

The Northwest Flight 253 Intelligence Failure: Negligence or Conspiracy?

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In the five days since the abortive attempt by the 23-year-old Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to detonate an explosive device onboard Northwest Flight 253, information has surfaced that indicates an ostensible breakdown in US intelligence and security that is extraordinary in both its character and scale.

Among the facts now known are the following:

- Abdulmutallab's father, a prominent retired banker and ex-government minister, had visited the US Embassy in Abuja more than a month before the attempted bombing to warn CIA officials that his son had become involved with Al Qaeda elements in Yemen. He provided them with information with which the young man could have been located, and he followed up his visit with at least two phone calls.
- For at least four months, US intelligence had information from Yemen that Al Qaeda operatives there were preparing "a Nigerian" for a terrorist attack.
- The information from Yemen was further substantiated by the National Security Agency's interception of communications discussing preparations for an impending attack and the use of the "Nigerian."

Moreover, Abdulmutallab's \$2,800 ticket was paid for with cash, apparently at the last minute, and he made the transatlantic trip having checked no luggage, carrying only a backpack.

Then there is the story told by a passenger on the plane, Kurt Haskell, a Michigan lawyer, who claims that he saw Abdulmutallab approach the airline ticket counter in Amsterdam accompanied by a well-dressed South Asian man, who told the Northwest ticket agent that the young Nigerian needed to fly without a passport.

"He's from Sudan, we do this all the time," the older man told the agent, Haskell recounted. He said that the agent then directed them to the office of the airline's local manager.

Normally, any one of these things would have triggered intense scrutiny before Abdulmutallab was allowed to board the plane.

Once again, as in the wake of September 11, 2001, the government and the media are peddling the explanation that all of these extraordinary lapses were the product of mere negligence or a "failure to connect the dots."

Eight years after 9/11, with all of the still unanswered questions surrounding the attacks that were used to justify an explosion of American militarism, the attempt to gloss over an event that nearly cost the lives of 300 people with this hackneyed metaphor does not hold water.

The general outlines of the Northwest bombing attempt and the 9/11 attacks are startlingly similar. One might even say that what is involved is a *modus operandi*. In both cases, those alleged to have carried out the actions had been the subject of US intelligence investigations and surveillance and had been allowed to enter the country and board flights under conditions that would normally have set off multiple security alarms.

Both then and now, the government and the media expect the public to accept that all that was involved was mistakes. But why should anyone assume that the failure to act on the extensive intelligence leading to Abdulmutallab involved merely “innocent” mistakes—and not something far more sinister?

If this episode is to be examined seriously, the question must be asked: What would have happened had Northwest Flight 253 been destroyed?

There is no question but that such a catastrophe would have had immense repercussions both internationally and within the United States. It would have seriously destabilized the Obama administration, politically strengthened the most extreme right-wing sections of the ruling class, and cleared the way for an even more massive expansion of military-intelligence operations overseas and a drastic curtailing of democratic rights at home.

Even the failed attempt has touched off a firestorm of criticism by the Republican right of the Obama administration’s supposed laxity in the face of terrorism.

This found its distilled expression in a statement released Wednesday by former Vice President Dick Cheney.

“We are at war, and when President Obama pretends we aren’t, it makes us less safe,” said Cheney. The former vice president and *de facto* leader of the “war on terror” in the Bush administration condemned Obama for proposing to close down the Guantánamo prison camp and try some of those held there in normal federal courts. He also denounced the US president for jettisoning the words “war on terror” in describing Washington’s continuing wars abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home.

The statements from Cheney—who was at the center of a secret government for eight years, has the closest ties to the military-intelligence apparatus, and is a ruthless advocate of torture, assassinations and a sweeping curtailment of democratic rights—shed light on the political calculations that may have encouraged elements within the CIA and related agencies to keep the “dots” separated and, thereby, facilitate a terrorist action.

Increasingly, the failure to identify Abdulmutallab and alert other government agencies to the threat revealed in Nigeria and Yemen has been attributed to the CIA. How many of the key figures in this agency had close connections to Cheney?

The key to this event may well lie in bitter struggles over policy taking place within the ruling establishment and the state. Despite all that Obama has done to continue the policies of the Bush administration, both in terms of aggressive war abroad and the buildup of police state powers at home, there are elements who want to go much further.

On Tuesday, for the second day in a row, Obama issued a public statement on the abortive airline bombing.

“When our government has information on a known extremist and that information is not shared and acted upon as it should have been, so that this extremist boards a plane with dangerous explosives that could cost nearly 300 lives, a systemic failure has occurred,” said Obama in the statement from Hawaii.

This second statement—delivered just one day after Obama’s announcement that he had ordered a “thorough review” of intelligence procedures—reflects the divisions and recriminations within the Washington political establishment and the US intelligence agencies. It is indicative of the immense pressure being brought to bear on his administration, and his own recognition that a successful terrorist attack would have had a profoundly destabilizing effect on his presidency.

There can be no serious investigation into how the Northwest Airline bombing plot was allowed to go so far without considering whether there are elements within the US state that had an interest in seeing it happen, and therefore in suppressing the intelligence and bypassing procedures that would have stopped it.

Getting to the bottom of these questions is impossible without identifying the specific individuals who saw the information on Abdulmutallab and made the critical decisions which blocked careful surveillance and action.

In its editorial Wednesday entitled “The System Failed,” the New York Times cites the voluminous intelligence on Abdulmutallab and writes, “Officials say the warning was insufficient.” It further states, “Officials decided that the warning wasn’t enough to put him on the list of 14,000 people subjected to more thorough airport searches.”

The Times attributes these decisions to “bad judgment calls.” As always, this voice of the erstwhile US liberal establishment can be counted on to provide the most trivial and unserious explanation for what is a deadly serious matter.

Who are these “officials?” They should be named. Moreover, they should be subpoenaed, publically questioned under oath, and compelled to explain their decisions.

Asking the question, who would benefit politically from a major terrorist attack on US soil, holds the best promise of shedding light on what is unbelievably presented as a staggering and inexplicable “breakdown” of Washington’s intelligence and security systems.

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