

Probe Finds Security Lapses At Airports, Pentagon, FBI

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Investigators masquerading as armed law enforcement officers carried unsearched briefcases past security guards at Reagan National Airport and secure government buildings--including the Pentagon, the FBI and the State Department--penetrating into or near Cabinet secretaries' suites in almost every attempt, according to new findings by the General Accounting Office.

Startling security weaknesses were discovered at two airports and all 19 of the federal agencies visited by special GAO investigators, who used counterfeit identification and phony law enforcement badges they obtained on the Internet.

The results of the investigation were shared with the agencies at a closed-door briefing on Capitol Hill on Tuesday morning. The FBI and some other agencies immediately tightened security.

The lapses suggest how vulnerable federal facilities remain to potential acts of terrorism or espionage, even though many buildings are now equipped with metal detectors and protected by concrete barricades.

Late last year, a listening device transmitting to a Russian foreign intelligence officer was discovered in a seventh-floor conference room at the State Department. U.S. officials believe someone penetrated State Department security not only to install the device but to regularly maintain it.

The GAO reported that at every federal building tested, undercover investigators posing as plainclothes officers of the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration and New York City Police Department were waved around metal detectors when they announced that they were carrying weapons.

In some cases, they were able to roam freely through the buildings and were easily able to locate the agency head's office from room numbers listed in publicly available federal directories. The CIA was the only place where they were unable to reach the office of the department or agency head.

The phony officers--who did not actually carry guns--were able to drive a rental van into the interior courtyard of Justice Department headquarters and simply walk away from it.

"This is a shocking report revealing a dangerous vulnerability plaguing thousands of people who work in our public buildings," House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.) said in a statement. A Judiciary subcommittee concerned about the easy availability of stolen and counterfeit law enforcement credentials commissioned the GAO investigation.

At the two airports tested--Reagan National and Orlando International--the fake law enforcement officers were not searched and were given permits to carry weapons aboard airplanes.

GAO Special Investigations official Bob Hast, in a memo prepared for Tuesday's briefing, said the undercover team that penetrated secure locations "could have introduced weapons, explosives, chemical/biological agents, listening devices or other hazardous material."

Said FBI spokesman John Collingwood: "This was a little bit of a wake-up call for every agency put to the test." He added that security measures were changed within an hour after the conclusion of Tuesday's GAO briefing.

"Because people got into the building using false police ID, we changed our internal procedures. All non-FBI law enforcement officers have to surrender their weapons when they come in the building," Collingwood said. New efforts are being made to verify visitors' identification, he said, and visitors will not be able to enter the building unless they have appointments with people authorized to let them in.

Crime subcommittee Chairman Bill McCollum (R-Fla.) said the GAO findings point to a "system-wide breakdown," because investigators were able to penetrate every location they tested. He said the fake badges and IDs were not intended to be perfect counterfeits. The investigators created the IDs by using computer graphics and bought badges over the Internet and at police supply stores.

McCollum faulted "certain customs and courtesies being extended within the law enforcement community." His subcommittee plans a hearing on the security problem today.

The GAO team not only brought an unsearched vehicle into the Justice Department's courtyard, but made its way up to the area of Attorney General Janet Reno's office suite, though she was not there at the time. The undercover agents were asked to leave by members of the attorney general's staff.

The availability of counterfeit IDs noted by the GAO "has raised some concerns--it's caused us to review and amend our security procedures," Justice Department spokeswoman Gretchen Michael said yesterday. She declined to discuss specific changes.

At the Pentagon, a spokesman said a review of security was recently initiated. "It's been a professional courtesy to allow other law enforcement in without going through the metal detector," he said. In addition to the fake IDs, members of the GAO team were allowed into the Pentagon because some security people recognized them as law enforcement officials, he said.

Those courtesies may be abolished and escorts may be required, the spokesman said.

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