

The Laptop Story Doesn't Do It Justice: What crossing the border has REALLY turned into

by [aerojad](#)

Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 10:55:28 AM PDT

For those just tuning in here, I live in the state of Michigan. As such, I am surrounded on two sides by Canada. While I haven't gone recently (a few years) due to a lack of funds, earlier on this decade I would go to Canada when I had the chance - especially when I spent a couple of years in northern Michigan in the tiny city of **Sault Sainte Marie, MI**, which is a stone's throw from its twin city of the same name in Canada. The border crossing process had usually been rather simple for me, with the most that I got asked is "Where'd you go? How long were you there? Bringing back lots of money? Alright have a good one." I suppose it was a bit naive of me to think that things would go south in the couple of years since I've been to Canada, especially in lieu of **revelations** that Homeland Security can take your laptop at the border if they feel like it.

Like most things in life you stay naive of it, happily nested in a world of "it can't/won't happen to me" until - sure enough - it does.

aerojad's diary :: ::

My purpose to travel to **Windsor, Ontario**, seemed simple and innocent enough: it was a Saturday, I was bored, and I wanted to take some pictures of the Detroit skyline to satisfy my off and on desire to **pretend** I'm good at taking pictures. Didn't plan on going much of anywhere, buying much of anything, or even being there that long. It was, quite literally, *something to do*. You know, getting out of the house and all of that good stuff.

Maybe it was because I was traveling alone. Perhaps it was because I had a camera on me and those are starting to be regarded as a terrorist tool. Maybe I've managed to work myself on to some list of bad people: not the terrorist watch list which now **boasts over 1 million names**, but maybe some other list that we don't know about yet. Could it have been a list of noted liberal-minded bloggers? People who buy politically-themed music? People who don't love the President and haven't loved the President from day 1? Known Obama supporters? Someone get Senator McCarthy in on this one to help me out. I'd love to know.

Maybe they didn't like the way I looked? Maybe they didn't like my car? Or better yet, maybe they liked my car and wanted to see if there was anything in it they could "detain" for as long as they'd like (reason #1 why I didn't bring my laptop with me and go to hotspots while in Windsor). Maybe someone was a White Sox fan and didn't like my Tigers baseball cap.

Or hell, maybe it was *just my time*.

It starts with a yellow sticker placed on the windshield and instructions to drive off to the side where the immigration/interrogation center is. The orders from the officer are in a stern matter, a "don't cross me little man, I am judge, jury, and executioner!" type voice.

TURN OFF THE ENGINE.

STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE.

WHERE DID YOU GO?

SPEAK UP

As someone who has been known to fly off the handle, thankfully I kept myself in check through this process. These people seemed like just the kind who wake up every morning just praying for someone to get smart with them so they can make someone's life hell for a few hours. My constant humbled voice and over usage of the word "sir" hopefully appeased someone's broken sense of self-importance and saved me what would have probably been a long night.

My cell phone was taken. The messages were gone through.

WHO DO YOU KNOW IN CANADA?

Thanks to the internet, I happen to have a number of friends dotted across Canada - though none in the immediate vicinity of Michigan. They're scattered from the **Maritimes** to Toronto to Vancouver and a few places in between. I keep in contact with them, I even write some of them letters and they write me back - pen pals for a digital age, if you will. I had apparently made a big mistake just a little while earlier, when entering Canada, as I texted one of them: *For at least the next little while, I am in your country :p* This was to a friend who lived in Calgary, as I had to explain - as well as rattle off other places of friends I knew in Canada.

DO YOU KNOW ANYONE IN WINDSOR?

ARE YOU SURE?

WHY DID YOU GO?

Before answering the question I already knew it was going to turn out badly, as I've said before: people who take pictures of things are gradually becoming demonized. If you're not taking pictures of drunken friends in this country, then you may be a terrorist. I sucked it up and explained that I was on the waterfront for a couple of hours, [taking some pictures of the Detroit skyline](#). I expected an inquisitive response, but I was shoved a pile of insulting gold instead:

COME ON. I DON'T BELIEVE THAT. NOBODY GOES THERE JUST TO TAKE PICTURES. DID YOU VISIT AN ESCORT SERVICE?

I was stupefied. After saying I had only been out of the country for two hours I was being asked if I only went over there to get a prostitute. I had no response and my mouth was probably left a little agape.

IS THAT YOUR CAMERA? GET IT OUT. TURN IT ON. LET ME SEE. CHANGE THE PICTURES. NOW.

Frustrated that my story (or rather, *the truth*) was checking out, he ordered me inside the immigration/interrogation center while they searched the rest of my car. Good decision on my part to clean my car out before I left.

