

Flight 253: Anatomy of a Cover-Up

A Failure to "Integrate and Understand," or a Thin Tissue of Lies

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Theme: [Terrorism](#)

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New revelations about the failed Christmas Day attack on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 continue to emerge as does evidence of a systematic cover-up.

With the White House in crisis mode since the attempted bombing, President Obama met for two hours January 5 with top security and intelligence officials. Obama said that secret state agencies "had sufficient information to uncover the terror plot ... but that intelligence officials had 'failed to connect those dots'," [The New York Times](#) reports.

The latest iteration of the "dot theory" floated by the President, aided and abetted by a compliant media, claims "this was not a failure to collect intelligence" but rather, "a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had."

"Mr. Obama's stark assessment that the government failed to properly analyze and integrate intelligence served as a sharp rebuke of the country's intelligence agencies," declared the *Times* uncritically.

While the President's remarks may have offered a "sharp [rhetorical] rebuke," Obama's statement suggests that no one will be held accountable. Indeed, the President "was standing by his top national security advisers, including those whose agencies failed to communicate with one another."

While the President may be "standing by" his national security advisers, the question is, are the denizens of America's secret state standing by him? One well-connected Washington insider, MSNBC pundit Richard Wolffe, isn't so sure.

Wolffe, the author of a flattering portrait of Obama, *Renegade: The Making of a President*, when asked on MSNBC's [Countdown with Keith Olbermann](#) January 4 what is the White House "focus here right now?" Wolffe's startling reply: "Is this conspiracy or cock up? It seems that the president is leaning very much towards thinking this was a systemic failure by individuals who maybe had an *alternative agenda*." (emphasis added)

"I will accept that intelligence by its nature is imperfect" the President said, "but it is increasingly clear that intelligence was not fully analyzed or fully leveraged."

The question is why? And more pertinently from a parapolitical perspective, what "alternative agenda" is playing out here that would put the lives of nearly 300 air

passengers at risk?

British Evidence: Down the Memory Hole

As [Antifascist Calling](#) reported last week, [The Sunday Times](#) and [The Observer](#) newspapers disclosed that MI5 had built a dossier on Abdulmutallab which showed “his repeated contacts with MI5 targets who were subject to phone taps, email intercepts and other forms of surveillance.”

It has since emerged, the [Associated Press](#) reported January 4, that British authorities began assembling a security file on Abdulmutallab shortly after his arrival the UK in 2005 when officials claimed he was in contact with “known radicals.”

Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s spokesperson Simon Lewis said on Monday, “Clearly there was security information about this individual’s activities, and that was information that was shared with the U.S. authorities. That is the key point.”

In an climb-down from Lewis’s admission, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported that Home Secretary Alan Johnson, whose brief includes MI5, said in an appearance before Parliament Tuesday, “Whilst we did provide information to the U.S., according to standard operational practices, linked to the wider aspect of this case, none of the information we held or shared indicated that Abdulmutallab was about to attempt a terrorist attack against the U.S.”

The Brown government has steadfastly refused to say just when the file on Abdulmutallab was passed to the U.S., letting stand the implication it was sent before the aborted Christmas Day attack.

The cover story being floated by MI5 now mendaciously claims the agency did not send Abdulmutallab’s security dossier on to American officials “because of concerns about breaching his human rights and privacy,” [The Sunday Times](#) reported January 10.

“MI5 has privately conceded that as early as 2006 its surveillance operations had picked up ‘multiple communications’ between the 23-year-old Nigerian student and suspected terrorists in Britain,” [The Sunday Times](#) disclosed.

Despite these concessions, we’re now to accept at face value the absurd claim that information on a terrorist suspect wasn’t passed along by British spooks to their closest ally “because of guidance from [MI5’s] legal department.”

Trying selling *that* fairy tale to Republican victims of the secret state’s “human rights and privacy” campaign in Northern Ireland as [The Sunday Herald](#) revealed during their multiyear investigation into Britain’s dirty war!

Under intense pressure by the United States about these disclosures, the Brown government has gone to great lengths to stress “the importance to Britain of close intelligence cooperation with the United States.”

