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No Way to Fight a War

More than 10 months after the disaster of Sept. 11, the government effort to improve aviation security is not progressing smoothly. Last week John Magaw, head of the new Transportation Security Administration, was abruptly ousted. On Tuesday, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta warned a House committee that Congress had failed to provide the government with adequate resources to meet the mandates it imposed in last year's aviation security legislation. Meanwhile, prodded by local airport operators, some House Republicans are trying to push back the law's tough deadlines for instituting new security measures.

Adding to the sense of disarray, Mr. Mineta told lawmakers that the administration would reconsider its opposition to allowing pilots to carry guns. The House voted on July 10 to arm pilots. This is not only a bad idea, but a counterproductive distraction at this point.

Congress should not retreat from the bold commitment it made last fall to secure the skies. It should hold the administration to its November deadline for assuming control of security at the nation's 429 commercial airports, and the year-end deadline by which all checked luggage must be scanned for bombs.

Deploying tens of thousands of new federal screeners by November is a daunting, and expensive, logistical challenge. Installing more than 1,000 of the enormous CAT-scan bomb-screening machines at airport terminals may be an even greater one. But the fledgling safety agency, aided by outside contractors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin, has made more progress than is generally

realized in making sure the job gets done.

The danger now, as Mr. Mineta warned, is that Congress will derail these efforts by relaxing deadlines and refusing to pay for adequate security. Lawmakers have trimmed \$1 billion from the agency's \$4.4 billion supplemental spending request for this year, and imposed an arbitrarily low cap of 45,000 on the number of employees it can hire. Mitchell Daniels, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, bears some of the blame for this stinginess because he held down aviation security spending requests.

Effective management of the agency is essential to any improvement in security. Mr. Magaw proved to be imperious, secretive and impolitic in his dealings with airport managers and Congress. But he was determined to overcome traditional resistance to security measures from the airline industry and airport operators, which do not want enhanced security to detract from travelers' convenience. Mr. Magaw's successor and former deputy, James Loy, who commanded the Coast Guard from 1998 until he joined the agency earlier this year, should not back away from security goals in deference to industry interests.

Neither Mr. Loy nor Mr. Mineta can still the growing opposition in Congress to meeting the security challenge in the most urgent manner. President Bush himself, backed by Tom Ridge, his homeland security director, must assume direct responsibility for this wartime effort. The White House needs to bring all parties together to ensure that the Transportation Security Administration has the resources to protect air travelers from terrorists.