Sitting in the center's lobby I looked around at the faces of others who looked like they had been waiting there for a while. There were a number of Arabs. Some of them had looks of fright on their face. Some of them had looks of brokenness on them, a look of "here we go again" if you will. An Arab woman and her daughter were standing by a bathroom door wondering if they could go in. As they reached for the door an officer shouted KNOCK ON THE DOOR. KNOCK. to which the woman did not understand. The officer instructed the man she was traveling with (I'm assuming husband) to tell her to knock, and he did. The room was clear so she could go in. The doors had that buzzer system that doors in police establishments have - buzzing loudly when they are opened. The woman jumped back, alarmed by the sound the door made. The officer joked: *Hey don't worry, it's not electrified, or at least not that much!* as he laughed. At that point I was standing at a counter and I, too, laughed, not because of the joke but more of a I'm-about-to-be-sick-god-help-me sort of laugh. I wasn't quite sure of in what direction the bad taste joke was pointing toward - [GitMo](#) or maybe [Abu Ghraib](#). Aww hell, it's just electrocuting Arabs, any parallel will do.

Finding that I wasn't a terrorist and noticing that maybe I really was just some kid who wanted to take some pictures on a sunny August evening, I was allowed to proceed into the country, with an interestingly-toned "I'm sorry about all this" from one of the officers at the facility. He was older than the ones who were shouting orders and questions at me. Everyone who shouted at me or talked down to me seemed to be in their upper 20's or lower 30's - people hired in the age since the Transportation Security Agency was absorbed by [Homeland Security](#). The one who said sorry seemed like he was from before that time, back when people like me could take short trips like this and not be "randomly" put through things like this.

As I drove home I felt somehow violated. That's *my* cell phone. That's *my* camera. Who has the right to look at them ever, for any reason, aside from me? Well, the answer would of course be Homeland Security - operating in the lawless zone between Canada and the United States, where they could do what they want to whomever they wanted - or at least that's the impression they were giving off. I felt even more sick as I thought: *I'm from here. I'm native born. How the hell are actual foreigners treated when they come here?* I felt embarrassed for how this country was being represented just by my entry back into it. I was treated almost like a criminal for an hour because I had chosen to leave this country for two hours to take some pictures of this country.

If I were a tourist, I sure as hell wouldn't want to come here and go through that. God help me if I was even the slightest shade of brown or my last name was the slightest of non-Western European sounding. This country is being run like a minimum security prison - you're free to do whatever you want as long as you stay within the borders. If you leave, there simply must be some sort of nefarious reason you did so, and be prepared to answer 20 questions and then some if you have the audacity to leave. Don't answer the questions quick enough and loud enough, get ready for additional rounds.

I had planned on going to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls next month, since the route on the American side is two times as long. A bit shaken after this whole ordeal as I am, I wonder if it's even worth it anymore.

Cross-posted @ [The Road](#) (will blog for visits!)

Update, in a bashful-spoken tone: The Rec-list? Thanks, everyone. I appreciate that my story has some resonance. Thank you.

Second Update: I just really wanted to say, in a meta-way, I am very touched by all the support you guys have. The stories, some far worse than mine, confirm the thoughts I was thinking about this country as I finally drove home yesterday - none too much good.

For those who have looked at the pictures, thanks to you as well. In a way it wasn't quite worth it (if you, say, told me Saturday morning this would all happen) but on the other hand - it is, it really is. Here's hoping nothing worse happens to me when I go to Niagara Falls.

Tags: [Homeland Security](#), [Unlawful Search](#), [Border Crossing](#), [Recommended](#) (all tags) ::

[Previous Tag Versions](#)

Permalink | 713 comments

Comments: Expand Shrink Hide (Always) | Indented Flat (Always)

Menu

[Home](#)

[Diaries](#)

[dKosopedia](#)

[Search](#)

[Create account](#)

[Login](#)

[Lose Your Password?](#)

wide

narrow

[aeroad's Blogroll](#)

[The Road](#)

[The Bonddad Blog](#)

[Calculated Risk](#)

[The Oil Drum](#)

[Yahoo Finance](#)

Advertising

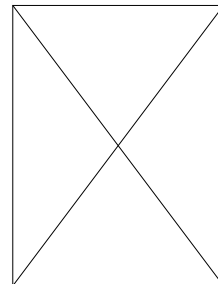
Premium Ad

[Advertise here!](#)

Second ads

[Advertise here](#)

Advertisers



NEW FROM
THOMAS FRANK

"A scathing recap of Republican mismanagement and corruption...Written with a barbed wit and finely controlled anger." --Publishers Weekly, starred review

"A refreshingly no-holds-barred exegesis on the naked cynicism of conservatism in America." --Kirkus Reviews, starred review
[Read more...](#)

DemocraticStuff.com



When you make a purchase of \$50 or more at DemocraticStuff.com, we'll give you a [free Obama yard sign!](#)

Oh, by the way, if you make a purchase of \$25 or more, we'll cover the shipping!

