

# Congress announces possible changes in airport security

■ The proposed deal would put weapon responsibilities in the hands of government employees rather than firms

By Jackie Koszczuk  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON (KRT) — The federal government would immediately take charge of security at most U.S. airports, including screening luggage, under a deal announced Thursday by congressional negotiators.

The legislation would make government employees, rather than security firms hired by the airlines, responsible for keeping weapons off airplanes. But it would phase in screening of checked baggage, an area many experts believe is the biggest vulnerability in air travel.

The breakthrough agreement cleared the way for the Senate and the House of Representatives to vote Friday on sweeping legislation to tighten security in U.S. air travel, eight weeks after terrorists hijacked four airliners and used them to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Both chambers are expected to pass the measure easily, and President Bush should sign it into law by Thanksgiving. Speaking for the Bush administration, Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta hailed the compromise as "a major milestone in the creation of a consistent, high-quality nationwide aviation security force."

To deter hijackers, the measure would greatly increase the number of plainclothes federal marshals assigned randomly to flights, would require cockpit doors to be reinforced and locked during flight

and would permit pilots to carry guns. Its first-year cost is put at \$2.6 billion.

"As soon as the president signs it, we can restore confidence in air safety," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

The central issue holding up the bill had been the status of baggage screeners.

The Senate had wanted to make all such workers federal employees, but House conservatives and the White House fought to allow private firms to keep doing the work under strict government supervision.

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R-Ariz.

Screening of bags and passengers is often called the weakest link in air security. Currently, airlines contract out the work, usually to the lowest-bidding firms. The workforce is trained and paid poorly, and annual turnover exceeds 100 percent at some airports, according to the U.S. Government Accounting Office.

In the next 60 days, the airlines would have to make a good faith effort to screen as many checked bags as possible. Within two years, the federal government would be screening every piece of checked luggage.

Under the lawmakers' compromise, federal supervisors would be deployed immediately, and screening checkpoints would be manned

entirely by federal employees within one year. Federal screening would continue for two more years, but then airport authorities could "opt out" and privatize security if they chose.

But advocates of federal screening doubt that will happen.

"That ought to give us enough time to show that Western civilization is not going to end by putting the federal government in charge," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., said, "It would be very difficult for airports to opt out once they have a good secure system in place."

The new screeners would not be permitted to strike and are required to be U.S. citizens, Mineta said.

The legislation would cover all airports except for five yet-to-be-identified facilities of varying size that would be permitted to experiment with privately-run security systems under federal supervision. The Department of Transportation would choose the five airports; their participation would be voluntary.

The House won one other major disagreement; the Department of Transportation will retain control over air security rather than the Department of Justice, which the Senate had favored. The Justice Department is a law-enforcement agency, which senators thought would be less likely to bow to the airlines.

To help pay for the increased security measures, the legislation would impose a \$2.50 fee on airplane tickets, with a maximum charge of \$5 per one-way trip, if that involved two or more planes.

Knight Ridder correspondent Cassio Furtado contributed to this report. © 2001, Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

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by Tony Kushner

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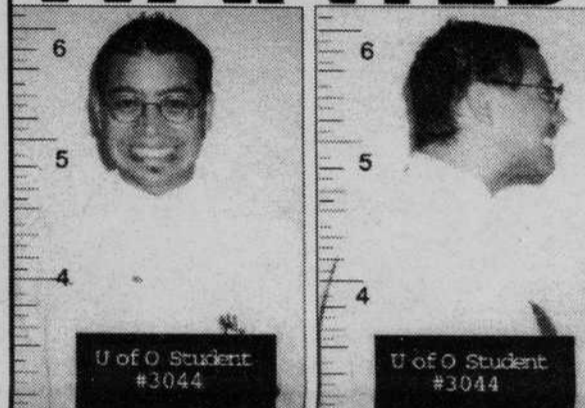
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