

California airports tighten security, stop air mail after threat from Unabomber

The San Francisco Chronicle received a letter stating that the Unabomber planned to blow up an airliner out of Los Angeles International Airport.

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Authorities tightened airport security around the state and stopped all air mail out of California on Wednesday after the Unabomber threatened to blow up a plane in a letter.

The letter — its authenticity confirmed by the FBI — represents the first time the elusive bomber has threatened a target in advance.

With the busy July Fourth weekend approaching, the Federal Aviation Administration warned passengers flying from California airports to watch out for suspicious bags or parcels and to expect security delays.

Long lines formed as ticket agents checked passengers for photo IDs, and some airlines waived fees for passengers wanting to change their flights.

"We are taking it very seriously. ... We do deem it to be a credible threat," Ed Jones, division manager of security for the FAA, said at Los Angeles International Airport.

The letter, received Tuesday by the San Francisco Chronicle, read: "WARNING. The terrorist group FC, called Unabomber by the FBI, is planning to blow up an airliner out of Los Angeles International Airport some time during the next six days. To prove that the

writer of this letter knows something about FC, the first two digits of their identifying number are 55."

The letter, postmarked San Francisco, did not refer to any specific flight. And the FBI said it was not clear when the six-day period began.

The "55" is believed to refer to a nine-digit code number used in Unabomber letters in the past. The code number has not been released, but the "55" portion is not a secret.

FBI agent Jim Freeman said he is "100 percent" sure the letter is from the Un-

device injured Percy Woods, then president of United Airlines.

The most recent victim of the Unabomber, so-named because many of his bombs were aimed at airlines and universities, was timber industry lobbyist Gilbert Murray, killed in his Sacramento office on April 24.

At both the Los Angeles airport and San Francisco International Wednesday, photo IDs were required for curbside baggage check and at airline counters. In Los Angeles, police also added officers and one bomb-sniffing dog near the United shuttle gate.

In addition, all mail out of California airports is being held indefinitely, said Postal Inspector Dennis Haggberg. Many of the Unabomber's explosives have been mailed from Northern California post offices, and the FBI has said the Unabomber probably lives near Sacramento.

There was no rush to cancel flights in advance of the busy holiday weekend, airline spokesmen said.

Lines got longer at San Francisco's United ticket counters as an employee checked IDs against ticket names.

American Airlines, the biggest passenger carrier out of Los Angeles International, and No. 2 United waived re-ticketing fees for passengers who want to change their California flights.

The Air Transport Association urged passengers in California to bring photo identification to check-ins and to arrive at least two hours early.

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— Ed Jones
division manager of security for the FAA

abomber, the name the FBI has given to the person who has killed three people and injured 23 with 16 package bombs since 1978.

Freeman said laboratory tests confirmed the letter's authenticity, but he would not elaborate. In a statement, however, the FBI said the letter had similar "language, content and other characteristics of previous letters known to have originated from the Unabomber."

In 1979, an altitude-triggered incendiary bomb sent by the Unabomber partially detonated in the cargo hold during an American Airlines flight, and 12 people suffered smoke inhalation. The following year, a Unabomber

House approves flag-burning amendment

The amendment must be passed by the Senate and ratified by three-fourths of the states before it can become part of the Constitution.

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a gesture timed for the Fourth of July holiday, the House overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment Wednesday designed to protect Old Glory from burning and other forms of desecration.

The measure, which now goes to the Senate, would permit Congress or any state to enact flag-protection laws of the type the Supreme Court has struck down in recent years as an infringement of free expression.

The 312-120 vote was 24 more than the two-thirds majority needed and came after occasionally passionate debate about the relative importance of the flag and the constitutional freedoms it symbolizes.

One after another, lawmakers trooped to the microphone and professed their love for the flag, then promptly disagreed over the wisdom of the amendment.

The flag "carries great significance for me and for many veterans and for a large number of citizens," said Rep. Gerald Solomon, the New York Republican whose insistence pushed the measure to the floor.

But critics, most of them Democrats, said the amendment would actually undermine American freedoms.

"If we abandon the Bill of Rights here, where will it then find a home?" asked Rep. James Greenwood, D-Pa.

In addition, critics said the measure would create a patchwork of laws, with each state permitted to prohibit acts of its own choosing. "It's unworkable; it's unreasonable," said Rep. John Bryant, D-Tex., who said Republicans had rushed the measure to the floor in time for Congress' upcoming Fourth of July break.

Rep. Garv Ackerman, D-N.Y., underscored the same point near

the end of the House debate. He held up a variety of items adorned with the stars and stripes — pantyhose, suspenders, pinwheels and slippers among them — and said states would be free under the amendment to write laws outlawing these items.

A Democratic attempt to substitute a measure giving Congress the authority to ban burning, rending, trampling and soiling the flag was rejected, 369-63.

