

At the Airport, You Better Smile

'Behavior Detection Officers' are now watching passengers' facial expressions for signs of danger

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It's a new level of absurdity for America.

It was bound to happen. Now even a frown or grimace can get you into trouble with The Man.

"Specially trained security personnel" will be watching passengers for "micro-expressions" that will reveal treacherous agendas and insidious intentions at airports around the country. These agents, who may literally hold your fate in their hands have been given a lofty, Orwellian name: "Behavior Detection Officers."

Did anyone ever doubt that George Orwell's prophecies in "1984" would

arrive? In that novel, he wrote, "You had to live-did live, from habit that became instinct-in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

In the study of "micro-expressions"-yes, it is actually a field of study and there are some who are arrogant enough to call it a science- it has been decided that when people wish to conceal emotions, the truth of their feelings is revealed in facial flashes. These experts have determined that fear and disgust are the key things to look for because they can hint of deception.

Let's see, fear and disgust in an airport? I'm frightened and disgusted weeks before I have to show up at an airport. In fact, I've pretty much sworn off the whole idea of going anywhere by airplane. It's bad enough that I might be trapped in a crowded plane with no food or water and nonworking toilets for hours; now there are security agents interpreting our facial expressions. The face police, in place at more than a dozen U.S. airports already, aren't identified as such. But the watcher could be at curbside baggage, the ticket counter or near the metal detectors and X-ray machines. The Transportation Security Administration hopes to have as many as 500 Behavior Detection Officers on the job by the end of 2008.

But what about the woman who is getting on a plane to see a dying relative? Or the man who is traveling to another state to see a cancer specialist in a last bid for extending his life? What about the guy who just had a fight with his spouse and now worries that a plane crash would mean their last words were in anger? We've all had the experience of having a bad day, being in a rotten mood-especially at the airport, which has become a modern-day chamber or horrors. On those days, doesn't it seem like everyone we meet looks sour and

unpleasant? The opposite is also true. When we're happy and joyful, we look at others and see happiness in them. Or even if we don't, we look at them kindly and with compassion. It's human nature to look at others through the lens of our own reality.

Here's where it gets really absurd. Apparently, these Behavior Detection Officers work in pairs. One scenario is that an officer might move in to "help" a passenger retrieve their belongings after they've been screened. And then the officer will ask where the passenger is headed. If the passenger's reaction sets off alarm bells in the officer's well-trained mind, another officer will move in and detain them. Let's be really clear here. If a stranger moved in on me like that, I'd tell that person to go to hell, throw in a few other expletives for good measure and probably give them the finger as I stomped off. Of course, I wouldn't be stomping very far.

So while TSA employees are confiscating our scissors and water bottles, they're going to secretly be staring at us, looking for some telltale sign of terrorist intent in a grimace, a sigh, a crinkled nose? Who knows what? In the end, the Behavior Detection Officers are the ones who are really acting suspicious. Which is the truth of the matter anyway.

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