

Obama: US agencies had intelligence to foil airline bomb plot

Bill Van Auken
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In a brief public statement delivered after a White House meeting Tuesday with US intelligence chiefs, President Barack Obama acknowledged that the CIA and other agencies had all the information needed to detect the Christmas Day airline bombing plot, but failed to stop it.

“This was not a failure to collect intelligence, it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had,” Obama said after meeting for two hours with some 20 top intelligence and security aides and advisors.

The extraordinary security summit came in response to the failed December 25 attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian, to bring down Northwest Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit by detonating plastic explosives hidden in his underwear. If it had succeeded, the bombing would have claimed the lives of nearly 300 passengers and crew members and potentially those of still more people on the ground.

Obama sought to adopt a tough tone—repeating his vow that he “will not tolerate” such failures—in response to the Republican attack on the administration. Leading Republicans have seized on the Christmas Day plot to accuse Obama of being “soft on terrorism.”

The administration’s defenders have pointed out that Obama has kept the system of repression and surveillance set up under the Bush administration virtually intact and largely run by the same people.

Obama’s remarks suggested that no one in particular will be held accountable for the supposed intelligence failure. Citing Obama’s statement that “every member of my team understands the urgency of getting this right,” the *New York Times* reported that Obama seemed to be “standing by his top national security

officials, including those whose agencies failed to communicate with one another.”

The president advanced no substantive new policies, promising that changes would be forthcoming and that the government would institute “smarter screening” at airports and “invest in technologies” that could detect the type of explosives used in the Northwest bombing attempt.

The day before, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) announced that US-bound passengers who are citizens of or are traveling from or through 14 countries would be subjected to a “full body pat-down and physical inspection of property.”

Such measures are tantamount to placing hundreds of millions of people on a terror watch list. They will do little to detect a genuine plot, but serve to heighten fear and intimidation.

The political character of this order was underscored by the inclusion of Cuba among the 14 countries, despite the fact that Cubans have been involved in no terrorist plots in the US or elsewhere. Indeed, it is Washington that harbors CIA-connected terrorists like Luis Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch, who are responsible for a 1976 airline bombing that killed 73 people.

The new TSA announcement provoked protests from governments in a number of countries affected, and it was not clear whether authorities would comply with the new rules.

Answering Republican critics, Obama said that the incident would have no bearing on his pledge to close down the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. However, he added that Washington would not repatriate any of the Yemenis still held there.

Given that about 90 of the current detainees at Guantánamo are from Yemen, this decision

underscores the administration's determination to recreate a facility for holding alleged terror suspects without charge or trials (except by military commissions) on US soil.

In his remarks Tuesday, Obama provided no explanation for why Washington's massive intelligence apparatus failed to "connect the dots," as he put it, dusting off the shopworn cliché used to explain away a similar "intelligence failure" in the run-up to the September 11, 2001 attacks.

An examination of these so-called "dots," however, makes it hard to swallow Obama's claim that Abdulmutallab's ability to board a US plane carrying a bomb was merely an innocent slipup, and that the CIA, NSA, FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the rest of the national security apparatus "will do better" next time.

John Brennan, a former top CIA official under Bush who is now the counterterrorism adviser to the Obama White House, was charged with conducting the main review presented at Tuesday's meeting. He declared on talk shows Sunday that there was no "smoking gun" that led to Abdulmutallab and the airline bombing plot.

Each passing day, however, seems to present yet another "smoking gun." They range from the revelation that the Nigerian's father, a prominent banker and ex-minister, had personally visited the US Embassy and repeatedly contacted the CIA to warn them that his son had fallen in with radical Islamists in Yemen and was a "security threat," to the admission that US intelligence had learned last August that Al Qaeda was planning to use a "Nigerian" in a terrorist strike against the US, to the recent report that British officials had passed on information about Abdulmutallab to their American counterparts before barring the Nigerian from reentering the United Kingdom.

Then there is the flight itself, in which the young Nigerian was allowed to board the airplane having paid cash for his ticket and failed to provide any contact information, while bringing only a carry-on bag for the transatlantic trip.

The official story that the failure to intercept Abdulmutallab in the face of all these red flags was merely an intelligence failure or a "screw-up," as Obama reportedly termed it in the closed-door meeting, is hardly credible.

Why were decisions made not to act on any of this

intelligence, and who made them? Nothing in Obama's statement provided even a hint of an answer to these questions.

In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration used the supposedly ubiquitous threat of another terrorist attack as justification for the two wars it launched abroad, as well as its sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

The US intelligence agencies were at the center of this operation, feeding the White House with the ginned-up intelligence it required, using agents provocateurs to create phony terror plots, and arrogating to themselves the right to employ methods ranging from torture to assassination, rendition and unprecedented levels of surveillance.

Given this record, together with the evident tensions within the US state as it embarks on another military escalation, the question is whether elements within the national security apparatus decided to facilitate Abdulmutallab's attempt, either to further their own interests in the internecine struggles in Washington or to provide another pretext for expanded war abroad and state repression at home.



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