

INSECURE AIRLINES

THE ARREST Aug. 29 in Sweden of a man with US flight school experience trying to carry handgun onto an airplane was just the most recent reminder that airline safety is critical one year after Sept. 11. An open, industrialized country like the United States is full of targets for terrorists, but the vulnerability of airplanes will always make them especially inviting. Airlines' concerns about passenger impatience with delays should not be allowed to interfere with thorough inspection of travelers and their bags.

One immediate improvement was the strengthening of cockpit doors. Some pilots find this inadequate and are asking for permission to carry handguns. But the airlines raise a sensible objection to this. "While we are spending literally billions of dollars to keep dangerous weapons off of aircraft," the heads of 21 airlines wrote to senators, "the idea of intentionally introducing thousands of weapons into the system appears to be dangerously counterproductive."

Examination of checked luggage by explosive-detecting machines has improved slightly, but airports say they will have difficulty meeting the Dec. 31 deadline for 100 percent compliance. Logan Airport, to its credit, is working to get the devices in place. The failure of the federal government and the producers of the machines not to ramp up production after Sept. 11 has been a signal defeat in the war against terrorism. The airlines now do positive matching of bags with passengers so no unaccompanied luggage gets on board - but only on the first legs of flights. The airlines fear that bag matching would cause unacceptable delays on connecting flights, although a recent trial in Chicago showed that this was not the case. Matching should be required on all flights.

Arnold Barnett, a professor of operations research at MIT who specializes in airline safety, sees gains since Sept. 11 but says some improvements might be lost because of pressure from the airlines. While the airlines fret over the customers they lose to rail or car travel because of security-related hassles, they should be more worried about the fate of their industry if weak security leads to another airline hijacking or bombing.