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## U.S. Airport Security Screening Long Seen as Dangerously Lax

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By **SCOTT MCCARTNEY, J. LYNN LUNSFORD** and **DAVID ARMSTRONG**

Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Government agencies have long warned about lax U.S. airport security screening, something that frequent fliers see on a regular basis. Tuesday, that crucial system failed in the most tragic and spectacular way.



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Commandeering  
four airplanes  
Tuesday and using  
them as giant jet

fuel bombs, suicidal hijackers apparently made it through airport security screening in Boston, Newark, N.J., and Washington, armed but not detected. Investigators will undoubtedly look at whether the attackers might have had fellow terrorists working at particular metal detectors and X-ray machines, or planted weapons aboard the planes

through catering or other service trucks, but authorities have long raised alarms about security, with little action taken to tighten airport procedures.

Just last year, in an almost prophetic warning, the General Accounting Office said airport security hadn't improved, and in many cases had worsened. Even though airport security screening stops an average 2,000 weapons a year, "the security of the air transport system remains at risk," the GAO said.

"People are very creative," says Viola Hackett, a security guard at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport, who said she wasn't surprised that the attackers could bypass airport security. "There are all sorts of things they're trying to hide."

One passenger aboard a doomed jet called her husband from the air, federal officials said, and said two hijackers were armed with box-cutting knives, which often have retractable blades.

The Federal Aviation Administration was already moving to tighten screening standards; in fact, new rules were supposed to be issued next week.

The metal detectors and X-ray machines so familiar at airport concourses are basically the only line of protection for U.S. airliners. With more than 10,000 commercial flights a day, airliners don't carry security personnel, and airline crews are armed with little more than plastic handcuffs to corral unruly customers and an ax for pilots to escape in the event of a crash.

Pilots and airline officials believe it is likely the hijackers disabled or killed both pilots in each of the three planes that struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and then flew the planes themselves into the structures. A fourth airline crashed near Pittsburgh. The two American Airlines flights and the two United Airlines flights involved were all large Boeing Co. two-pilot jets heavily loaded with fuel for transcontinental flights.

Pilots are able to lock their cockpit door, but the lightweight door, built with breakaway panels so pilots can escape a crash, offers little protection. And once hijacked, pilots are trained to cooperate with hijackers.

One pilot for a major airline, who declined to be identified, said that typical pilot training for hijackings focuses only on dealing with perpetrators demanding to be taken to a particular destination. "We're not trained to deal with this type of terroristic activity," the pilot said. "We're trained to deal with people who are deranged or want to go somewhere ... not suicide bombers."

Pilots can alert air-traffic controllers by radio or by secretly entering a special code in the plane's transponder, which broadcasts information from the plane. But there is little else that can be done. No system exists for intercepting a plane in the air.

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"Crews would never allow aircraft to run into buildings, they would steer away and divert immediately even with a gun pointed to their head," said Capt. Denis Waldron, a Delta Air Lines pilot. Even untrained pilots could steer an airborne jetliner into a target, he added.

Investigators may only be able to determine what happened aboard the planes if they can recover cockpit voice recorders in the "black box" aboard each plane.

Regardless of who ends up responsible for the attacks, the nation's commercial air-traffic system is bound to be dramatically altered -- with the imposition of some time-consuming, intrusive and costly stepped-up security measures as the first step.

"Civil aviation as we know it will change as a result of what happened today. The job of making airports secure is enormous, just enormous," said Retired Adm. Cathal Flynn, the FAA's former associate administrator for aviation security. The biggest obstacle will be deciding what to fix, he said, but that won't happen until investigators can determine how the system failed.

The extra protection could include individual searches of passengers and their belongings. There may be calls for mandatory matching of all passengers and luggage before takeoff - - an idea the industry has objected to in the past because it would add to delays. And there is likely to be talk of major efforts to upgrade bomb- and weapons-detection scanners at airports.

Logan authorities said Tuesday night that the airport would likely adopt tougher security measures in coming days, including reduced access points to airfields, increased spot checks of luggage and passengers, an end to curbside luggage check-in, a ban on allowing non-passengers through security checkpoints, and stepped-up canine searches for explosives.

