Getting to California wasn't the problem, though. It was getting back.

When I went to the ticket counter to acquire my boarding pass, the attendant asked me several times if I had packed my bag myself and if anyone had given me anything to carry on. Then, I was informed that I had been chosen for a random check. Not a big deal. They took out all the contents of my check-in bags, refused to let me bring some stuff back (mainly fruit), then sent me on my merry way.

I got to the metal detector. Once again, I was informed that I had been randomly selected to be "wanded," where they take the hand-held metal detector and run it over your body. Anything that beeped (my watch and jewelry) was checked, and I was frisked. Fun times.

Then, I arrived at the gate to board the plane — and I was randomly selected to have my carry-on bag searched. The only thing I found peculiar was that the person in front of me, who also had her bag checked, was of Indian descent, like me. No one else was subjected to the same scrutiny. All the other passengers were white.

It turned out that the plane had mechanical problems and the flight was cancelled. All of us had to deplane and rebook.

Upon my arrival the next day, I was yet again chosen to have my bags searched. The other Indian girl happened to be checking in at the same time — and surprise! She was also randomly selected *again*.

After being checked, I watched the line pass by for two hours. No one else was searched.

I thought my tribulations were over as I boarded the plane, although I was surprised that I hadn't been "randomly selected" again. But

just as I reached my seat, an attendant came and said, "Ms. Pai, you need to deplane *immediately*." To my mortification, he escorted me off the plane. Once again the contents of my carry-on bag were searched, and I was "wanded" in front of the entire line of passengers boarding the plane.

I'm tan. I'm used to being in the minority — just look at the school I attend. I am also an American citizen, born and bred in the United States. And I wholeheartedly support using random checks as a security measure.

However, I don't believe in racial profiling, which was the obvious case in this situation. All terrorists are not brown. Look at Timothy McVeigh. Look at Ted Kaczinsky. There are dangerous people of all sizes, shapes and colors.

If checks are to be random, then make them so. Those of us who have taken a research methods class know that a random sample is one in which each person in the population of interest has an equal chance of being selected. I guess I was more equal than everybody else, huh?

Let's get real, folks. This was not a coincidence, but I can't exactly say it was a conspiracy. It was, however, unfair to stereotype me, it was unfair to make me get off the plane and it was unfair that I was the only one targeted.

I strongly support better airport security, but there has to be a more consistent method of selection for security checks.

— Maya Pai

The author is a senior communication studies major from West Columbia, S.C. This article is reprinted with permission from the December 7, 2001, issue of The Paladin.