

The Bogus Flight 253 ‘One-Way Ticket’ Meme: Anatomy Of A Myth

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In a remarkable example of how bad information can travel far and wide, dozens of media outlets around the world have said Umar Abdulmutallab was traveling on a one-way ticket to Detroit when he allegedly tried to blow up Flight 253, even though that has never been substantiated and appears to be flat wrong.

Abdulmutallab’s “one-way ticket” has been cited in recent days by [the AP](#), the [Wall Street Journal](#), and the [Washington Post](#), even though the Nigerian government said Dec. 28 that Abdulmutallab had a round-trip ticket, and provided details to back it up.

The “one-way ticket” meme was originally sourced to anonymous U.S. officials and has since been recited as an undisputed fact.

It has been referenced repeatedly by commentators attacking the U.S. government for missing red flags about Abdulmutallab. See for example [this](#) Michael Gerson column in the Jan. 6 *Post* (“Airline attack shows Obama’s listless approach to terrorism”) and [this](#) Michael Mukasey *Wall Street Journal* effort (“The president’s job is not detecting bombs at the airport but neutralizing terrorists before they get there.”)

In a typical case on Dec. 28 — when the accurate information was already available — CNN anchor Erica Hill [asked](#): “So, just how did a guy on a terror watch list with a one-way ticket paid for in cash, with no luggage ... manage to board a U.S. airliner and allegedly try to blow it to pieces? Simply put tonight, who screwed up?”

And [here’s](#) Rush Limbaugh on Friday: “When a 20-something Muslim male buys a one-way ticket with cash and has no luggage, that’s not a dot. That’s a fire alarm! He may as well have “I’m a terrorist” taped on his T-shirt.”

But published reports on Dec. 28 cited the conclusion of the Nigerian government that Abdulmutallab had a round-trip ticket to Detroit. It had been purchased in Ghana on Dec. 16 for \$2,831, according to [the AP](#), citing Civil Aviation Authority director Harold Demuren. His return date was [found](#) by the Nigerians to be Jan. 8. (A Dutch government report described by the *International Herald Tribune* on Dec. 31 also said Abdulmutallab had a round-trip ticket, but it’s not clear whether the Dutch were simply relying on the Nigerians’ conclusion.) A full account of Demuren’s comments can be found in the Nigerian newspaper *The Nation* [here](#).

While the *New York Times* published a [correction](#) on Dec. 30 saying it had erroneously reported Abdulmutallab’s ticket was one-way, many outlets that have mentioned the one-

way ticket haven't run corrections.

So where did the false meme come from? Anonymous U.S. government sources. And unless there's classified information suggesting otherwise, those sources were clearly mistaken.

The first citation of a "one-way ticket" we could find is a report on Christmas day by MSNBC (cached version [here](#)): "Federal officials identified the man as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, 23, of Nigeria, who was traveling one way, without a return ticket."

Another early reference is in the Dec. 26 [edition](#) of the *New York Daily News*: "Officials said Abdulmutallab was traveling one way, without a return ticket."

MSNBC's Pete Williams tells TPMmuckraker: "Though there were federal officials who initially said it was one-way, we've [been] saying since that it was round trip, which it clearly was."

But there are a whole lot of media consumers out there who believe Abdulmutallab came to Detroit on a one-way ticket.

The "one-way ticket" has been cited by CNN, Fox, [Time](#), [Newsweek](#), the [AP](#), the [Washington Post](#), the [New York Times](#), the [Boston Globe](#), [Gannett News Service](#), the [Pittsburgh Tribune Review](#), the [Sacramento Bee](#), the [Globe and Mail](#), the [Washington Times](#), *Congressional Quarterly* and many other outlets, according to a review by TPMmuckraker.

The Today Show's Matt Lauer even [asked](#) about the one-way ticket in a question to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano (who did not address the matter in her answer).

The only substantiated reference to a one-way ticket in we could find is the statement by a Ghanaian official last week that Abdulmutallab purchased a one-way ticket in cash from Accra, Ghana, to Lagos, Nigeria. That was in addition to the purchase of the ticket from Lagos to Detroit via Amsterdam, according to Deputy Information Minister Samuel Okudzeto-Ablakwa, [quoted in](#) the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* says Abdulmutallab took Virgin Nigeria flight 804 from Accra to Lagos on Dec. 24, before getting on a plane en route to Amsterdam.

There are few signs that the "one-way" meme will die any time soon.

The AP, which two weeks ago reported the correct information from Nigeria, ran [a story](#) Friday ("Experts say terror watch lists have limited uses") stating that Abdulmutallab purchased a one-way fare.

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