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TELEVISION PROGRAM TO "CBS NEWS' FACE THE NATION."



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Transcript**

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TRANSCRIPT

JOHN DICKERSON: Today on FACE THE NATION:

A Nigerian tries to blow up a U.S. airplane after his father warns the State Department about him--should he have been allowed to fly at all. The suspect Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab had become so radicalized his father warned the U.S. embassy officials in Nigeria. This got him on a watch list but not off the plane.

Did someone drop the ball? Is this the work of al Qaeda? And does airport security need to be tightened even further--we'll ask White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs.

Then we'll talk with the top Republican on the Homeland Security Committee Peter King of New York and Democratic House whip James Clyburn of South Carolina.

We'll get the latest on the investigation with CBS chief investigative correspondent Armen Keteyian and Juan Zarate, CBS News national security analyst.

But first, a terror plot foiled on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from Washington substituting for Bob Schieffer, CBS News political analyst John Dickerson.

JOHN DICKERSON: Good morning, and welcome to FACE THE NATION.

I'm here with White House press secretary Robert Gibbs. Welcome, Robert.

(INAUDIBLE)

ROBERT GIBBS (White House Press Secretary): --foremost the President has asked for two reviews to take place as a result of this potential terrorist attack. The first li-- is a watch-listing review. This individual was on a list what's called a TIDE's database list, based on the information that the government gathered from his father. That put him on a list of about five hundred and fifty thousand different people, the different departments and agencies can log in. The selectee list which is for second screening and the no-fly list are far smaller. They encompass in total about eighteen thousand. So we

want to ensure that all of the information that needs to go to decision-makers gets to where it needs to go. The President has asked for a review of the procedures which in some cases are several years old.

Secondly, the President has asked the Department of Homeland Security to review our detection capabilities to ensure that somebody that might be carrying explosives like this individual was can't get through a sc-- a screening stage like they did in Amsterdam.

JOHN DICKERSON: Does the President think anybody dropped the ball in this process?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, obviously, there's a review that's going to take place and an investigation that's certainly ongoing. I-- I think the President's posture on a war against those that seek to do us harm has been to focus not on Iraq but to draw down from Iraq and focus our resources on Afghanistan and Pakistan, to increase our cooperation with nations like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. And we've seen al Qaeda targeted there and many of their heads eliminated.

JOHN DICKERSON: But does he think in this case--that even though the system may have been old--that mistakes were made?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, look, again, that's the part of the review that's going to take place. I think first and foremost, John, the President wants to ensure the safety and security of the American people.

JOHN DICKERSON: Does he think this was a tiny little rip in the system? Or does this show there's a big hole here that needs to be fixed?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, again, look, we're going to go through the capabilities for detecting and we're going to look through the watch-listing procedures again--some of which are older and evaluate whether or not they're up to date for the types of threats and security concerns that we have. I do think though that in many ways this system has worked. We just have to continue to keep refining it and stay ahead of what terrorists are trying to do.

JOHN DICKERSON: The-- but the system, as you said, it's kind of-- it's a-- it's a little bit crazy. Five hundred thousand people

on this larger list. In this case, the suspect's father went to the embassy and said he was worried about his son.

ROBERT GIBBS: Mm-Hm.

JOHN DICKERSON: That should, in some people's minds, at least get him an extra pat down which didn't happen in this case.

ROBERT GIBBS: Right.

JOHN DICKERSON: That really seems like it's very much out of whack?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, his-- his entry into this database was because of that information. There was not enough information to bring him more forward to either the selectee or the no-fly database list.

JOHN DICKERSON: Mm-Hm.

ROBERT GIBBS: But, obviously, whether it is our detection capabilities, whether it is our listing procedures, the President wants to ensure every step and precaution is taken to ensure our safety and security.

JOHN DICKERSON: The President is not known for big outbursts of emotion. But on this case when you talk about studies and reviews and all of that, it sounds a little antiseptic. Gi-- give me a sense of the sense of urgency here from the President?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, obviously, the President was-- was briefed on this almost as soon as it took place. He's been involved with national security aides and secured conference calls to and from the Situation Room in the White House to get information. I-- I think what's important--I hope it doesn't sound too antiseptic-- because, obviously, we need to learn what happened in this instance and how anything like this can be prevented from happening in the future, John.