Still reeling however, from U.S. threats to cut-off intelligence sharing last summer if torture evidence was disclosed to the public by the British High Court, the government is moving to avoid a similar controversy over the Abdulmutallab affair.

In late July, [The Guardian](#) revealed that “Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state,

personally intervened to suppress evidence of CIA collusion in the torture of a British resident, the high court heard today." [*The Guardian*](#) also reported that MI5 chief Jonathan Evans said in a speech in October that the "Security Service had been 'slow to detect the emerging pattern of US practice in the period after 9/11'."

While the torture files were eventually released in late October by a High Court order, it is certainly reasonable to ask: what other "U.S. practice(s)" are being suppressed today by the Brown government?

[*The Independent*](#) confirms this and states, "The Downing Street comments were reported to have angered the US government, but after talks with the White House, Mr Brown's spokesman tried to lower the diplomatic temperature. He said relations remained 'excellent' between the two countries."

As part of a new and improved sanitized narrative, the Home Office now claims that Abdulmutallab's transformation into an erstwhile suicide bomber began only after he left Britain. This, despite revelations by *The Sunday Times* last week, that he stoked MI5's interest precisely because of his repeated contacts with individuals "who were subject to phone taps, email intercepts and other forms of surveillance."

In a further development that can't please the British state, [*The Guardian*](#) reported January 7, that Yemen's Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security, Rashad al-Alimi, told a news conference that "information provided to us is that Umar Farouk joined al-Qaida in London."

[*The Wall Street Journal*](#) reports that al-Alimi said Thursday, that Abdulmutallab had "no links" to al-Qaeda "when he first came to Yemen in 2004 and 2005 to study Arabic" and that he "was radicalized during his time in the U.K., where he had studied between his two stints in Yemen," charges that "senior British counterterrorism officials" dismiss, claiming "there was no evidence to back them up."

Why then, would Abdulmutallab's web browsing habits, cell phone conversations as well as "other forms of surveillance" on "targets of interest" to British spooks indicate a "lack of evidence"? It would seem to suggest just the opposite.

Indeed, Abdulmutallab had been in "close contact" with "a key suspect in an Al-Qaeda plot to murder British citizens," according to MP Patrick Mercer, the chairman of the parliamentary counter-terrorism committee. Mercer told *The Sunday Times* January 10, that the alleged airline bomber "had been in touch" with the suspect, currently a resident in a high-security British prison awaiting trial, "while both men were students in London."

Feeling the heat, Lewis has backtracked from his initial statement and now claims that information revealed Monday was simply a "routine exchange of information," and not specific warnings that "Abdulmutallab posed a terrorist threat."

This beggars belief. Indeed, the Brown government's climb-down is clearly intended to "disappear" inconvenient evidence from the official record, thus suppressing the actual content of MI5's security dossier on Abdulmutallab, and will only heighten suspicions that a transatlantic cover-up of the affair is in full-swing.

A Failure to "Integrate and Understand," or a Thin Tissue of Lies

Making the rounds of the Sunday talk shows last week, John O. Brennan, President Obama's top counterterrorism advisor, claimed that U.S. intelligence officials "had snippets of information" about the suspected bomber but "we didn't have any type of information that really allowed us to identify Mr. Abdulmutallab."

[**The Washington Post**](#) reported January 4 that Brennan mendaciously claimed, "We may have had a partial name. We might have had an indication of a Nigerian. But there was nothing that brought it all together."

Indeed, the 25-year CIA veteran and former CEO of The Analysis Corporation, the firm which built and maintained bloated watchlists for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's National Counterterrorist Center, went so far as to cheekily proclaim "there is no smoking gun piece of intelligence out there that said he was a terrorist, he was going to carry out this attack against this aircraft," or that America's multibillion counterterrorist apparatus only had "bits and pieces of information."

Let's take a look at those informational "snippets" and summarize what is quickly emerging as growing evidence of U.S. foreknowledge of an imminent attack on an American passenger plane:

* May: the British government withdrew its student visa for Abdulmutallab, a graduate of the prestigious University College London and placed him on a watchlist, barring his entry into the UK. MI5, and presumably their MI6 military intelligence colleagues in Yemen, compiled a dossier on the would-be bomber, citing his "political involvement" with "extremist networks" that have enjoyed on-again, off-again ties with NATO military intelligence organizations across the decades. This information, as Brown government spokesperson Simon Lewis, who let the cat out of the proverbial bag, was shared with their American counterparts.