In fact, many of these tougher antiterrorist ideas gained prominence and were embraced by many in Congress and the White House during the Gulf War and, again, after the crash of Trans World Airlines Flight 800. In addition to carrying significant price tags, such proposals would fundamentally change the nature of air travel by restricting or eliminating existing conveniences such as curbside baggage checks, or showing up at the gate barely 15 minutes or half an hour before takeoff.

Despite decades of high-level U.S. government concern -- and a string of recommendations from blue-ribbon study groups -- the focus of attention has tended to be on issues other than potential hijackings of jetliners. Industry officials said not even the worst-case scenarios contemplated the destruction and devastation that occurred Tuesday.

Airport security is the joint responsibility of the FAA, airport operators and airlines.

Typically, airlines hire private security companies to run the X-ray machines and metal detectors. The airline with the most flights on a particular concourse is responsible for managing the security screening on that concourse. In addition, major airports are required to have computer-controlled identification badges that enable employers and law-enforcement officials to immediately lock out employees who have been fired.

The GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, identified two important causes for security lapses at checkpoints: rapid turnover of screening personnel and inadequate attention to human factors. From May 1998 through April 1999, turnover more than doubled on average among screeners at 19 large U.S. airports; five airports (Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston and St. Louis) had annual turnover of more than 200%.

Low wages, minimal benefits and daily stress contribute to turnover, the GAO said.

"The fact that there has been no major security incident in the U.S. ... in nearly a decade could breed an attitude of complacency in improving aviation security," Gerald Dillingham, associate director of the GAO, told a congressional subcommittee in April 2000.

At one airport, the GAO said, wages for airport screeners started at \$6.25 an hour while fast-food-restaurant workers started at \$7. Turnover among screening personnel in Europe and Canada is lower, the agency said, and screening is often more stringent.

The FAA has moved to address GAO-identified shortcomings, the GAO said, but slowly. For instance, the FAA last year was still planning to establish performance standards that screening companies would have to meet to earn and retain certification, an action the GAO recommended in 1987.

FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown said Tuesday that at the time of Tuesday's attacks, the agency was preparing to issue rules "in the next week" establishing a certification program for airport screeners.

Congress has also been slow to fill in the gaps in airport security. Legislation signed by President Clinton last year requires all airport screeners and those with access to secure areas to undergo a criminal history record check. But that provision doesn't actually take effect until later this year.

In 1999, the FAA became so concerned about lax security at the nation's major airports that it threatened to force the airlines to post guards at every airplane.

At the time, the FAA said that federal agents were able to sneak 46 times through security doors at four major airports and then walk around on the tarmac. They also boarded 51 planes unchallenged. In response, the FAA ordered increased security at 70 of the largest airports and announced that it would run exercises to test for holes in security.

In a letter to airport directors, Adm. Flynn, who at the time headed the FAA's security, wrote: "Allowing intruders to piggyback through access doors, not challenging intruders on the ramp, and intruders being able to get aboard aircraft combine to make a significant vulnerability." The breaches were detailed in a confidential report prepared by Inspector General Kenneth Mead of the U.S. Transportation Department.

Agents working for Mr. Mead found that it was possible to sneak through gates for service vehicles or to walk through doors behind airline employees without being challenged.

"Without displaying any identification, the agents roamed the air-operations area, passing 229 employees, but were challenged only 53 times," Mr. Flynn wrote.

In the following months, FAA officials said significant improvements were made at all of the airports, but at the same time, they stressed that vigilance on the part of every employee was necessary if security was to work.

Airport and airline officials have resisted taking the most extreme security measures, saying that they would be incredibly expensive, if not impossible at the larger airports, where as many as 250 airplanes can be on the ground at the same time.

David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association, which represents passengers, said that the disaster reflects both a lack of security at U.S. airports and wrong assumptions about likely terrorist attacks.

Mr. Stempler said that most experts whom he heard at security and risk-assessment meetings had assumed that terrorist attacks would come on international rather than domestic flights. Their reasoning was that, once terrorists were inside the country, they wouldn't bother to go to an airport but would bring their weapons straight to the target.

