



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on December 28, 2009

Nigerian with al Qaeda Ties Attempts Airline Terrorist Attack

As the Airbus 300 from Amsterdam packed with holiday travelers descended toward Detroit on Christmas Day, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab returned to his seat after spending about 20 minutes in the lavatory. Upon returning to his seat, Abdulmutallab pulled a blanket over his legs and stomach, informing the passenger seated next to him that he wasn't feeling well.



Minutes later, the 23 year-old Nigerian educated in Britain, attempted to detonate about 80 grams of the explosive pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) that was sewn into his underwear. According to American intelligence officials, the bomb was built by and the plan to bring down the Northwest Flight 253 was hatched by known al Qaeda operatives based in Yemen.

Fortunately for the nearly 300 passengers and the families expecting them for Christmas, the detonator employed by Abdulmutallab failed and the bomb did not explode. As smoke began spewing from between his legs, passengers heard a bang and began screaming for flight attendants. A Dutch filmmaker on his way to Miami for the holidays saw the smoke and without delay he jumped across the aisle, snuffed out the flames, subdued the suspected terrorist and dragged him by the neck to the first class cabin. Jasper Schuringa rejects the title "hero" and told reporters that he was scared, but knew he "had to do something or it would be too late."

Should the lives of hundreds have come down to such a close call? How was a man already drawing scrutiny of worldwide intelligence and security agencies able to board a plane with enough explosives to bring it down? Officials are being peppered with these questions and the answers are not coming fast enough. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano copped to the lapse. "No secretary of homeland security would sit here and say that a system worked prior to this incident which allow this individual to get on this plane," Napolitano admitted to Fox News on Monday. "Here, clearly, something went awry. We want to fix the problem," she continued.

There were so many red flags flying around his activities that Abdulmutallab should never have been permitted to board the plan in Amsterdam. First, his name was on a terrorist watch list, not on the so-called "no-fly list." Had Abdulmutallab's name appeared on the latter list, then his movements would have been tracked from the moment he used cash to purchase his ticket from Amsterdam to Detroit. It didn't, so he wasn't.



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Second, in October, Abdulmutallab's father (a retired bank executive) called the American embassy in Nigeria and informed them that his son had "developed radical views, had disappeared and might have traveled to Yemen." Despite this paternal warning, American officials neither revoked Abdulmutallab's visa nor took any further administrative steps to prevent him from entering the United States.

Officials responded to criticism by pointing out that Abdulmutallab's DHS file was flagged so that should he ever reapply for a visa, a fuller investigation would be conducted. No need for that now. The damage has been done, or almost was.

Although American security officials all but ignored the obvious signs that pointed to potential threats, there were some official attempts by the government of the United Kingdom to restrict Abdulmutallab's movements. British Home Secretary Alan Johnson reports that earlier in the year his ministry denied Abdulmutallab's student visa renewal application after learning that the classes listed on his application form were "bogus." As a result of this discovery, the London-educated Nigerian was placed on a list that prevented him from visiting the United Kingdom.

According to Johnson, such official action on the part of the British government is normally communicated to their American counterparts, but apparently there was a breakdown in the process, as he understands that no reciprocal American restraints were placed on Abdulmutallab. Johnson has no explanation for this failure, but he expressed doubt that there had been any "hiccup" in the process.

As has been well documented, this is not the first efficiency "hiccup" in the American intelligence community. In November, 13 people were killed by Army psychiatrist and self-described "Soldier of Allah" Nidal Malik Hasan, despite the chilling fact that Hasan's electronic correspondence with Anwar al-Awlaki, a known al Qaeda supporter and radical Islamist with close ties to three of the 9/11 terrorists had been under surveillance for nearly a year prior to the rampage.

There are other similarities between Hasan and Abdulmutallab. Both men were well educated and lived a comfortable life. As Richard Clarke, former chief counterterrorism adviser explained, "The kind of person who's being radicaliaed increasingly in the U.S. and Europe are people who are the sons of the middle class, the upper middle class, sons of well educated families, people who have radicalized at long distance over the internet."

While both men are Muslim, neither came from particularly devout families. Hasan openly criticized the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as did Abdulmutallab. Hasan wrote emails to al-Awlaki enquiring as to whether he would be justified in deceiving his superiors in the name of Allah, whereas emails sent by Abdulmutallab suggest that for years he was walking further along the path of extremism and was considering the morality of lying to his parents regarding his increasing association with preachers and purveyors of radical Islam.

Not surprisingly, the fear fomented by this latest attempt at terrorism is being manipulated by government officials to justify increased privacy violations. In a statement released to abcnews.com, former secretary of DHS, Michael Chertoff called for the immediate installation of millimeter wave body-scanning machines in airports across the country. These machines are able to produce images of a



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person's body underneath their clothes and such technology, advocates claim, would have prevented Abdulmutallab from secreting explosives onto the airplane. This assertion is dubious at best and downright spurious at worst. While such devices may have detected the PETN that Abdulmutallab planned to ignite, there are other considerations that are far more critical and crucial to the future peace and safety of the United States.

Primarily, why — within fewer than two months — have there been two egregious fumbles on the part of the American security establishment, one of which resulted in the death of 13 and the wounding of more than thirty, and another that but for the quick and courageous action of civilians would have resulted in the death of hundreds on Christmas Day? Controversial deprivations of privacy and embarrassingly intrusive security checkpoint searches will not answer this vital question and will not strengthen our security net that is already more than suspect.

Photo of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab: AP Images



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