

#### AoW 1.4.10

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading on the page.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN

Note: This is an editorial (opinion), not a straight news story.

### **The System Failed**

Only luck and the courage of passengers on Northwest Flight 253 averted a tragedy on Christmas Day. When a Nigerian man allegedly tried to blow a hole in the airplane's side, the explosive powder he had concealed failed to detonate properly and passengers subdued him before he could do any more damage.

Terrorists will always look for new ways to breach security, and let's hope luck and courage don't ever run out. But as this case makes chillingly clear, the airport security systems put in place after the Sept. 11 attacks — complicated, expensive and hugely onerous for travelers — have serious flaws. And so do the bureaucracies that run them.

The apparent role played by a branch of Al Qaeda in Yemen — Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab told authorities that he had ties to Al Qaeda and got the explosive device in Yemen — underscores the need for the Obama administration to review its counterterrorism efforts there.

Let us be clear: the system did not work. It is disturbing that Janet Napolitano, the secretary for homeland security, seemed to suggest, even briefly, that it had. It is unseemly that so many Republicans are rushing to make partisan hay out of the near disaster. On Tuesday, Mr. Obama did a better job, acknowledging what he called a "systemic failure" in the nation's security apparatus and saying he would "insist on accountability at every level."

Everybody bears responsibility: the Bush administration for not connecting the dots before Sept. 11 and not doing enough in the seven years after to rationalize and improve homeland security; the Congress, under both parties, for blocking necessary changes and failing to demand others; the Obama administration, which has shown little interest until now in reforming what is clearly an inadequate security system.

The first issue is the failure of the diplomatic and intelligence screening process, which should have raised alarms long before Mr. Abdulmutallab got on a plane bound for the United States, multiple entry visa in hand.

What makes this so much worse is that officials had something they can't always expect: fair warning. In mid-November, Mr. Abdulmutallab's father, a prominent banker in Nigeria, went to the American Embassy in Abuja to ask for help and warn them of his son's increasing "radicalization." The State Department, working with other agencies, had the power to revoke the son's visa or put a temporary hold on it. Officials say the warning was insufficient. That seems like a very bad judgment call.

The embassy did pass on the father's information, as required, to the National Counterterrorism Center and the son's name was added to a database of 550,000 people with some alleged terrorist connections. Officials decided that the warning wasn't enough to put him on the list of 14,000 people subjected to more thorough airport searches or to the 4,000-person "no fly" list. That was clearly a very bad call.

The case has raised all too familiar and worrying questions about the degree to which the authorities are sharing intelligence — within the American bureaucracy and between countries. Officials told *The Times* on Tuesday that the government had information from Yemen before Christmas that Al Qaeda was talking about “a Nigerian” being readied for an attack.

Technology is also a major issue in this case. With all of the expensive screening machines, how did Mr. Abdulmutallab get 80 grams of PETN — the same material used by Richard Reid, the “shoe bomber” — on the plane? The failure was apparently both in Nigeria, where he started his travel, and in Amsterdam, where he boarded the flight to Detroit.

The incident raises the immediate question of whether this country and others should now buy and widely deploy so-called whole body imagers, which can detect the presence of nonmetallic objects, including lethal chemicals, plastic explosives and ceramic knives.

The machines have been criticized by privacy advocates. We’ve had some qualms, too, especially with early versions that showed the outlines of a naked body too clearly. But security officials have managed to blur the images and adopted other procedures that should allay those concerns. What is needed is a rigorous and independent process of evaluation for whole body scanners and other equipment — the Transportation Security Administration has 10 at some stage of development — to figure out what provides the best security at the most rational cost.

Additional security measures may be needed — subject to sensible evaluation. A reported new requirement that passengers on international flights into the United States remain seated for the last hour is puzzling since it wouldn’t stop a terrorist acting before then. Travelers will put up with a lot to increase aviation security. But it has to be a rational system that does not make them the first line of defense.

Finally, there is the question of how the United States deals with the growing presence of Al Qaeda in Yemen. The administration has been pressing President Ali Abdullah Saleh, with some success, to allow American operations — including drone or missile strikes — on Yemeni soil. Washington is providing \$70 million over the next 18 months to equip and train Yemeni security forces, and has dispatched special operations forces to do the training. The White House will now have to decide if these measures need to be further stepped up.

As soon as Congress gets back to Washington, it must confirm the heads of the T.S.A. and the customs agency, both of which have been under interim management for a year. There is no excuse for more politicking or delay with the nation’s security.

Source: *New York Times*, 12/30/09