

DOING NOTHING, REDUX

What's more frightening than terrorism? Relying on analysts to prevent it.

What we are focused on is making sure that the air environment remains safe, that people are confident when they travel. And one thing I'd like to point out is that the system worked...The passengers and crew of the flight took appropriate action...Within literally an hour to 90 minutes of the incident occurring, all 128 flights in the air had been notified to take some special measures...So the whole process of making sure that we respond properly, correctly and effectively went very smoothly.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano's pitiful attempt to deflect blame for letting a bomb-carrying terrorist board a U.S.-bound plane didn't work. Only a day later, as [Al Qaeda openly gloated](#) about an operation that "penetrated all modern and sophisticated technology and devices and security barriers in airports of the world," the would-be spinmeister was forced to concede that the system had really *not* worked, at least not in the way that really matters.

Unfortunately, it will take a lot more than a Presidential scolding to improve flight security. It seems that [the vaunted "system" installed after 9/11](#) is hopelessly porous, with all measures short of a strip search having proved incapable of stopping determined evildoers. Although Homeland Security insists that every security checkpoint will soon be equipped with machines that can detect liquid explosives, PETN, the substance used in this episode (and earlier, by shoe bomber [Richard Reid](#)) is a powder. Canines and wildly expensive electronic sniffers that can detect vapors from PETN and other explosives are tied up screening checked baggage. Meanwhile deployment of phenomenally costly full-body scanners is on hold due to privacy concerns.

What about intelligence? Weren't analysts sitting at glowing terminals supposed to be the solution? Indeed, America's first line of defense, the [FBI Terrorist Screening Center](#), maintains a "Consolidated Terrorist Watchlist" listing 550,000 persons suspected of terrorist ties. Most are foreigners. For reasons of efficiency [TSA usually checks passenger lists](#) against two subsets of individuals considered to pose the greatest threat, a "no-fly" list of 4,000 persons who are flat-out prohibited from boarding commercial aircraft, and a larger group of 14,000 "selectees" who must be thoroughly searched. (For the controlling Government regulations click [here](#). Numbers given are the latest reported.)

Alas, Umar Abdulmutallab was only on the master list, so when he got to the airport he was treated just like you and me (assuming that you're not a bad guy, of course.) [Why he wasn't flagged for a more thorough search](#) demonstrates just how fragile a process security screening really is.

A Nigerian national from a rich family, Abdulmutallab was enrolled at a prestigious London university between 2005-2008 and presided over the student Islamic society. On graduation he acquired an American multiple-entry visitor's visa, good for two years, and briefly vacationed in Houston. In January 2009 he attended a college in Australia. In May he tried to renew his British student visa using the name of a bogus college that was known to serve as a front for illegal immigration. That got him permanently barred from Great Britain. No matter – by August he was in Yemen, purportedly to study Arabic. Before dropping from sight he sent his parents text messages mentioning his radical intentions and saying that his family should forget about him. His alarmed father alerted his own government and went to the American embassy, where he met with officers from the State Department and CIA. But the kid remained unmolested. After meeting with an Al Qaeda cell in Yemen, he returned to Nigeria and flew to Amsterdam, where he boarded his final flight to the U.S.

As one might expect this episode has provoked a great deal of finger-pointing. Britain never told the U.S. that it placed the youth on a no-entry list. Despite the father's anguished warning the State Department didn't revoke the son's visa. Neither did the CIA tell the FBI that it had opened a file on Abdulmutallab. An NSA alert about an Al Qaeda attack that was to be carried out by an unnamed Nigerian national was filed and forgotten. And so on.

Now wait a minute: wasn't creating a new über-agency, the Department of Homeland Security, intended to correct the lapses in coordination and information sharing that supposedly contributed to 9/11? Sure. But while less-potent bureaucracies such as Customs, Immigration and the Secret Service got yanked from their former homes and placed under a single umbrella, the three national security organizations that really matter – the FBI, CIA and NSA – have way too much political clout and to this day remain virtually independent.

Yes, the system is hopelessly fragmented. But should that be blamed for what took place? As we pointed out in [Missed Signals](#), there is simply so much data and so little opportunity to do anything about it that anything other than an obvious red flag tends to get discounted. Really, the notion that those at the end of the information superhighway can successfully detect fast-moving conspiracies in time to avert a catastrophe is frightfully naive. Warnings that foreigners have it in for America aren't exactly in short supply. Analysts didn't know Abdulmutallab and they surely hadn't spoken to his father. It's a credit to the FBI that it placed the youth on any list at all.

In truth, the best opportunity to detect a threat isn't at a centralized analytical bureau that might as well be in another Galaxy – it's in the field. Just how often do wealthy former government ministers walk in to warn foreigners about their own sons? Had officers at the American embassy in Nigeria made a few calls and consulted a few databases they might have easily come up with enough to nix Abdulmutallab's visa, if not more.

But they didn't.

Had airport security officers or airline employees in Nigeria or Amsterdam paid attention to someone who was flying to the U.S. without checked baggage, on an airline ticket paid for in cash, they might have prevented a terrorist's boarding.

But they didn't.

When the everyday pressures of business are overwhelming it's awfully easy to rationalize things away – in effect, to do nothing. Let's review the closing paragraph from [Missed Signals](#):

Rare events such as mass murder are difficult to predict precisely because they *are* rare. Our best shot at preventing them lies in avoiding the urge to routinize and in paying close attention to the unusual and offbeat, like naked women falling from the sky and military officers e-mailing with terrorists.

We were referring to Cleveland serial killer [Anthony Sowell](#) and Fort Hood shooter [Nidal Hassan](#). Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab wouldn't come until later.