

The Grand Placebo: Airport security and The Terrorist Genie

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The authorities in Britain and the United States are scrambling. They hope to find answers as to how the 23-year-old engineering student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab managed to elude and almost detonate himself on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit. Even his family in Nigeria had contacted US security officials, voicing 'concerns' about their son's radicalization. Their son's sojourn to the Yemen, a key al-Qaida ground, was mentioned.

Abdulmutallab was said to have hidden an explosive device under his clothes on the Detroit-bound airbus on Christmas Day. The device supposedly involved the widely available high explosive PETN concealed in a condom and strapped to the leg of the suspect. His intention, it is alleged, was to blow up the substance with the addition of a liquid chemical kept in a syringe. A group calling itself al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) has claimed responsibility for the foiled effort.

The responses to this event demonstrate a disturbing tendency in law enforcement and international policing. Banal events are regarded as radical and dangerous (typing the term 'terror' in the Google search engine might be 'suspicious'), while a statement from a family vouching for their son's defection to an al-Qaida stronghold is to be regarded as of lesser importance. Eyebrows are not raised at pure cash transactions such as that which took place at Ghana - \$3,000 worth for the ticket. The most useful, and the most obvious intelligence goes begging.

Instead, politicians and the policing establishment will rush for the nearest biometric or body imaging panacea they can find. The solution, for them, resides in the machine. Rep. Peter King from New York and the top Republican on the Homeland Security Committee has already shown us that streak, telling us that Abdulmutallab did not go through 'full-body imaging machines in Nigeria or Amsterdam' (*Washington Post*, Dec 27). Image the body, one apparently solves the problem. Security 'experts' prefer the jargon of the 'Bikini principle' in enforcement. In the words of one commentator (ABC News, Mar 21, 2006), 'When you provide strategic coverage of the most important vulnerabilities, you've already won most of the battle.'

Nor is the fabled relationship-sharing nature of intelligence between US and British officials smoothly run, let alone squeaky-clean. In this case, it seems there was a failure in sharing information that might have proved costly. The British Home Office was apparently in possession of the suspect's fingerprints, which it never passed on to international agencies.

The authorities are bound to increase security measures, bringing an ever more intrusive

regime into play in their hunt for elusive substances and bombers. The already idiotic spectacle of having shoes removed is bound to become more bizarre. Airport giants such as Heathrow, an already deeply frustrating airport for a passenger to traverse, is set to become more chaotic.

Such measures will hardly solve the problem. The broader picture is stark for the British: a regular stream of radicalized Muslims taking up residence in such places as Yemen. In terms of the purely technical aspect of law enforcement, each heavy-handed response clocks up another point on the al-Qaida scoreboard. Bumbling officialdom risks looking authoritarian and inefficient.

What is striking is that officials did not observe their own information on the suspect, bringing into question whether the masses of data supplied to their coffers matter much in compiling 'watch lists' and the like. Abdulmutallab was on an intelligence database which was blithely ignored. Pre-existing records were not consulted. The evidence of his father, Alhaji Umaru Abdulmutallab, was given similar treatment. That his son ever boarded the flight from Amsterdam to Detroit was itself puzzling.

US President Barack Obama wants the entire screening process reviewed. The Office of Homeland Security is stumped, with its secretary Janet Napolitano humbled by the near fatal event. In the meantime, the grumbling queues and grouchy guardians at the boarding gate are bound to increase. All in the name of feeding that grand placebo of airport security.

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