



Aviation security test remains secret

New evaluation suggests little effect on airlines' departure times

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Scott Olson / AFP file

Passengers wait in line to pass through an American Airlines security checkpoint at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, where aviation officials conducted the secret test.

By Alex Johnson
Reporter
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June 14, 2002 - A secret government test this spring indicated that tougher security rules for baggage handling would have little significant impact on airlines' schedules or costs, MSNBC.com has learned. But divisions on the panel that conducted the test have led federal aviation officials to take no action for several weeks and to consider keeping results of the test permanently under wraps.

The results of the study — which assessed whether rules that order the airlines to track checked bags along with their owners could be extended to connecting flights — were consistent with those of earlier studies, according to sources familiar with the test. Those assessments concluded that doing so would not significantly disrupt departure times or impose a financial burden on the airlines.

The new test was completed in the first week of May at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, according to administration, aviation industry and congressional sources. Since then, the Transportation Security Administration, which was created in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, has circulated a draft report to a small number of airlines seeking comment on the

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study, which was conducted with the direct involvement of American and United airlines.

No other action has been taken since then, the sources said, even though many weeks have passed since MSNBC.com reported in March that the TSA had failed to close the connecting-flight loophole despite repeated promises to do so.

Although lawmakers and security experts have maintained for months that failure to match bags on connecting flights was an open invitation to terrorists, TSA officials appear to be in no hurry to close the security gap.

A spokesperson for the agency, who confirmed MSNBC.com's identification of O'Hare as the test site, said that there was no deadline or timetable to end what the agency calls an "evaluation process" and that there were no plans to make results of the new study public.

Sources familiar with the study said on condition of anonymity that it appeared to be in limbo because of significant disagreements over how to interpret the results, not over the credibility of the results themselves. They said that some members of the study panel were contending that even the small impact on departure times or carriers' costs found by the study were unacceptable.

Tight secrecy surrounds test

The assessment largely remains shrouded in secrecy. It was conducted without the knowledge of airport administrators, local and state officials or the offices of several Chicago-area members of Congress who have taken high-profile positions on issues involving O'Hare. All of them said they first learned of the test through inquiries by MSNBC.com.

A spokeswoman for Illinois Homeland Security Director Matthew Bettenhausen would neither confirm nor deny that Bettenhausen had been consulted.

Industry officials and aviation experts generally agreed that the TSA was right to keep the test secret while it was being conducted so the collection of data would not be skewed.

But many of them said they were puzzled that the agency might choose never to release the results, noting that the data themselves could no longer be influenced and that the agency would be pressured to explain why it decided on whatever action it eventually took.

"It seems strange under those circumstances," said David

Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association, which publishes the Airline Safety Report Card.

'It's going to be very hard for them to support their position without turning to the data demonstrated' in the test.

— DAVID STEMLER
Air Travelers Association

"We're in a new world in the post-9/11 period where security tends to put a lot of normal procedures on the sidelines ... so it doesn't surprise me that they might take that position," he said. "But it's going to be very hard for them to support their position without turning to the data demonstrated" in the test.

Dawn Deeks, a spokeswoman for the Association of Flight Attendants, said that "if people are onto it that [the test] exists, that doesn't make much sense" for the TSA not to release the findings.

Some industry experts said missteps were to be expected at the TSA because it was an infant agency that had been given an enormous task to accomplish in a short time. They said those difficulties would grow as the agency simultaneously tried to figure out how it would fit into a new Department of Homeland Security that President Bush has asked Congress to create.

But at least one other analyst was less charitable. "You're not dealing with the sharpest knives in the aviation drawer," said Michael Boyd, an aviation industry consultant who has emerged as a prominent critic of the TSA. "You're not dealing with the sharpest and most effective bureaucracy."

Bag-matching opponents on panel

The composition of the panel that conducted the test also raised eyebrows. In addition to several TSA representatives, it included representatives from American and United airlines, according to TSA and congressional sources.

The concern focuses on American's involvement. Donald Carty, the chairman of American's parent company, AMR Corp., has been widely quoted before and after the test period as denouncing passenger bag matching on connecting flights.

Such a requirement "will cause absolute paralysis in airports," Carty said last month in a speech to the American Association of Airport Executives in Dallas. He said the intentions behind bag matching were "good, but the effect can be disastrous."

Officials at American Airlines did not return repeated telephone

calls and e-mail messages seeking comment.

