www.nytimes.com
The New York Times ON THE WEB

July 10, 2002

House Passes Bill to Allow Airline Pilots to Carry Guns

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, July 10 — The House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly today to let airline pilots carry guns in their cockpits. A similar proposal is gaining support in the Senate, making it likely that Congress will try to overrule an administration decision that pilots should not be armed.

Last winter, when Congress passed legislation creating the Transportation Security Administration and told it to take over airport security, it left the decision on arming pilots to the new agency. But when John Magaw, head of the agency, decided in May to rely instead on stronger cockpit doors, federal air marshals and better screening of passengers, many members of Congress said they were outraged.

"Do you really think that 9/11 would have happened if our pilots had been armed, as they should have been armed?" Bob Young, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said in floor debate today.

James L. Oberstar, the Minnesota Democrat who is the ranking minority member of the committee, said he had originally sided with the administration, but had changed his mind because of the current policy that orders the Air National Guard to shoot down hijacked planes. Mr. Oberstar said that under that policy, an airline pilot flying on weekends for the National Guard might have to shoot down the very airliner he flew during the week.

Republican and Democratic leaders had agreed on a two-year test program, in which up to 2 percent of airline pilots, or about 1,400 people, could be trained by the Transportation Security Administration, deputized as federal flight deck officers and authorized to carry guns. But on the floor today, an amendment offered by Peter A. DeFazio, Democrat of Oregon, eliminated the 2 percent limit and opened the program to any pilot who could pass the training, and made the program permanent. The amendment carried by a bipartisan vote of 250 to 175.

After that vote, Mr. Oberstar, a strong proponent of the 2 percent limit, pleaded with members not to destroy the compromise. William O. Lipinski, an Illinois Republican who also helped shape the the compromise, suggested that such a strong program might face a veto. But in a re-vote, the amendment passed by an even larger margin, 251 to 172.

The bill itself passed by 310 to 113.

Sentiment for arming pilots is also building in the Senate. Four senators have introduced a bill that would let as many pilots carry guns as want to and can pass a qualifying course. But the chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, Ernest F. Hollings, opposes the idea and

has blocked it from coming to a vote there. As a result, the sponsors are now looking to offer the proposal as an amendment to another bill, possibly the president's Homeland Security Department or a security appropriations bill.

Arming pilots was popular first with conservatives, but today Senator Barbara Boxer of California, a liberal Democrat, endorsed the idea. Referring to a prime sponsor, Bob Smith, Republican of New Hampshire, who is one of the more conservative members of the Senate, she said, "I think this is the first time I have ever stood with Senator Smith on an issue that has involved guns."

Ms. Boxer said she, too, was moved by the idea of the Air National Guard shooting down a civilian airliner. "Imagine how the survivors of all those passengers and crew will feel if we failed to allow pilots to have guns to defend the plane and an American flight was brought down by the American military," she said.

In House debate today, few lawmakers spoke against the bill. Vernon J. Ehlers, Republican of Michigan, was one. He said he did not oppose guns in the cockpit but that this bill would cut the airlines out of the process. "I'm not aware of any instance where the federal government has told an employer, you have to let your employees carry a gun to work if they want to," he said.

Michael Honda, a California Democrat, said that Congress had referred the question to the security experts at the Transportation Security Administration, who decided this was not a good idea. But Mr. Young, the Transportation Committee chairman, said that experts "don't know squat," and that if a hijacker came into a cockpit, the pilot had "a right to eliminate that individual."

Bob Clement, Democrat of Tennessee, gave the consensus view. "Voluntarily arming our pilots will give us a new last line of defense against hijackers and terrorists," he said.

In a concession to the airlines, the bill would relieve them of legal risk. An armed pilot who mistakenly shot a passenger would be treated as a federal employee for purposes of liability.

One reason for the 2 percent limit in the leadership compromise bill was cost. Mr. Oberstar said that it would cost $8,000 per year for each pilot that was trained and that if all of them wanted guns, it would cost over $500 million a year. "There isn't enough money to do all the other things we want to do," he said. He said another reason for compromise was that many members of the public are not enthusiastic about giving pilots guns.

Aviation experts have quietly raised the idea that guns in the cockpit would be a distraction to professionals whose full attention ought to be devoted to flying the airplane. Others raised questions about the effect of stray bullets on cockpit control panels. But pilots themselves, many of them Air Force or Navy veterans, have loudly supported the bill.

Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company | Permissions | Privacy Policy