

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“The Lessons and Implications of the Christmas Day Attack: Watchlisting
and Pre-Screening”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
March 10, 2010

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Today’s hearing focuses on two fundamental questions: why was the Christmas Day bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, allowed to travel to the United States, and why wasn’t his name included on the terrorist watchlist?

We know that Abdulmutallab’s father had informed the American Embassy in Nigeria of his Islamist extremist connections in Yemen more than a month before he boarded the flight to Detroit. We also know that his name was included in the broadest terrorist database, known as TIDE. But despite this alarming information, the system failed to bar Abdulmutallab from boarding Flight 253 to America.

This is a case of missed opportunities.

From my perspective, the State Department clearly had sufficient information to revoke Abdulmutallab’s visa. State Department officials already had decided to question Abdulmutallab about his ties to extremists if he chose to *renew* his visa. How he could have been a threat to the United States in the *future* based on his extremist ties, but not a sufficient *current* threat to suspend his visa defies both logic and common sense. Had the State Department taken this action, it would have prevented him from traveling to the United States. A missed opportunity.

Another missed opportunity occurred in Amsterdam, where Abdulmutallab’s flight originated. This airport is one of only nine foreign airports where a small number of U.S. immigration advisory officers are stationed. These officers can ask an airline not to board a passenger who will be prohibited from entering our country upon arrival. They receive a list of passengers of concern, including those whose visas have been revoked or flagged by the State Department. This was another missed opportunity to stop Abdulmutallab.

Recently, the Department of Homeland Security has expanded its efforts to identify individuals who have revoked visas or who are on the

State Department's visa watch list before they board airplanes overseas, rather than waiting until they have already arrived at U.S. airports. I would like to know how successful these programs are at identifying high-risk travelers.

Another missed opportunity to stop Abdulmutallab occurred at the NCTC. The President has stated that there was ample intelligence on Abdulmutallab to warrant his inclusion on the No Fly list. Yet that did not occur, even after his father's warning. It did not occur because other streams of intelligence were not connected until it was too late. Why did the Intelligence Community fail to analyze all available information relating to Abdulmutallab?

Some intelligence experts point to outmoded systems as a factor. Despite vast improvements in information sharing, our Intelligence Community continues to rely on internal systems that are relics from the days before the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. These outdated systems do not effectively surface intelligence information so that analysts and security officials can identify threats in real-time.

I would like to know the Administration's plans for upgrading systems to allow for more effective searching of terrorist information. For starters, identifying individuals in the terrorist databases who have valid U.S. visas should not be a complicated task.

We also must examine how we can better identify individuals who should be on watchlists for additional screening at airports. For example, we know that Abdulmutallab was identified for additional screening once he arrived in Detroit while his flight was in the air.

Why wasn't that same information used to identify him earlier, before he boarded his flight? Another missed opportunity. As this case demonstrates, waiting until a suspected terrorist arrives in the U.S. to conduct additional screening is waiting too long.

We must continue to strengthen our watchlisting and screening systems. Unless these systems work effectively, we will not be able to prevent terrorists' from traveling to our nation.

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