The Clinton administration opposed the measure. Deputy Attorney General Walter Dellinger spoke against it earlier

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— James Greenwood
Representative, D-Pa.

er this year, saying it was unnecessary "in the absence of any meaningful evidence that the flag is in danger of losing its symbolic value."

An earlier bid to approve a

constitutional amendment on flag desecration failed in 1990, but the election of a Republican majority last fall gave advocates a second chance.

An identical amendment is pending in the Senate, where prospects for passage there are uncertain. "Right now, we are very close to the 67 votes we need," said Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah.

But in a signal of the struggle ahead, Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, the Judiciary Committee's senior Democrat, said he opposed the measure as drafted, in part because it would permit each state to write its own laws.

Passage of the amendment by the Senate would send the measure to the states. Ratification of three-fourths of the states would then be necessary to make it part of the Constitution.

In the House, Solomon said there was ample evidence of public support, noting that all states except Vermont had asked for enactment of the amendment before the House.

Senate passes bill to stop frivolous consumer lawsuits

The measure would require that defendants in stockholders suits pay damages only in proportion to their degree of guilt.

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate voted by a decisive margin Wednesday to curb stockholders' suits against companies and their accountants. Backers said the bill is sorely needed to stop frivolous lawsuits, but consumer groups called it an outrage, sure to stifle legitimate complaints.

The overwhelming 70-29 vote, with one member not voting present, coupled with a 325-99 House vote for a more expansive version in March, means proponents may have sufficient votes to override a possible presidential veto.

White House aides have only hinted at a veto. The bills now go to a House-Senate conference to resolve their differences.

Business interests who favored the measure as well as consumer groups and trial lawyers who opposed it waged extensive lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill while eliciting public support for their positions through expensive broadcast and newspaper ads.

Proponents argued the measure will help tame an out-of-control legal system that rewards predatory plaintiffs' lawyers for filing frivolous lawsuits against businesses, particularly high technology companies and accounting firms.

Senate Banking Committee Chairman Alfonse M. D'Amato, R-N.Y., argued the measure would reduce legal bills that companies pay to fight class action shareholder lawsuits. Such suits, he said, consume an average of more than 1,000 hours in management time and typically cost a company about \$690,000.

"These suits, which unnecessarily interfere with and increase the cost of raising capital, are often based on nothing more than a company's announcement of bad news, not evidence of fraud," D'Amato said.

Sen. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md., reminded colleagues that by voting for the bill, "We are ignoring the advice of all of the regulators."

Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Arthur Levitt Jr. and the North American Securities Administrators Association, or NASAA, a coalition of state regulators, both opposed significant parts of the bill.

To fix the problem, the bill would require that defendants pay damages only in proportion to their degree of guilt.

Under the current liability system, defendants who played a minor role — such as an accounting firm that failed to detect fraud — can be forced to pay the entire settlement if the fraud's masterminds are bankrupt.



D'Amato

Texas court denies death row inmate third appeal

Ronald Chambers has been on death row for 19 years for the murder of a Texas Tech student.

AUSTIN (AP) — The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Wednesday upheld the death sentence of a man convicted three times for the 1975 beating death of a Texas Tech student.

Ronald Curtis "Buffalo" Chambers has been on death row 19 years for the murder of Mike McMahan, a 22-year-old Texas Tech engineering student. Only three inmates have been on death row longer than Chambers.

He has been tried three times for McMahan's murder. All three times he was convicted and sentenced to die. However, his conviction was overturned twice on technicalities.

McMahan's parents are hoping Wednesday's court decision means the third conviction will stick. "It's been a long 20 years," McMahan's mother, 71-year-old Bennie McMahan, said in an interview from her home in Kennewick, Wash. "We haven't been able to let Mike go in peace."

In the early morning hours of April 11, 1975, Chambers and three other men abducted McMahan and his date, Deia Sutton, as they left a Dallas nightclub. The two were forced at gunpoint into their car, robbed and taken to the levee on the Trinity River.

There, Sutton was shot in the back of the neck. McMahan also was shot, but both were still alive. When McMahan called out to Sutton to see if she was all right, Chambers struck McMahan 10 to 20 times in the head with the barrel of a shotgun. He then shot Sutton three times.

Sutton survived the attack, but McMahan died from multiple blows to the head, a punctured lung and two gunshot wounds.

Chambers first was convicted in 1975, but the conviction was overturned by the Court of Criminal Appeals because a state-appointed psychiatrist improperly questioned him.

He was re-tried in 1985 and again convicted. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned that conviction, ruling it was racially discriminatory because prosecutors excluded three blacks from the jury.

His third trial was in 1992. In his appeal of that conviction, Chambers claims 19 points of error, including that there was insufficient evidence to prove he would be a continuing threat to society.

However, the court said "the calculated and coldblooded nature of the instant offense ... amounts to sufficient evidence upon which a rational jury could conclude appellant would constitute a continuing threat to society."

Although Chambers still can take his appeal to the federal courts, McMahan and her husband hope this latest decision is a signal that the case may soon come to a close.

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