JOHN DICKERSON: Janet Napolitano, the Homeland Security director, said, "Right now, we have no indication that this is part of anything larger." Is that right?

ROBERT GIBBS: I-- I don't want to get into classified intelligence matters. I wouldn't disagree with the secretary of Homeland Security. I think what's important, though, is we saw what could happen. We've seen what can happen on September 11th.

The important thing is we take all steps to ensure that it never happens again.

JOHN DICKERSON: Is there going to be a new normal here after Richard Reid tried this in 2001 we now all take our shoes off?

ROBERT GIBBS: Right.

JOHN DICKERSON: Are we going to have full pat downs now and-- and is image-- full body scans, is that in the future possible?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, look, the secretary of Homeland Security raised what we do at each of our airports. The threat level was kept the same but the procedures were enhanced. More air marshals were added on to flights. We obviously want to review and make sure that all the detection capabilities that are supposed to happen, whether it's a pat down, whether it's additional security selection, that that happens in each instance.

JOHN DICKERSON: Any discussion of raising the threat level, the-- the color of the threat level?

ROBERT GIBBS: The-- that was evaluated on Christmas Day, the day of the incident. Officials felt comfortable with where the threat level was but wanted to ensure that capabilities that are happening at airports--both foreign and domestic--are raised a little bit, so we understand that-- and-- and work to prevent this from happening again.

JOHN DICKERSON: So does the President think it's safe for Americans to fly?

ROBERT GIBBS: Absolutely.

JOHN DICKERSON: Finally, last question which is the President in his speech at West Point, when he made his decision about sending more troops to Afghanistan suggested that maybe people had forgotten that people are out here trying to do this. Does he think the American public has become complacent about these kinds of threats?

ROBERT GIBBS: Well, look, John, we understand that-- and the President has dedicated a lot more resources to the region of the world where people sit in caves and in houses planning to do us harm. They didn't sit in Iraq. They sat in Afghanistan and they sat in Pakistan. That's where the President has directed

his resources and he thinks it's important that the American people understand why he's dedicated our brave young men and women to fight in that area and drawdown in Iraq.

JOHN DICKERSON: Okay, Robert Gibbs, White House Press Secretary, thanks very much.

ROBERT GIBBS: Thanks, John.

JOHN DICKERSON: Joining us now from New York is Congressman Peter King, the top Republican on the Homeland Security Committee.

Congressman, how close did this suspect come to taking this plane down?

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING (R-New York/Homeland Security Committee): Oh, by all accounts, he came very close. And, you know, earlier today Secretary Napolitano said the system worked. The fact is the system did not work. We have to fi-- find a bipartisan way to fix it. He made it on the plane with explosives and he detonated the explosives. If that had been successful, the plane would have come down and-- and we'd have had a Christmas Day massacre with almost three hundred people murdered, so it-- this came within probably seconds or inches of working. And thank God, there were brave people onboard and, thank God, that the terrorist was not able to successfully carry out the detonation but he right to the one-yard line.

JOHN DICKERSON: The former director of the Homeland-- Department of the Homeland Security Michael Chertoff suggested that at airports that the screening procedures basically to k-- to stop this kind of attack are going to have to go to either a full-body pat down or a-- a full x-ray. Is that where you see things heading?

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING: I think we have to head in that direction. I-- In fact I would say right now we do need the full-body scan, especially when you have countries like Nigeria, which have inadequate security-- security to begin with, then you have passengers transiting in Amsterdam and coming here. Yes, I think we have to face up to this reality that we live in a dangerous world where Islamic terrorists want to kill us. And, yes, there is some brief violation of privacy with a full-body scan. But on the other hand, we-- we can save thousands of lives. To me, we have to make that decision and we have to come down on the side of saving thousands of lives. And that's why I

think it's important for the President or the secretary to be more out there and reminding the people just how real this threat was and how deadly it is.

You know, for the first three months of this administration, they refused to use the word terrorism. And even at the speech of West Point, the President did not use the word "terrorism." This is a teaching moment to use the President's term. And I believe that he or the secretary or the vice president or the attorney general should be out there and reminding the American people saying this shows how deadly this enemy is. This shows how real this threat is and why we have to do whatever we possibly can to protect the American people.

