

## Merry Christmas

Sheikh Anwar had instructed him to make sure the airliner was over American soil when he pushed the plunger on the syringe. With only sixty minutes left in the eight-and-a-half-hour flight from Amsterdam, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab kept his eyes fixed on his video screen, tracking the location of the big Airbus as it moved across the map. Nearby, other passengers dozed and watched movies.

When the tiny image of the plane approached the American border, the twenty-three-year-old Nigerian squeezed past the American college student next to him and retrieved a small bag from his carry-on in the overhead compartment. Then he headed to the bathroom, where he made one last check on the equipment, performed a ritual washing, and doused himself with cologne to cover any chemical odor. He was a warrior now, one of the mujahideen. He'd soon be a shaheed, a martyr for Allah, only for Allah. America was his target, chosen for him in Yemen by Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki.

It was America, after all, that was slaughtering Muslims in so many countries--Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and now, of course, Yemen. It was to Yemen, the land that the Prophet Muhammad had once declared to be the home of true belief and wisdom, that Abdulmutallab had come a few months earlier in search of Sheikh Anwar, whom he knew from hours online listening to the cleric's calm, erudite lectures.

Over time, Abdulmutallab had found his way from Sanaa to Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki's hideout in Shabwah province in the south. The sheikh had tested him and found him worthy of a martyrdom mission. He had then sent him to Brother Ibrahim, the bomb maker, who had explained to him the technical details of pentaerythritoltetranitrate, the explosive known as PETN, and had fitted him with the strange undershorts that had the plastic bag sewn inside. Always the diligent student, Abdulmutallab had worn the underwear for three straight weeks, removing it only to shower, so that he could grow accustomed to it and make sure it was not noticeable to the people he encountered.

As the airliner descended toward Detroit, Abdulmutallab returned to his seat, mumbling to his seatmate that he did not feel well. He pulled the blanket over his head and groped for the syringe attached to the bag in his underwear. This was the moment he had trained for, for which he had given up an easy life as the son of a wealthy Nigerian banker.

Below his window seat over the wing, 19A, the dense Detroit suburbs of the Downriver area scrolled past and the jetliner banked toward Detroit Metro Airport. It was a land of infidels, obsessed with material things--he had seen it, in a visit to Houston for an Islamic conference the previous year. The Americans were at war with Allah and the believers. Perhaps this would make them think again.

He pushed the plunger home, as instructed, waiting for the chemicals to mix and explode.

In Washington, Michael Leiter, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, had set aside the Christmas holiday for a mundane job. He was Jewish, and he had decided to take advantage of the rare morning off to perform an overdue household chore, painting his basement. Just before noon, his cell phone rang. It was Art Cummings, the FBI's executive assistant director for national security, with a heads up: some kind of firecracker or incendiary device had gone off aboard an international flight into Detroit. The plane was about to land and the details were unclear. Leiter put away the paint and headed to his office in a warren of glass towers not far from CIA headquarters in northern Virginia.

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In the darkened operations center at Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs, Nevada, drone operators were changing shifts, joking and grumbling about having to spend the holidays patrolling Yemen from the sky. Three weeks earlier, the 432nd Air Expeditionary Wing Commander, writing on the base website, had offered commiseration, of a sort, to what he called "the RPA community," for remotely piloted aircraft. He knew, and they knew, that they lived in some strange psychological limbo, on the battlefield and away from the battlefield, living at home but never quite at home. "I know many of you missed Thanksgiving with your families," he wrote. "I also know many more of you will miss Christmas. But I ask you to step back and examine the environment in which we work. There are thousands of troops on the ground in harm's way. They missed Thanksgiving with their families also. Some of them won't see another Thanksgiving again." He signed it, but not with his name, in keeping with the blanket of secrecy draped over everything to do with drones at Creech. He was commander at the "Home of the Hunters," as it said on the sign at the gate. He signed it "Hunter 1."