* August: U.S. intelligence agencies, including the CIA and NSA, intercepted cell- and satellite phone traffic which revealed that a Yemeni affiliate of the Afghan-Arab database of disposable Western intelligence assets, also known as al-Qaeda, were finalizing preparations for an operation that would utilize a "Nigerian."

* October: [**Newsweek**](#) revealed in their January 11 issue, that the dodgy cleric, the American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, who communicated extensively with the disturbed Ft. Hood shooter, Maj. Malik Nadal Hasan, posted "a provocative message on his English-language Web site: 'COULD YEMEN BE THE NEXT SURPRISE OF THE SEASON?'" According to *Newsweek*, "Al-Awlaki seemed to hint at an upcoming attack that would make Yemen 'the single most important front of jihad in the world'." [**The Washington Post**](#) reported in 2008 that al-Awlaki had extensive contacts with 9/11 hijackers Nawaf Alhazmi, Khalid Almihdhar, and Hani Hanjour and was suspected of having assisted the 9/11 plot. According to the *Post*, "three of the hijackers had spent time at his mosques in California and Falls Church." Despite, or possibly *because*, of these dubious connections "he was allowed to leave the country in 2002." According to the [**History Commons**](#), it is only in 2008 that the U.S. government concludes that the shady imam "is linked to al-Qaeda attacks." However, Al-Awlaki's provenance as a new "terrorist mastermind" should be viewed with suspicion, given well-documented links known to have existed amongst the 9/11 hijackers and American, Saudi and Pakistani secret state agencies.

* October: the same month Al-Awlaki was hinting at a "surprise," *Newsweek* revealed that John O. Brennan "received an alarming briefing at the White House from Muhammad bin

Nayef, Brennan's Saudi counterpart. Nayef had just survived an assassination attempt by a Qaeda operative using a novel method: the operative had flown in from the Saudi-Yemeni border region with a bomb hidden in his underwear. The Saudi was concerned because he 'didn't think [U.S. officials] were paying enough attention' to the growing threat." A familiar trope we've heard in the aftermath of other terrorist strikes.

* Early November: [Newsweek](#) published an exclusive report January 4, that two U.S. "intelligence agencies and the Department of Homeland Security circulated a paper within the government last fall that examined in some detail the threats that bombs secreted in clothing-or inside someone's body cavities-might pose to aviation security." According to information leaked to the newsmagazine by anonymous "national-security officials," the report "was prepared by the National Counterterrorism Center in conjunction with Homeland Security and the CIA," and that "one principal point of discussion in the document was whether the detonation of a bomb hidden in clothing on an airliner *would have a different explosive effect than the detonation of a bomb secreted in a body cavity under similar circumstances.*" (emphasis added) This chilling report, prepared in the wake of intelligence information provided U.S. security agencies by Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism czar, should raise provocative questions. No other media outlet however, has followed the trail.

* November 19: Abdulmutallab's father, a prominent Nigerian banker and former high state official, visits the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, telling State Department and CIA officials he believes his son is a threat. A cousin tells [The New York Times](#) that the father told U.S. officials, "Look at the texts he's sending. He's a security threat." Although Embassy personnel promise "to look into it," the cousin told the *Times* that "they didn't take him seriously."

* November 20: the CIA prepares and files a report on Abdulmutallab that is sent to agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia "but not disseminated to other intelligence agencies," unnamed "officials" tell the *Times*. Embassy staff also wrote and sent a cable known as a "Visa Viper," to the State Department and National Counterterrorism Center and a security file is opened on the suspect.

* December 9-24: Abdulmutallab travels to Ghana from Ethiopia and pays cash, \$2,831 to be precise, for a ticket on a Northwest Airlines flight from Lagos through Amsterdam to Detroit, landing on Christmas Day. "It is now known" [The Independent on Sunday](#) reported January 10, "that the Ghanaian hotel he listed on his immigration form was not the one where he was actually staying." According to *IoS*, although the FBI "has officers on the ground in Ghana and believe it is likely the terrorist may well have had his final al-Qa'ida briefing, and supplied with equipment and explosives, there," no steps are taken to apprehend the suspect. "All this" *IoS* comments, "was more than a month after his father, a wealthy Nigerian banker, had met officials at the US embassy in Abuja to share concerns about his son."