That being said, though, Mr. Stempler believes that security at airports should be upgraded and coordinated nationally rather than leaving it up to international airports and airlines. Also, he said, X-ray machines that require human scanning for guns or knives should be replaced by computers that automatically detect weapons.

"The reality is, we had the facade of security and safety in this country," he said. "We really didn't have a full-blown, intense security system. It wasn't perceived that the risk was there. The public won't accept heightened levels of security and all the inconvenience that entails unless they're convinced there's risk."

Security at major airports has always been a tough issue for the FAA and the airlines. On the one hand, the traveling public expects airports to be absolutely safe, but passengers also expect to be able to travel with ease.

During the Gulf War, passengers got a glimpse of how inconvenient air travel could be when the government temporarily suspended curbside baggage check-in and prohibited all but ticketed passengers from passing beyond security checkpoints.

Security at Boston's Logan Airport has been a particular issue over the years. In 1998, the FAA investigated a company called Capital Building Security of Boston, which did airport cleaning for the Massachusetts Port Authority, which runs Logan. The company was accused of giving employees security badges and access to secure areas without conducting background checks. Capital Building didn't return a phone call Tuesday.

In July 1999, a teenager dressed as a Hasidic Jew scaled an airport fence and walked two miles across a restricted ramp area and stowed away on a British Airways flight to London. That fall, the Boston Globe reported that FAA special agents found at least 136 security violations at Logan from 1997 through 1999. As a result, the FAA reportedly fined major airlines and Massport \$178,000. Agents found that screeners routinely failed to detect test items like pipe bombs and guns, and agents were able to gain access to planes parked overnight at gates and walked through secure doors without being questioned.

Last month, the FAA said it was seeking \$99,000 in civil penalties against American Airlines for allegedly failing to apply appropriate security measures on six flights, including one originating from Boston's Logan Airport. The violations were discovered on June 25, 2000 when FAA special agents found that American improperly transported unaccompanied bags on five flights, failed to perform passenger ID checks on two flights and failed to ask appropriate security questions regarding checked bags on two flights.

The FAA said American took immediate corrective action at the airports where violations were found in order to bring the airline's security measures into compliance.

James F. McNulty, an executive vice president at Burns International Services Corp., which provided preboarding security for American Airlines at Logan airport in Boston through its Globe Aviation Services Corp. unit, said their staff members at Logan didn't report anything out of the ordinary Tuesday morning before the hijackings.

"We talked to them first thing this morning. There was nothing unusual," he said.

Mr. McNulty said his company had no information about how the hijackers might have

smuggled weapons aboard the plane, or even whether they actually had any weapons. "Your guess is as good as mine." But he noted that there were "hundreds of vendors" at the airfield with access to airplanes, including postal, delivery and food service personnel. (Globe Aviation wasn't in charge of on-tarmac security).

"You penetrate four airplanes, this was pretty well-planned," he said.

Mr. McNulty declined to provide more information on security precautions at Logan or on Globe's operations there, saying his company and American had been advised by the FBI to refer all questions to FBI agents.

Burns International's Globe Aviation Services unit won the contract to provide security services for American Airlines at Logan last year. Both Globe and Burns are units of Sweden's Securitas AB. Burns is based in Chicago.

A woman answering the phone at Globe's head office said Ronald J. Harper, president and CEO, was "in a meeting" as were other executives. She said the company had "no comment at this time."

Logan Airport authorities said Huntleigh USA Corp. provides gate and baggage security services for United Airlines. United officials declined to identify the security firm at Logan Airport. Officials at St. Louis-based Huntleigh didn't return repeated phone calls.

At Logan Tuesday, Massport security chief Joseph Lawless said the agency would assess security.

"I feel Logan is a safe airport," he said. "We've taken a lot of measures in place to maintain the security of the airport." Mr. Lawless added that he considered Logan "as secure as any other airport in this country."

*-- Stephen Power in Washington, Nicole Harris in Atlanta and Andy Pasztor in Los Angeles contributed to this article.*

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