



How Did Abdulmutallab Avoid Detection?

As reported yesterday by The New American, a second person of interest was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers after the failed attempt by Umar Abdulmutallab to bomb Northwest Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day. According to information published Wednesday, customs agents at Detroit Metro Airport apprehended, handcuffed, and removed an unidentified man while the other passengers remained quarantined in a crowded waiting room awaiting further questioning by border patrol officers.



Despite multiple witnesses to the apparent arrest of a well-dressed fellow passenger, a spokesman for ICE gave the typical “neither confirm nor deny” response when questioned about the mystery man’s identify and possible connection with Umar Abdulmutallab.

While the existence of any accomplices or additional suspects remains unclear, what has become apparent is the nearly fatal intelligence blunder that opened a gaping security hole through which Abdulmutallab, with deadly explosives sewn into his underclothing, passed unchecked onto a plane full of innocent holiday travelers. Although it was the malfunction of a syringe devised to detonate the bomb that prevented a catastrophe, it was the malfunction of the U.S. security apparatus that gave the recently radicalized Nigerian a real chance to pose such a proximate threat to the lives of nearly 300 people.

In the days after the attack, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano negligently claimed that the system had “worked really very smoothly over the course of the past several days.” The problem as it now appears is not the timely reaction to a barely thwarted terrorist attack on American soil, but rather the lack of timely action taken beforehand by intelligence agencies that reportedly received reliable information months before the Christmas Day attempt that a “Nigerian” was in Yemen and was being trained to carry out an assault in the United States.

President Obama confirmed the failure in a statement to the press from Honolulu. “The system that has been in place for years now is not sufficiently up to date to take advantage of the information we collect and the knowledge we have,” said the President. The tenor of the President’s message conveyed a sense of anger and disbelief that a network of security created after 9/11 and specifically designed to enhance and improve interagency communication could experience such a systemic breakdown to the point of nearly permitting another, and by most accounts, preventable terrorist attack within the United States from aboard an American airplane.

The specifics of the intelligence community’s abject dereliction of its sole duty of protecting the American people from such events is startling.

First, there is the fact that the CIA met with Abdulmutallab’s father at the American embassy in Nigeria after the former bank executive contacted them regarding his concerns about his son’s apparent



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association with radical Islam and his dissociation with his family and former friends. After their interview with Mutallab, the CIA supposedly sent the information on to the State Department where it was treated with only tepid interest and Abdulmutallab's name was entered in a database of people with suspected ties to terrorism (a list of about half a million names). But his name was not, as one would reasonably expect given the specificity of his new and nefarious ties and extremist behavior, added to the much-smaller "no-fly list," whose total roster is about 4,000 people. (There is even an intermediate list of about 14,000 names of people whose record is sufficiently questionable so as to warrant a mandatory secondary search should they try to board a plane bound for the United States.)

Moreover, there is the fact that CIA spokesmen admit that the agency was alerted as to the nationality (Nigerian) of the suspected terrorist and the country (Yemen) wherein he was contacting known al-Qaeda operatives. In its defense the CIA avers that it "didn't know the name" of the individual classified as a clear and present danger to the safety of the United States. Such a weak demurral is difficult to believe given the fact that the primary source of credible information about the man was provided by his own father, someone likely to know the name of the "Nigerian" meeting with terrorists in Yemen.

In light of the rampant ineptitude of the supposedly revamped (and grossly overpowered) American intelligence network that was properly diagnosed in the aftermath of the Ft. Hood massacre in November, it should not be surprising that the holes in our safety net are wide and numerous. President Obama himself denounced the system's nearly disastrous display of incomprehensible communication worthy of the Tower of Babel. "It now appears that weeks ago this information was passed to a component of our intelligence community but was not effectively distributed so as to get the suspect's name on a no-fly list," Obama said of the father's warning. "There appears to be other deficiencies as well. Even without this one report, there were bits of information available within the intelligence community that could have and should have been pieced together."

There are nearly 300 people who are lucky to be alive today. If the apparatus carried on board Northwest Flight 253 by Umar Abdulmutallab had functioned as intended, a gaping hole would have been blown in the side of that airplane and all those on board would almost certainly have perished. Likewise, if there was not such a gaping hole in the wall of security erected around the United States, then a man with known ties to terror would never have been permitted to board that plane in the first place.

There are crucial questions and the American people must demand answers. With the existence of at least 20 security and intelligence agencies tasked with ensuring our safety, we should not have to rely on luck for our protection.

Photo of Umar Abdulmutallab: AP Images



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