[Free yard sign, free shipping](#) - this one's a no-brainer...

Tips for... (791+ / 0-)

...hope?

I don't know. I feel strangely disturbed on the inside, in addition to being embarrassed and ashamed for this country.

I just... don't know anymore.

The Road - a meandering state of blog.

by **aerojad** on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 10:56:17 AM PDT**

[Read more...](#)
[Advertise here](#)

I feel sick to my stomach after reading this. (223+ / 0-)

If I ever cross an American border again in my life, I will not be crossing it ever again.

I can't imagine how you felt, or even how you managed to stay calm.

The officer joked: Hey don't worry, it's not electrified, or at least not that much! as he laughed. At that point I was standing at a counter and I, too, laughed, not because of the joke but more of a I'm-about-to-be-sick-god-help-me sort of laugh.

If that isn't enough to make anyone sick, I don't know what it would take.

I am so sorry for what our country has become.

Tipped and Recc'd.

Thank you for doing such a fine job of putting your frightening experience into words that should make everyone pay attention.

Good feet giving up good boots. <http://www.bringthemhomenow.org/>

by **panicbean** on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 11:06:47 AM PDT**

[Parent]

American Criminalship (126+ / 0-)

I am just beyond words.

That's my home, Michigan.

We are no longer citizens and no longer have rights.

This is astonishing.

Sharing and Caring are for Commies! They should be illegal. Drop by and support the Human Agenda

by **k9disc** on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 11:23:17 AM PDT**

[Parent]

I honestly can't say I am astonished. (107+ / 0-)

I mean we have been reading things like this for a while now.

But when I think of folks who may not speak English, and young folks who simply cross a border to see a friend, shop, or even simply to take some photos, being subjected to this type of criminal interrogation/search along with the snide joking, it absolutely does make me sick, in my heart and soul, as well as my stomach.

Good feet giving up good boots. <http://www.bringthemhomenow.org/>

by **panicbean** on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 11:27:50 AM PDT**

[Parent]

I've been right there with you, (44+ / 0-)

but I just can't believe it's actually happening.

I've been holding out on the off chance that I'd be wrong.

sad... so very sad!

Sharing and Caring are for Commies! They should be illegal. Drop by and support the Human Agenda

by **k9disc** on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 11:35:27 AM PDT**

[Parent]

9-11 Gave Them An Excuse... (50+ / 0-)

To change (Ruin) EVERYTHING...

I want my country back... I am tired of living in MORDOR.

RMD

The Bushiter's Iraq 2004 - 1268 Dead, about 25K Medivacs and 9000 Maimed... It's the

Bushiter Way, wasting other people's money and lives. And it's worse now.

by [RedMeatDem](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 03:53:26 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

Doesn't that mean the terrorists won? (15+ / 0-)

by [WattleBreakfast](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 07:56:55 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

Yep (9+ / 0-)

This is exactly what OBL and his filthy pigs wanted to happen. I've heard it mooted that Cheney etc. are probably Iranian agents given how much they've helped them with their policies.

by [pengiep](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 08:43:59 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

Canadian citizen Maher Arar (30+ / 0-)

was sent against his will to Syria to be tortured for 1 year after his plane was diverted to New York on the way back to Montreal (from Europe).

The U.S. still hasn't apologized and still hasn't given him a reason why they did so. He is also STILL on the U.S. no-fly list.

I just thought I'd remind everyone that his occurred several years ago.



THANK YOU FOR NOT IMPEACHING THE WAR CRIMINALS AND TERRORIST ENABLERS. Next Stop: Iran. You're on a roll, Congress! -- FUCK, YEAH!!

by [STOP George](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 10:23:00 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

They sure did -- the neocon ones, that is. n/t (8+ / 0-)

--Shawn

by [sk4p](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 08:57:42 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

I went through this crap in the 60s (21+ / 0-)

Crossing the Mexican border as a DFH.

Fortunately we were clean as a whistle and I cheerfully lied my ass off about any experience with, use for or knowledge of pot.

Having as an American citizen (at the time) the delusion that I actually had some rights, it really pissed me off and I was nearly as hostile to my interrogator as he was to me - until I realized he had almost unlimited power to F me over.

That was the year I got beat up by the cops...

Interesting year for us all - 1968.

by [UneasyOne](#) on **Sun Aug 03, 2008 at 08:46:26 PM PDT**
[[Parent](#)]

I see 1968 as a break-point in ... (20+ / 0-)

American history. We have King and Bobby both killed. Chicago and the Democratic convention that year was a zoo of abuse. Nixon is elected to expand a lawless government. Wiretapping under Johnson are expanded even more under Nixon just like renditions under Clinton have exploded under Bush II. The following spring, we have Kent State and the killing of protesters by the National Guard.