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## Stalemate in Congress Irks Security Experts

By RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.

With Congress in a stalemate over whether to federalize airport screening workers, experts warned yesterday that major gaps remained in aviation security nearly two months after the terrorist attacks.

The fight in Congress — where the House late on Thursday narrowly rejected the Senate's plan for Washington to hire 28,000 government screeners — has led to the shelving of rules that weeks ago would have required the tightening of government oversight of private airport workers.

Meanwhile, some improvements that experts consider fundamental remain uncertain. The airlines oppose universal matching of checked bags with the passengers who actually board flights, arguing it would be costly but provide no protection against suicide bombers. Congress wants all checked bags screened for explosives but has not appropriated the \$2 billion that officials say bomb- detection machines will cost.

And though the House and Senate plans are in agreement on measures that experts say would bolster security — adding armed marshals to more flights, transferring oversight of airport workers from the airlines to the federal government and fortifying cockpit doors — action on those fronts has been held up by the tug of war in Congress.

Individual airports and airlines have taken matters into their own hands, contributing to what some frequent travelers perceive to be spotty and haphazard security efforts across the country. Experts say the narrow debate in Congress has diverted attention from the need to comprehensively overhaul aviation safety for a new era when suicide hijackers turn jets into bombs.

"Far too much time has been spent on this issue of screeners," said James E. Hall, who was chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board from 1994 until earlier this year. "We've got to address everything in the system."

Security efforts have, of course, changed since Sept. 11. There are long lines at many airports as more passengers are patted down and carry-on luggage is searched more closely. The government has issued a number of security directives, limiting carry-on luggage, banning all cutting devices and increasing the number of passengers whose checked bags must be searched or X- rayed. But the transportation secretary, Norman Y. Mineta, acknowledged on Tuesday that there continued to be

"intolerable" lapses.

Officials at some airports have gone beyond the federal orders. At Dallas-Fort Worth International, for example, guards have sealed off access to sensitive areas and bomb-sniffing dogs are patrolling garages.

Pressed by their workers — and public anxiety — some airlines have taken steps, too. Many carriers are already installing fortified cockpit doors. The Mesa Air Group ([news/quote](#)) is training pilots to carry stun guns. Delta Air Lines ([news/quote](#)) is testing video cameras in the passenger cabin. And at the insistence of security-screening companies, a number of carriers have raised pay for airport screeners.

Still, Mr. Hall, now a lawyer in Washington, said he worried that despite the huge loss of life on Sept. 11, lawmakers and the airline industry were still too concerned about cost. Both the House and Senate measures would raise more than \$1.5 billion annually to enhance security, mainly through new fees on passenger tickets, but many experts are worried that may not be enough.

"If we don't have the resources, then we'll end up in trouble again," Mr. Hall said. "That's been the problem in the past. We were trying to do security on the cheap, and we paid a horrible, horrible price."

Michael Wascom, a spokesman for the Air Transport Association, the industry's main trade group, said airlines spend \$700 million a year on security, and he rejected the notion that safety has been compromised by cutting costs.

"I really don't think cost has been a stumbling block," Mr. Wascom said. "It's always been our belief that we have trained and deployed screeners based upon the perceived level of security risk identified by the federal government."

One measure advocated by some security experts — matching checked bags to the passengers who actually board domestic flights — has been fought hard by airlines, citing costs in money and time. Bag matching already is required on international flights.

Arnold Barnett, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who in 1997 helped conduct a two-week test of bag matching on 8,000 domestic flights, estimated that imposing it on all flights would cost 25 cents to 52 cents a passenger and delay departures by an average of one minute.

"We need to move as fast as possible to 100 percent bag matching," Mr. Barnett said in an interview.

Others, though, say bag matching would do nothing to deter a suicide bomber, and airlines say the delays and costs would be far greater. "I don't think that has any value at this point," said Jonathan Ornstein, chief executive of the Mesa Air Group.

The House bill would require bag-matching until all checked luggage

can be screened for explosives; the Senate bill requires "improved" bag-matching.

A spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration said this week that the agency was reviewing the feasibility of 100 percent bag matching.

Critics note what they regard as a pattern of slow response by the government and airlines to air disasters.

Bag matching has been debated since the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland in 1988. The new federal rules on airport screening that were scheduled to be issued in mid-September were devised after the crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island in July 1996. Implementation of the rules, which call for tripling classroom training for screeners, among other steps, was delayed for two-and-a-half years while the F.A.A. tried to figure out how to measure screeners' performance. The agency now says it has held off imposing the rules until Congress agrees on new security legislation.

Congress is pressing the F.A.A. to speed the installation at airports of machines to screen checked luggage for explosives, and since Sept. 11, airlines have been using a computer database to flag more passengers and their baggage for close screening.

But government inspectors have found lapses, even where the most up to date equipment is already in place.

In Congressional testimony last month, Kenneth M. Mead, the inspector general of the Transportation Department, said that inspections at seven airports showed that "at some locations, the machine was not turned on; at others, the machines were on and staffed with screeners, but no baggage was being screened; and at others, baggage was being screened only sporadically."

In a speech on Tuesday, Mr. Mineta also criticized the airlines and the security screening companies for lapses, citing an incident last week in which a passenger was able to inadvertently carry a loaded handgun aboard a Southwest Airlines ([news/quote](#)) flight without being detected.

Such episodes, he acknowledged, were eroding confidence in the F.A.A.

While many travelers report being reassured since Sept. 11 by stepped-up security in terminals and the presence of the National Guard, others question what the guardsmen could do to prevent a terrorist attack. And many cite what appear to be jarring discrepancies.

Before a recent flight from Miami to Boston, for example, John Shurman, a Miami executive who flies often, said he wanted to test security measures. He walked through the airport metal-detector with six quarters, a silver money clip and a cellphone in his pocket. To his surprise, the machine did not sound an alarm.

"I went to the U.S. marshal sitting at the table across the hall and said, 'What is going on here? How in the world could I get through?' " Mr. Shurman said. "He said, 'We've been having problems with that machine all day.' " Other experiences have been more reassuring, Mr. Shurman said, including a flight out of Guatemala, where his luggage was hand- searched twice.