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August 10, 2004

Robert M. Jacksta
Executive Director, Border Security and Facilitation
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20229

Dear Mr. Jacksta:

After a recent trip to Canada, a friend and I returned to the United States at the border crossing in Houlton, Maine. For some reason, the Customs official questioning us decided that our car was to be searched.

While I understand the government's right to search vehicles at border crossings, and we were allowed to proceed on our way after the search was completed, there was one aspect of the search which quite troubled me. Rather than allowing us to be present for and to observe the search of our car, the Customs agents at the scene insisted that we leave the car unlocked and wait inside the building while our car (parked outside) was searched.

This practice seems to me to be unnecessarily confrontational. In addition, if Customs agents had—even by accident—lost anything of ours or theirs during the search process, we would not have been there to notice. When we entered Canada, our car was also searched, but in that case we were present for the search, which was a much better situation.

Is it standard practice to prevent travellers from being present while their vehicles are searched upon entry to the United States? If it is, I would recommend that this policy be changed, and, if it is not, I would like to know why this happened in our case.

I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Michael Castleman