

Heed security wake-up calls

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When box cutters and other suspicious paraphernalia were found hidden on two Southwest Airlines jetliners last Thursday, the incident sent a noisy wake-up call to the nation. But it wasn't the first sign of continuing air-security gaps the government has received during the past 18 months.

Congress and policymakers have hit the snooze button several times after hearing alarms about security that remains porous. The tendency for vigilance to slacken is normal more than two years into a war against shadowy terrorists. Yet the government has little reason to believe that its inattention is matched by a drop in terrorist threats.

On Saturday, for instance, a new audiotape of a voice purporting to be al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden promised more terror attacks. Other warnings publicized last week said terrorists might try to hide explosives in coats, pillows or stuffed animals.

Thursday's incident turned out to be a hoax of sorts. A 20-year-old college student is suspected of hiding the materials in the restrooms on two planes to publicly dramatize security lapses. The discovery came the same day that Transportation Security Administration chief James Loy acknowledged that a lack of money was hindering his agency. "We can't provide world-class, effective security on the cheap," Loy told Congress.

Other pointed warnings:

* Last month, a government report showed that guns, knives and box cutters had slipped past airport screeners in undercover tests.

* Also in September, a man hid in a crate that was shipped in a plane flying from New York to Dallas. While the escapade occurred on a cargo aircraft, shipments made on passenger planes also lack security. In fact, less than 10% of such cargo is screened.

* In April 2002, authorities arrested 104 workers at Baltimore and Washington airports for using false information to obtain jobs or security badges. The arrests - among 356 workers rounded up at airports nationwide - showed baggage handlers, janitors and workers fueling jets had been ill-screened for jobs that gave them access to what should be the most secure areas.

Each incident gets attention "for a day and then fizzles," says Paul Rancatore of the Allied Pilots Association.

The public can't depend on hoaxes and headline-grabbing incidents to keep the government alert. While airline security is much improved since 9/11, meeting continuing threats means making vigilance an everyday routine.