While most industry officials and analysts contacted by MSNBC.com would not comment on whether American might have been able to influence the results — “I wouldn’t even know how to begin answering that question,” said David Barnes, a spokesman for TSA Inspector General Kenneth Mead — some did acknowledge that they were surprised by the airline’s involvement.

“That would make me question the way that the study was done, especially because the industry has for so long cried foul when the topic of bag match comes up,” said Deeks of the flight attendants association.

“If the study was done in secret, in concert with airline management — and I haven’t seen the study, so I can’t say for sure that it’s biased — I’m not sure if we can guarantee its objectivity. That’s for sure,” she said.

Stempler of the Air Travelers Association also suggested that the TSA was relying on dubious sources of information.

Stempler, whose organization lobbies for better flying conditions for passengers, said he had met in the past couple of weeks with TSA officials, who gave no clue that they had conducted a test of such interest to the flying public. “I don’t know where you’re getting your input on what’s of concern to passengers or interest to passengers,” he said he told the TSA officials.

Panelist backs American

However, a member of the study panel who otherwise sharply disagrees with American defended the airline, saying it was being criticized unfairly.

“American did a brilliant job during the test and proceeded with the utmost skill and honesty,” said Arnold Barnett, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who directed the largest previous federal study supporting bag matching, in 1997.

Even though American’s leadership has led the fight against the procedure, the airline’s representatives on the study panel were rigorously fair, said Barnett, who acknowledged his involvement in the study only reluctantly and said confidentiality agreements limited what he could say.

‘If the study was done in secret, in concert with airline

“It was American that pointed out that [airlines] would require no additional personnel” to extend bag matching to

management ... I'm not sure if we can guarantee its objectivity. That's for sure.'

— DAWN DEEKS
Association of Flight Attendants

connecting flights, Barnett said. He said that observation was a remarkable divergence from the Air Transport Association's standard position that tens of thousands of new workers would be needed if the procedure were mandated.

Officials at the Air Transport Association did not return repeated calls for comment.

Barnett had no comment when asked about positions taken by United, the other airline involved in the study. Officials at United, which has maintained a low public profile on the issue of bag matching on connecting flights but has adamantly fought the prospect in private, said they would not comment on any matters involving airline security.

MSNBC.com could not immediately confirm the identities of other participants in the study.

Battle over bag matching

The airline industry continues to fiercely resist any effort to compel it to match bags with passengers on connecting flights.

When he announced the bag-matching program early this year, TSA Administrator John Magaw said the decision not to include connecting flights came because of warnings from airline officials of "enormous delays" if they were required to unload bags when passengers missed their connections.

Barnett's 1997 study of passenger bag matching, however, did not support that contention.

The two-week test, involving 750,000 passengers on 8,000 flights by 11 airlines flying between 50 cities, "fully considered connecting as well as originating flights," Barnett told Congress in advocating the system this year.

The 1997 test showed that out of every 2,000 connecting passengers, only one with a checked bag was missing at departure time for his outbound flight, Barnett testified in January. "In those rare instances when a bag-pull was required, it delayed the flight seven minutes on average. Indeed, most observed delays during the experiment were tied to originating passengers," he said.

Two U.S. airlines that already match bags on connecting flights, JetBlue and Frontier, told MSNBC.com that they had experienced

no unusual delays. Industry analysts have cautioned against reading too much into their experiences, however, because both airlines are smaller regional carriers and not representative of the industry as a whole.

Boyd, the industry consultant, and others also warned against the assumption that universal bag matching was the best way to ensure the safety of checked baggage.

"Just bag matching by itself is a distraction," Boyd said. "It won't make us safer if that matched bag does not have some sort of security scrutiny.

"Whether it's with a passenger or not is a non-sequitur," he said. "It's going on an airplane or it's not. If it's going on an airplane, it's got to go through some scrutiny."

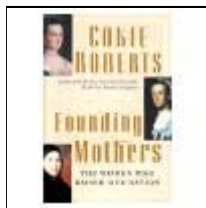
But Boyd sharply questioned why the TSA would want to keep last month's study under wraps.

The study could be "something that they would not want to be made public because it so sloppily done and so poorly implemented that it's meaningless," said Boyd, who was not involved in the study and has not seen the report. "The second thing is that it may be something that is so politically unpalatable ... that it may be honest, it may be right, but they don't want to say that."

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