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ANALYSIS

Shutdown Politics Revive Questions About U.S. Airport Security Model



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DALLAS — The ongoing Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funding gap is once again putting pressure on U.S. airport security. Passengers are facing longer wait times, and more screeners are missing work, raising fresh concerns about how well the system can cope.

The disruption has also revived a broader policy debate. In a recent analysis, AirInsight co-founder Addison Schonland argues that U.S. airport security is not failing operationally, but is instead “structurally exposed” to political risk. His broader thesis is not simply that screening should be privatized, but that a critical aviation function should not remain vulnerable to repeated government funding shocks.



The argument is timely and partly supported by current conditions. The larger question is not whether Schonland has identified a real vulnerability, but which remedy—greater private participation, funding reform, or some combination of both—would best reduce it.

An operational system under political stress

The immediate issue is clear. As Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employees continue working without pay during the DHS shutdown, absentee rates have increased, and staffing gaps have emerged at some airports. The result has

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This is not the first time such conditions have appeared. Similar patterns were observed in previous shutdowns, when financial strain on federal workers translated into operational friction at checkpoints.



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Schonland frames this as a structural problem rather than a temporary staffing issue. A more precise reading is that it is both: a short-term staffing disruption driven by a deeper funding vulnerability.



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At its core, the system relies on a federal workforce whose compensation depends on political negotiations that may have little connection to aviation itself.

Privatization is one possible response—but not the only one

One of the questions raised in Schonland's analysis is whether a privately employed screening workforce could be less exposed to shutdown-related disruption.



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There is some evidence supporting that possibility, at least in a narrow context.

Under the TSA's Screening Partnership Program (SPP), a small number of U.S. airports use private contractors to perform checkpoint screening under federal oversight. During funding lapses, these contractors have generally continued operating under existing agreements, making them less immediately exposed to payroll disruptions affecting federal employees.

However, this model is often misunderstood.

SPP is not a fully privatized system. The TSA still sets procedures, certifies and trains screeners, oversees compliance, and retains ultimate responsibility for security outcomes.

April 2026

Only about 20 U.S. airports participate in the program, including large facilities such as San Francisco (SFO) and Kansas City (MCI), alongside many smaller regional airports.

In other words, the U.S. has already tested a hybrid model, but not a fully commercialized one. The current evidence suggests private screening can provide some insulation from shutdown effects in specific cases, though it does not by itself settle the broader policy question.

Security, incentives, and risk ownership

Any expansion of private screening raises a fundamental question: who ultimately bears the risk?

Even under a contractor model, accountability for aviation security failures would remain with the federal government. That reality shapes how the system is designed.

Since 2001, U.S. aviation security has focused on minimizing risk, placing greater emphasis on preventing missed threats than on maximizing efficiency. That approach tends to favor centralized oversight, redundancy, and standardized procedures.

Private operators, by contrast, typically optimize for cost control and throughput within contractual limits. While that can improve passenger flow, it also introduces different incentives

that policymakers may view cautiously in a zero-tolerance security environment.

This tension helps explain why the United States has maintained a federalized structure even while allowing limited outsourcing.

International models, but not direct comparisons

Schonland points to countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where private contractors play a larger role in aviation security under government supervision.

These systems demonstrate that contractor-based screening can function effectively. However, they operate within different institutional frameworks, including distinct labor models, different liability structures, and more stable public funding mechanisms.

Crucially, they do not face U.S.-style shutdown dynamics tied to congressional budget disputes.

As a result, international comparisons are informative, but not directly transferable.

A more immediate policy lever: funding stability

As Schonland notes, the issue is not simply whether screening should be public or private, but whether a critical aviation function should remain vulnerable to political funding shocks.

That leaves multiple policy paths open, including broader private participation, protected payroll structures, multi-year appropriations, or other forms of funding insulation.

Schonland himself points to the possibility of insulating TSA operations from shutdowns through mechanisms such as multi-year appropriations, protected payroll structures, or a trust-fund-style model similar to other transport functions.

This approach would address the core vulnerability without requiring a wholesale redesign of the security system.

It would also align with a broader recognition across aviation that certain functions, including air traffic control and security screening, are critical infrastructure with limited tolerance for disruption.

What the shutdown reveals

The current disruption does not suggest that U.S. airport security is failing in its primary mission. Screening operations continue, and the system remains functional.

But it does expose a deeper weakness: a critical aviation function remains vulnerable to political funding volatility.

On that point, Schonland's thesis is difficult to dismiss. Where the debate remains open is in the remedy. Greater private participation may be part of the answer. Structural funding reform may be another.

What is becoming harder to defend is the status quo: a system in which airport security, vital to the functioning of the aviation network, can be repeatedly disrupted by budget disputes that have little to do with aviation itself.

You can read Schonland's thesis [here](#).

Update: ICE personnel to aid TSA operations

On Monday, March 23, the federal government began deploying personnel from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to assist at 14 U.S. airports. Border czar Tom Homan said on Sunday the move was intended to help ease long security lines at airports facing severe delays and high absenteeism, including those in the New York area, Atlanta, and Houston.

ICE personnel are supporting non-screening functions, including passenger flow management and general security presence in public areas. They are not conducting screening operations, and they are not authorized to perform passenger or baggage screening or operate checkpoint equipment.

The deployment reflects a short-term operational adjustment within DHS rather than a change to the underlying airport security model.

Implications for the policy debate

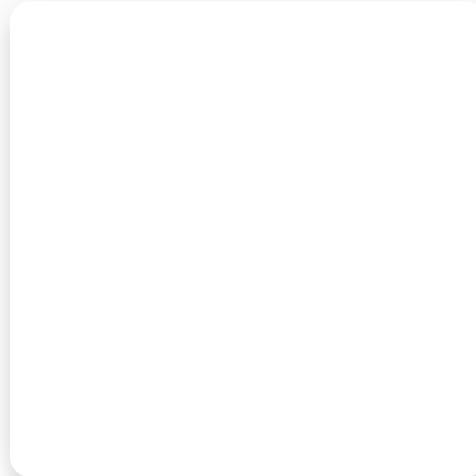
The introduction of non-TSA federal personnel into airport environments raises additional questions about training, role clarity, and the boundaries between different federal missions.

For policymakers, the takeaway is more operational than ideological. Short-term continuity can be maintained through internal redeployment. Long-term resilience still depends on how airport security is funded, staffed, and insulated from political disruption.

If anything, the episode sharpens the central question raised by the shutdown itself: should a critical aviation function depend on emergency staffing measures during routine political funding disputes, or should it be structured to avoid them altogether?

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