JOHN DICKERSON: In that instance, though, Congressman, could-- could you buy the argument or what do you think of the argument that if the President rushes out to the microphones that it, in fact, gives the terrorists more power, that he's shaken the entire administration into this pig-- big public display?

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING: There's no need to rush to a microphone, but this is a President who has been on television, made more television appearances, more news conferences than any President in history. And to me, it would be very important for-- in a very calm, reassuring way to tell the American people this is what we're doing. We're on top of this. We're going to win but this is a reminder of why we always have to be alert to the evils of it Islamic terrorism. Instead, there's been a virtual vacuum for the last day-and-a-half. And I'm not making this partisan. I mean nobody was better than Bill Clinton at addressing the American people and explaining to them what we were facing and that's really all I'm saying. And, by the way, let me make this clear. I am confident that the President of the United States, as commander in chief, is doing all that he possibly can in this instance to protect the American people. I'm not getting into that. I'm just saying I would think that an administration which is so quick to talk about global warming and health care reform and the latest deal that's being made in the Senate, somebody in the last almost forty-eight hours should have been out there speaking to the American people and the world to let them know that we are on top of this. We are winning this.

JOHN DICKERSON: You-- you heard my conversation with Robert Gibbs about the specific measures the President has called for, these two reviews both-- both about the list and then also about the detection devices at-- at airports. Are you satisfied with

that response, that portion of the response from the administration?

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING: Yeah. To me, the administration is going to follow through-- through on that. I'm-- I'm confident they will. And that the Congress is also going to hold its investigation, the Homeland Security Committee to make sure that all is being done to make s-- to ensure that, for instance, the person who was on a watch list-- for instance, in this case, Mutallab is coming out of Nigeria, which is a suspect country anyway as far as al Qaeda. His father comes to the American embassy on November 23rd, the State Department raises concerns about him. When you consider the country, when you consider, you know, information was given on him, at least he should have gotten a secondary screening in Nigeria. Now that could have been a failure of the system. So let's honestly address that and admit the system did not work and find ways that we can move people off that five hundred thousand list on to at least a secondary screening list.

JOHN DICKERSON: But if you look at five hundred thousand people, um, you know, one of the reasons that the lists have shrunk in the past is that it just became untenable, just too expensive. Delays at airports, crippled the airline industry. Isn't what you're suggesting going to create delays and-- and financial ruin for airlines?

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING: John, we have to find a way to take the more obvious cases. Here you have a-- a leading banker in Nigeria coming to the American embassy on his own.

We're not talking about a name that was found in a BlackBerry somewhere. We're talking about a leading banker coming to the American embassy and giving a warning or raising concerns about his son. It's in a country where there's strong al Qaeda presence, which does have unfortunately-- lacks airport security. It would seem to me in that particular case alone, for instance, that that should have gone to a-- on to some list where he would've been at least screened in Nigeria or screened in Amsterdam when he got there and the American government should've been behind that.

JOHN DICKERSON: Thank you, Congressman. We're going to have to leave it there. Thanks very much.

We'll be back in a minute.

REPRESENTATIVE PETER KING (overlapping): Thank you, John.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

JOHN DICKERSON: Congressman James Clyburn, the number three Democrat in the House, joins us now from Hilton Head, South Carolina. Congressman, welcome. I wanted to ask you about what Congressman King said.

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN (D-South Carolina/D-Majority Whip) (overlapping): Yeah.

JOHN DICKERSON: He suggested the President and-- and the administration was not fast enough in responding to this. What's your reaction to that?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me. You know Peter King is a good buddy. He has given to a little bit of hyperbole sometimes.

I think that the President in his response is doing exactly as he should do. I think that in so many instances these terrorists get more benefit from the reaction they cause than from the action they take. And so I believe that for the President to be very measured in reactions-- in his reactions not elevating this thing to the point that it would be satisfactory to terrorists is exactly the way to do it. I think Secretary Napolitano is out there today talking about this issue. I have been in touch with the Situation Room of the White House. I've been briefed. I've talked with sen-- Congressman Bennie Thompson of Mississippi who cheers the Homeland Security Committee. And I am very satisfied that everybody is doing what they ought to do with this instance.

