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Air marshal cutbacks denied White House rejects Democratic criticism

Edward Epstein, Chronicle Washington Bureau

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(07-31) 04:00 PDT Washington -- The Bush administration **denied** reports Wednesday that it planned to trim **air marshal** operations on U.S. commercial flights, after sharp criticism spearheaded on Capitol Hill by California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer.

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Citing internal department e-mails, the Washington Post reported Wednesday that a budget crunch had forced the Transportation Security Administration to eliminate some long-distance flights by marshals because they require an overnight hotel stay. The department also planned to cut advanced training for the marshals, according to the Post story.

Boxer and other Democratic critics said it made no sense to consider reductions among the marshals even as the government issued a new terror warning, saying would-be hijackers might be planning attacks on planes this summer along the East Coast, or in Europe or Australia.

Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman Rachel Sunbarger **denied** that cuts were in the works, saying, "No decision was ever made to cut the Federal **Air Marshal** Service or to reduce the number of missions."

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said in a speech Wednesday, "Every **air marshal** we have is being deployed and every resource is being used."

Boxer, who is up for re-election next year, said she had spoken Wednesday with a high-ranking Transportation Security Administration official who "said it was never going to happen. So I said it was apparent it was, reading between the lines. But he admitted they were going to reprogram money away from training" for the marshals.

"We caught them, and they backtracked," Boxer said.

Cuts in the airline security program have been rumored for days. The marshals, whose total numbers are classified, fly on undisclosed flights and remain anonymous.

Lending credence to the rumors was the Transportation Security Administration plan to eliminate the jobs of some 6,000 airport screeners, 11 percent of the total federalized workforce in that category.

BUDGET OFFICE BLAMED

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said he spoke Wednesday with Homeland Security Deputy Secretary Asa Hutchinson about the proposed reductions for the marshals.

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"He said it was a mistake," said Schumer. "But decisions are made not by Homeland Security, but by the Office of Management and Budget, and OMB doesn't care about homeland security."

Democrats have been feuding with the White House over the department's budget. Democrats, the minority party in Congress, have offered five amendments in the Senate to increase spending, and have lost every time.

"You cannot protect this country on the cheap," Boxer said at a Capitol press conference Wednesday. Fearful that fewer marshals might travel on cross-country flights into San Francisco, Boxer said she had offered to send the TSA a list of hotels near San Francisco International Airport where rooms for marshals could be booked for well under \$100 a night.

Boxer, in an earlier effort to improve airline security, succeeded in getting a \$60 million appropriation passed by the Senate to pay for the first stages of a plan to equip U.S. airliners with electronic technology that would deflect shoulder-fired missiles such as the Stinger.

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