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## San Francisco Chronicle

### Officials: Plot shows America remains vulnerable

Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington Bureau  
Thursday, August 10, 2006

**(08-10) 17:33 PDT Washington --**  
Despite billions of dollars spent bolstering airport security since 19 hijackers commandeered four passenger jets using box-cutters on Sept. 11, 2001, counter-terrorism officials say America remains vulnerable to the type of terrorist plot allegedly foiled by British authorities this week.

"There are always gaps in security," said aviation security consultant Cathal Flynn, a retired Navy rear admiral who was associate administrator for civilian aviation security at the Federal Aviation Administration during the Clinton administration. "It all depends on the organization and the capabilities of the terrorists."

Security officials, since at least the 1988 explosion of Pam Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, have tried to get ahead of those terrorist capabilities. For example, U.S. officials in recent years have become increasingly worried about terrorists using shoulder-fired missiles against passenger jets. The Department of Homeland Security is testing technologies on planes and on the ground that could jam the missile's

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targeting system. But the technologies may prove too costly for the government or industry to install, Flynn said.

"Deploying that would cost billions of dollars for our fleet or for our airports," he said. "Our nation and people, through our representatives, have to ask: How much do we want to spend on that versus what is the effectiveness of that? And what is the probability that terrorists will have those things and use them in the United States?"

Anti-terrorism experts agree that heavy spending on airline security over the past five years has made it more difficult to carry out an attack. The Transportation Security Administration hired more than 65,000 passenger and baggage screeners and air marshals and met a congressional mandate to screen for explosives in all checked luggage.

But, as U.S. and British authorities acknowledged this week, the new measures would not necessarily stop a terrorist from carrying onto a plane the raw materials to build a crude bomb. The CT scanners used to check carry-on luggage at security checkpoints can't always detect explosive chemicals, especially if they are hidden in a water bottle or other innocuous-looking container.

"An X-ray system doesn't pick up vapors. It picks up shapes and densities, and it's tuned to enhance the visual effects of densities likely to be the densities of explosives," said Colin Drury, an engineering professor who directs the Research Institute for Safety and Security in Transportation at State University of New York in Buffalo.

A much smaller percentage of luggage is "swabbed" and run through more sophisticated devices that test for explosives or other dangerous compounds. But not all chemicals are detected by these machines or by "puffers," which blast air over passengers as they walk through to check for various vapors.

In the short term, aviation security experts said it's prudent to stop people from carrying onboard any liquids or gels (except baby bottles and certain medicines) until authorities can put in place better detection systems for explosives.

"It's sadly and frustratingly always a race to stay ahead of these guys," said Jack Riley, a homeland security expert at the Rand Corporation, who testified before Congress recently on explosive detection systems.

"The scanners that are used (on) checked baggage are potentially useful here," Riley said. "It all comes down to: What were the explosives these guys were intending to use? And are the existing explosive detection machines or the trace detection systems capable of detecting that chemical signature?"

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Critics of the Bush administration complain that security officials still fail to screen all air cargo for explosives, instead relying on random checks and the "known shipper" program that requires cargo companies to register with the government. The TSA responded in May by beefing up background checks of airport and freight workers, using more bomb-sniffing dogs and hiring 300 air cargo inspectors.

Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., a critic of the administration's cargo screening system, said Thursday: "While this terrorist plan may have been thwarted, I still am gravely concerned about gaping aviation security loopholes that continue to put passengers and crew members at risk."

But some counter-terrorism experts praised the government's efforts, including spending hundreds of millions of dollars developing new technologies that detect weapons, explosives and biological or chemical agents.

"The entire aviation security system has improved perhaps tenfold since before 9/11," said Thomas Hartwick, who chaired a National Academy of Sciences panel on aviation security. "But you know the old dictum in the military is that any defense can be penetrated. You have to stay ahead of the bad guys to keep the system safe."

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