JOHN DICKERSON: Based on your briefings, Congressman, how big of a-- of a deal is this? I mean was this a narrow incident? Or do you think this represents a much bigger problem?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: Well, from all that I have heard, I think that this is a-- a very narrow incident. Now, the fact of the matter is we see something taking place here that disturbs me a little bit. I remember the incident of the Shoe Bomber. I think Mister Reid, if I might call him mister, the same flammable material, explosive, that he used seems to have been used in this instance. So it would seem to me that some kind of secondary screening may need to be take place in certain

instances, and, hopefully, in order to detect that kind of substance.

JOHN DICKERSON (overlapping): Quickly, Congressman--

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: That to me--

JOHN DICKERSON: Does-- does that mean for you a full-body pat down, just quickly?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: Well, I'm saying secondary. How you describe that secondary, I think, would base-- be based upon where the airplane is originating from and-- and what kind of security measures they have on site.

JOHN DICKERSON: All right. Let me now switch to the topic of health care which was the other big story we were going to talk about until this breaking news. The Senate has passed its bill. Can you sign on to what the Senate has passed?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: I think that our process calls for us to now meet in conference. I believe both the House and Senate bills make tremendous contributions toward bending the cost curve. I think they-- they do a great deal to bring more people into the system. I think though that the House bringing the thirty-six million additional people, the Senate bringing thirty-one million additional people, I think that the more the merrier in this instance.

So, I do believe that the Senate has done a very good bill, but I think that the House has done a very good bill as well.

JOHN DICKERSON (overlapping): Congressman, you were a big--

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: We need to look--

JOHN DICKERSON: --you were a strong advocate for the public option, sent a letter to the President--

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN (overlapping): Sure.

JOHN DICKERSON: --and said don't-- don't waiver on this. It does-- it's not included in the Senate bill. Can you vote for a final health care bill that does not include a public option?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: Yes, sir, I can. Because why did we do-- why do we want a public option? We want a public option

to do basically three ten-- things: create more choice for insurers, create more competition for insurance companies, and to contain costs.

So, if we can come up with a process by which three-- these three things can be done, then I'm all for it; whether or not we label it a public option or not is of no consequence. What we want to do is get good, effective results from whatever we put in place.

JOHN DICKERSON: A number of other public option supporters who shared your passion for the issue feel that the President let them down a little bit on this. That he didn't fight very hard for it. That he was kind of stringing them along through the process. Did he let you down?

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: No, he did not. If you may recall, I said way back before we went out on our August break that we ought to take a hard look at this so-called robust public option that a lot of people had bought into. I never quite bought into that. I was one of those people saying we ought to come up with a hybrid, part of which was to bring more people into Medicaid, and that's what we did on the House side. We did a blended plan. We didn't do what you might call a robust public option plan on the House side. What we're saying is on the House side let's increase eligibility for Medicare--

JOHN DICKERSON (overlapping): All right, Congressman--

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN: --from hundred and thirty-three percent-- Yeah.

JOHN DICKERSON: I'm afraid we're going to have to leave it there on the details. We'll be back in just a minute--

REPRESENTATIVE JAMES CLYBURN (overlapping): Thank you.

JOHN DICKERSON: --with more on the terror plot.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

JOHN DICKERSON: CBS chief investigate correspondent Armen Keteyian is in New York and CBS News national security analyst Juan Zarate is in our L.A. bureau. Armen, I want to start with you. What's the latest? What can you tell us?

ARMEN KETEYIAN (Chief Investigative Correspondent): Well, John, the latest is the investigation is moving forward on-- on several different fronts. The investigators are digging into Abul-- Abdulmutallab's life. They're trying to determine right now whether he was a-- a lone wolf acting on his own or whether he was connected to another group or organization.

Yesterday, Scotland Yard seized his computer in London. They're looking through e-mails, any kind of documents. They're searching for videos or diaries or writings or blogs that would offer some insight into his motivation, into his mindset, and again, whether he was connected to any other group or organization.

JOHN DICKERSON: Juan, James Clyburn, Democratic-- Democratic Congressman James Clyburn said that he thought this was a narrow incident. Can they know that this fast? And does that strike you as the case?

JUAN ZARATE (CBS News National Security Analyst): Well, I think it's narrow in one context in terms of the security concerns with respect to vetting of individuals, the listing, and security procedures getting on planes.