* December 22: during a White House Situation Room briefing *Newsweek* reports that "a document presented to the president titled 'Key Homeland Threats' did not mention Yemen, according to a senior administration official."

* December 25: Abdulmutallab boards Flight 253 in Amsterdam with only a carry-on bag for his international flight; the would-be lap bomber holds a 2-year entry visa into the United States. As is standard procedure, the Department of Homeland Security is notified an hour prior to departure that he is a passenger on the plane.

* December 25: the [Los Angeles Times](#) disclosed January 7 that “U.S. border security officials learned of the alleged extremist links of the suspect in the Christmas Day jetliner bombing attempt as he was airborne from Amsterdam to Detroit and had decided to question him when he landed.” Homeland Security officials “declined to discuss what information reached the U.S. border officials in Amsterdam on Christmas Day.” Despite suspicions by Customs and Border Protection agents, who had accessed NCTC’s TIDE database, the flight crew is not notified of Abdulmutallab’s presence aboard the airliner and additional security precautions therefore, are not made.

Preliminary White House Review: Crafting the Cover-Up

In [remarks](#) January 7 announcing the White House’s [preliminary review](#) of alleged “intelligence failures” responsible for the near detonation of a bomb aboard Flight 253, President Obama said that “America’s first line of defense is timely, accurate intelligence that is shared, integrated, analyzed, and acted upon quickly and effectively.”

Echoing remarks made Tuesday, Obama reiterated the trope that the secret state “failed to connect the dots in a way that would have prevented a known terrorist from boarding a plane for America.”

In a maneuver to deflect public attention from the glaring similarities between the 9/11 provocation and the near-tragedy Christmas Day over Detroit, Obama claimed that “intelligence reforms” instituted under the previous regime had “largely achieved” the goal of generating said “timely intelligence.”

Leaving aside overwhelming evidence that secret state agencies and a Pentagon data mining [program](#) had amassed *terabytes* of data on the 9/11 hijack team, including detailed profiles and intelligence dossiers, and that the Bush administration had been repeatedly warned by elements within their own counterterrorism agencies as well as their [foreign counterparts](#) in Britain, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Morocco and Russia, in other words possessed “timely intelligence” that an attack was imminent, the “connect the dot” meme, as with 9/11, is handmaiden to today’s transparent cover-up.

The President then alleged that despite knowledge of the “al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen,” and that secret state agencies had amassed considerable information on Abdulmutallab’s ostensible Yemeni confederates, and that “we knew they sought to strike the United States and that they were recruiting operatives to do so,” as with 9/11, “the intelligence community did not aggressively follow up on and prioritize particular streams of intelligence related to a possible attack against the homeland.”

The preliminary review released by the White House presents an even more damning indictment of these purported “intelligence failures.”

According to the declassified version of the report, “The U.S. Government had sufficient information prior to the attempted December 25 attack to have potentially disrupted the AQAP [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] plot—i.e., by identifying Mr. Abdulmutallab as a likely operative of AQAP and potentially preventing him from boarding flight 253.”

The document further charges that “the Intelligence Community leadership did not increase analytic resources working on the full AQAP threat.”

Despite evidence to the contrary, the administration claims that “the fundamental problems

... are different from those identified in the wake of the 9/11 attacks” and that “firmly entrenched patterns of bureaucratic behavior as well as the absence of a single component that fuses expertise, information technology (IT) networks, and datasets ... have now, 8 years later, largely been overcome.”

However, as I documented last week in “The Strange Case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab,” as with 9/11, a similar pattern of concealing information from relevant counterterrorism officials who might have intervened and rescinded the suspect’s U.S. visa, and thus preventing him from boarding Flight 253, were replicated.

Indeed, the CIA’s Nigerian station had prepared a dossier on Abdulmutallab that included biographical details and texts handed over by the family, an analysis of NSA electronic intercepts, reports from their own on-the-ground operatives in Yemen that were sent to the agency’s Langley headquarters “but not disseminated to other intelligence agencies,” as [The New York Times](#) revealed December 31.