In the last few weeks, the pilots and sensor operators running the drones over Yemen had been on high alert, with a flurry of intelligence suggesting that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the local branch of the terror network, was up to something. There had been two American strikes in Yemen, carried out not with drones but with cruise missiles and manned jets. The drone units at Creech that were assigned to Pakistan were carrying out their own strikes, firing missiles from unmanned Predator drones at a pace of about once a week. But the Yemen teams could only watch, circling above suspected militant camps in the tribal areas. Their drones were flown out of the little country of Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, a hop across the water from Yemen, and the Djibouti government had not yet permitted the United States to load missiles on its Predators.

The operators at Creech sat for hour after hour, mesmerized by the beige Yemeni landscape as it rolled beneath the drones. But on this Christmas Day their grinding routine was suddenly interrupted by alerts and instructions popping up on their computer screens. A plane had landed in Detroit after a fire of some kind, and there were indications that the incident might have links to Yemen. They were directed to step up patrols and look for any unusual activity. For now, however, they had to leave the shooting to others.

In their plush rented beachfront home in Hawaii, Barack and Michelle Obama were just starting their day, making last-minute checks on the Christmas presents for Malia, eleven, and Sasha, eight. The First Family had escaped Washington only the day before, delaying their vacation getaway to wait for

what the wires were calling the Senate's "historic vote" to approve health care reform. Secret Service officers wearing unaccustomed leisure outfits were politely turning back early-bird beachgoers who hoped to catch a glimpse of the president. The Coast Guard patrolled part of Kailua Bay, cordoned off with yellow markers, to keep nosy sailors away.

The Associated Press had called it "Obama's aloha low-key holiday," and White House spokesman Bill Burton told the gaggle of reporters aboard Air Force One on the trip west that the holiday would be "an opportunity for the president to recharge his batteries." Obama had a message for the press, Burton said: "He would like for you to relax and to not anticipate any public announcements or news-making events." One reporter kidded back, "We've heard this lie before."

The Obamas were singing Christmas carols when a military aide interrupted and told the president that John Brennan, his counterterrorism adviser, who was staying nearby, was on the phone.

Barack Obama knew he had the responsibility to protect the American people, but the last thing he wanted his presidency to be remembered for was that phrase that had always rankled him, the "war on terror." You cannot wage war against a tactic, he would say, and he had no interest in becoming a sort of George W. Bush Jr. He had run against some Bush counterterrorism programs because he thought they had besmirched the name of the United States, and to no purpose: the "enhanced interrogation techniques," given that creepy name by CIA bureaucrats who insisted that torture was not torture; the "black sites" overseas where prisoners were held in secret, in violation of principles the United States had long upheld; the Guantanamo Bay prison that he believed had become a garish recruiting pitch for Al Qaeda. It was proving no easy task to undo such programs; he had banned torture and shut the black sites on his first day in office, but his Justice Department was still investigating torture and deaths in CIA detention, and Congress was blocking his plan to move the Guantanamo detainees to an empty prison in Illinois.

Perhaps Obama's most audacious foreign policy goal was to repair relations between the United States and the Muslim world. He believed the Bush administration had done grave and unnecessary damage with its counterterrorism policies and with the invasion of Iraq. To restore the American image in Islamic countries was not just a matter of idealism, Obama believed, but could have practical consequences, reducing the appeal of Al Qaeda and making the United States a more effective broker for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. He began his campaign for change with remarks to the Turkish parliament in April, declaring to applause that the United States was not, and never would be, at war with Islam. But it was in a long-awaited speech at Cairo University in the sixth month of his presidency that he pulled out all the stops in his attempt, as he put it, "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."

No American president had ever given an address quite like this one. He wasn't the first president to offer an audience the traditional Muslim greeting, *As-salamu alaykum*, "Peace be upon you," but he was certainly the first to speak of the "generations of Muslims" in his father's family and of fond childhood memories of hearing the call to prayer in Indonesia. Obama quoted the Koran and paid lavish tribute to a long-ago time when Islamic science and learning had led the world, "paving the way

for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment." Today, he said, a "small but potent minority of Muslims" carried out terrorist attacks, and the United States would continue to defend itself against them. But he also offered an unusual apology for the excesses in the American response to terror, including torture and the limbo for prisoners at Guantanamo. "Just as America can never tolerate violence by extremists," Obama said, "we must never alter our principles. 9/11 was an enormous trauma to our country. The fear and anger that it provoked was understandable, but in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our ideals."