But I think there's a broader issue here which is if, in fact, this individual got training from al Qaeda individuals in Yemen to launch an attack. This could be a game changer because it will be the first time since 9/11 that you've had a-- a U.S.-based plot driven out of somewhere other than the Pakistan-Afghan theater. And so I think that could change the context of how we view the terrorist threats, how the administration has to deal with the potential safe haven in Yemen and also how we view other safe havens in Somalia and North Africa. And so I would-- I would caution against too early a judgment as to the scope and dimensions of this-- this threat.

JOHN DICKERSON: Juan, I want to stay on Yemen there for just a second. Talking to a senior administration official today, they-- they said if you notice Yemen creeps into the President's speeches about terrorism and has over the last several months. Thinking outside of the context of this event, is Yemen sort of like Afghanistan was in, say, 1990? I mean, how should people think about that country?

JUAN ZARATE: Well, you have got a problematic theater in Yemen. You've got a-- an unstable government, you've got three different security situations, a-- a Shia rebellion in the

north, secessionist in the south, and then a-- an increase in al Qaeda presence. And you have greater ties to plots toward the U.S. in Yemen.

Recall the recruitment center attack in Little Rock where the individual had traveled to Yemen. Recall the Fort Hood case with Anwar al-Awlaki, the American cleric in Yemen providing some degree of communications with Hasan, the-- the perpetrator of that attack.

And now you have this individual having, perhaps, received training and the materials in Yemen and then traveling toward the U.S. And so this presents a real problem and it suggests need for more aggressive approach and explains why there have been more aggressive attacks by the Yemeni government against al Qaeda over the last two weeks.

JOHN DICKERSON: Armen, I want to ask you now about PETN, which was the substance that Richard Reid, the Shoe Bomber, used in 2001. He had it in his shoe. This was also used in this bomb effort. How easy is this to get just to start?

ARMEN KETEYIAN: Well, John, just to take a quick step backwards that's what investigators are looking at right now--how much of the PETN was in the suspect's underwear stashed in that little clear plastic baggy. They're also looking at the chemical compound that was allegedly injected into that substance to see how much and what that concoction really was. But PETN is a fairly easy substance to obtain. It's used in blasting caps. It's used in detonation cords. It's used in small arms ammunition. It is readily available and as-- as Juan said and you suggested, it was used by Richard Reid eight years ago, the so-called Shoe Bomber.

It was also part of the Semtex that brought down Pan Am 103 back in 1988. So it is a concern. It's available and it adds to this whole security question because it isn't detectable evidently going through the metal detectors at airports.

JOHN DICKERSON: What about the other kinds of detection efforts? We've talked today about pat downs. What about some of these other detection efforts? Would they've been able to catch this?

ARMEN KETEYIAN: Doesn't appear to be at this point in time. Certainly, a detection-- if you're going to pat down every individual passenger that goes through an airport, what kind of nightmare that would pose for the nation's travel could only be

imagined but the concern that we heard this morning from some of the people that we were talking to is the history of PETN as a-- an explosive device on airplanes. Getting through metal detectors is becoming even increasingly a-- a concern to U.S. people that we talked to in the U.S. government today.

JOHN DICKERSON: Juan, last question to you which is on this watch list. You've been on the inside in the government. How possible is it to-- to-- to fix this huge list to make it more efficient? The President has called for a review. Tell us what that will look like and how hard that will be to-- to do?

JUAN ZARATE: Well, it's a difficult balance because you have multiple lists that are used for different reasons across the government. The initial database in which this individual's name appeared is the general database. It's got over five hundred thousand names. The no-fly list is a selectee list. Those are the lists that are used to-- to hold people off planes or to have secondary searches--is a much narrower list of people in part for efficiency sake. And, people need to recall that the pressure over the last couple of years, especially from Congress, has been to reduce the numbers on that list. And, so now you've got a pendular swing the other way with people probably suggesting that the list for pat downs and for no-flies should be larger.

JOHN DICKERSON (overlapping): All right.

JUAN ZARATE: It's a difficult balance.

JOHN DICKERSON: Juan, we got to go. Thanks very much, gentlemen.

We'll be back in a moment.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

JOHN DICKERSON: That's it for us this week. Thank you for watching. Bob Schieffer will be back next week.