The CIA says it is now taking steps to “improve” its handling of “terrorist-threat” information. Agency spokesperson, George Little told the media that CIA Director Leon Panetta specifically ordered the Company to implement several “new measures,” including “formally disseminating information on suspected extremists and terrorists within 48 hours,” expanding “name traces” and “reviewing information” on individuals from “countries of concern” to determine whether the Agency should recommend “changes in status on U.S. government watch lists.”

One would have thought these were precisely the policies *already implemented* after the September 11, 2001 attacks! And yet, here we are eight years later and the CIA, perhaps more concerned with protecting their intelligence assets—a motley crew of killers and sociopathic riff-raff that include neofascists, mafia kingpins, drug traffickers and terrorists—from scrutiny by law enforcement officials, have to be ordered by the reputed head of their Agency to protect something as trivial as the lives of airline passengers, is stark commentary on the state of affairs in an allegedly democratic republic!

It cannot be ruled out that the CIA was interested in recruiting Abdulmutallab as an asset. After all, the Nigerian youth came from a prominent family, was a graduate of an up-scale British university and was well-versed in the close relationships amongst British and Yemeni Islamist networks. Indeed Abdulmutallab, like MI6’s man during the Yugoslav destabilization campaign of the 1990s, the reputed 9/11 bag man, ISI asset and al-Qaeda leader, [Omar Saeed Sheik](#), a graduate of the London School of Economics, would seem to fit the bill quite nicely.

On the face of it, however you care to slice it, the “connect the dots” *conspiracy theory* floated by the White House doesn’t pass muster.

Two separate agencies, the CIA and NCTC, had all the information required to identify the would-be bomber and yet both, if we are to believe the official narrative, failed to do so. This despite the inconvenient fact that NCTC was stood up *precisely* as a central repository to collate, fuse and “connect” each seemingly minute piece of intelligence, the “dots,” flowing into the U.S. security apparatus.

The White House cover story, accepted uncritically by the media, suggest that a mass of disparate data points—raw intelligence—when taken separately, is not incriminating in and of

itself. However, after each fragment is subjected to the massive data mining and analytic capabilities of the U.S. Government which “fuse” these datasets into a coherent whole, only then will a dodgy pattern emerge.

In Abdulmutallab’s case however, each seemingly innocuous piece of information on its own should have set alarm bells ringing. That this didn’t happen Christmas Day cannot be explained away as either incompetence or “firmly entrenched patterns of bureaucratic behavior” but rather, by conscious action, or if you prefer, sinister *inaction* by factions within America’s secret state.

Conclusion

As of this writing, it is not yet possible to provide a comprehensive answer as to *why* these events unfolded as they did. I am however, certain of one thing: the Obama administration, the security agencies presumably under its control and the corporate media, johnny-on-the-spot when it comes to covering-up imperialism’s multitude of crimes, are lying to the American people.

There are however, several preliminary hypotheses which can be advanced, all of which raise further troubling questions worthy of additional investigation.

Were the Christmas Day events a pretext to expand the “War on Terror” into yet another strategic petroleum chokepoint as analyst F. William Engdahl suggests in an excellent piece published by [Global Research](#)?

Nor can we dismiss out of hand the analysis offered by the [World Socialist Web Site](#) that the failed Christmas Day airline plot was a maneuver by extreme right-wing elements deeply embedded in the U.S. National Security State “to destabilize and undermine the Obama administration.” To this can be added Richard Wolffe’s provocative statement that factions within the secret state may have had their own “alternative agenda,” and thus failed to act.

Add to the mix, the systematic outsourcing of intelligence and security functions to a host of giant [defense firms](#), outside of democratic control; in other words, rightist grifters who answer to shareholders and not the American people, and suddenly another piece of Wolffe’s “alternative agenda” comes into sharp focus.

Chock-a-block with ex-CIA officers, NSA analysts, FBI agents and U.S. Special Forces veterans of America’s dirty wars who now staff the privatized U.S. security complex, in other words well-paid mercenaries who know a thing or two on how to run a clandestine operation, and we just might have another plausible theory why a “dot” or two was ignored Christmas Day.

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