In truth, while Obama felt it was critical to restore decent relations with Islamic countries, his most heartfelt ambitions lay in the domestic realm. He wanted to dig the economy out of the chasm into which it had fallen as he campaigned for office; to end the scandal that made the United States the only developed country where much of the population lacked health insurance; to reverse the trend of economic inequality that left not just the poor but the middle class struggling; to promote alternative energy and face squarely the dangers of climate change. These were among the problems that *The Onion* had memorably satirized after the election with the headline "Black Man Given Nation's Worst Job," but they were challenges the president relished. The national security stuff simply came with the territory, and the secure communications team and passel of security aides were along on his Christmas vacation, too, lest he forget.

Like every president, and every high-level appointee whose job brought him into the threat briefings, Obama woke every morning to a could-happen horror show, the myriad threats that seventeen American intelligence agencies "assessed with medium confidence," as their bloodless jargon put it, to be percolating in half a dozen countries. He often remarked to friends that only a president and his security aides could fully appreciate the crushing responsibility of keeping the country safe in the post-9/11 era, when the worst-case scenario was only too obvious. Bush had been surprised by 9/11, after he and his top aides had brushed aside the looming warning signs, but a grieving people had rallied to support him nonetheless. The next president would not have the excuse of surprise.

As it happened, 2009 had been the rockiest year on the domestic terrorism front in a long time--by some measures, the worst year since 9/11. If Obama felt his luck was rotten in that regard, he had good reason. Schemes had been uncovered to blow up the Federal Building in Springfield, Illinois, and synagogues in the Bronx; to shoot marines at their base in Quantico, Virginia; and to kill shoppers at malls in Boston. But those plots had been carefully monitored by the FBI and its informants--indeed, in some cases, the bureau's paid informants seemed to be the most eager conspirators. Not so the shooting in Little Rock in June of two soldiers at a military recruiting station by an American convert to Islam who had spent time in Yemen, a nasty surprise that had left one army private dead. Nor did the FBI discover until the last minute in August the plan of an Afghan-born man who had been a popular Manhattan coffee vendor, Najibullah Zazi, to attack the New York subway with three suicide bombers wearing explosive-filled backpacks.

Then, the previous month, in early November, had come the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11. At Fort Hood, Texas, an army major and psychiatrist, Nidal Hasan, had actually managed to carry out an attack, crying, "Allahu akbar!" before mowing down some fifty people, thirteen

of whom died. Hasan's shooting spree, which followed months of signs that he was developing a lethal hostility to his fellow soldiers, had led to a lot of finger-pointing. Obama was grateful that George W. Bush had refrained from publicly criticizing him; the former president had said that his successor "deserves my silence." It was an especially gracious stance in light of the fact that Obama had effectively blamed his predecessor for the devastated economy and for betraying American values in the fight against terror. But congressional Republicans and conservative pundits, led by Bush's former vice president, Dick Cheney, had shown no such reticence. They had spent months advancing the notion that Obama was projecting weakness in the war on terror.

Cheney had accused Obama of "dithering" over whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan. When the Obama administration proposed a federal criminal trial in New York for Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the main 9/11 plotter, Cheney said it would give "aid and comfort to the enemy," wording borrowed from the treason statute. After the Fort Hood shooting, he claimed that Obama was helping Al Qaeda by refusing to label the Fort Hood slaughter "terrorism." The "uncertainty" projected by Obama "feeds into sort of the basic al Qaeda strategy," Cheney told Sean Hannity of Fox News. "Remember the way al Qaeda operates and what their underlying plan is--if you kill enough Americans, you can change American policy." Obama refused to call terrorism by its name, the former vice president said, or to acknowledge that the country was at war.

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