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Handling problems the Obama way

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HONOLULU — There is a sense of déjà vu in the Obama administration's response to the attempted [terrorist](#) attack on Christmas Day. A by-now familiar pattern has been established for dealing with unexpected problems.

First, White House aides downplay the notion that something may have gone wrong on their part. While staying out of the spotlight, the president conveys his efforts to address the situation and his feelings about it through administration officials. After a few days, the White House concedes on the issue, and perhaps [Barack Obama](#) even steps out to address it.

That same scenario unfolded over the summer, when Obama said Sgt. James Crowley, a white Cambridge, Mass., police officer, "acted stupidly" when he arrested [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), a black Harvard professor, in his own home. It happened in March when the public was outraged over AIG dishing out hefty bonuses. More recently the public witnessed the dynamic after a [security](#) breach at President Barack Obama's first state dinner.

But the fact that the issue now is a terrorist incident — albeit an unsuccessful one — makes the stakes much higher, and the White House's usual approach more questionable. That this test of his leadership comes while he's on vacation in tropical Hawaii further complicates things.

After delivering his first public remarks

Monday about a Nigerian man's attempt to blow up a Northwest Airlines jetliner over [Detroit](#), the president motorcaded to the golf course at a nearby country club. Optics aside, it had taken Obama three days to issue a statement on the incident, and the administration was left struggling to control the message.

By the time Obama addressed the public with a brief televised statement, his critics had made such headway that the White House was left with this lede in the New York Times: "President Obama emerged from Hawaiian seclusion on Monday to try to quell gathering criticism of his administration's handling of the thwarted Christmas Day bombing of an American airliner as a branch of Al Qaeda claimed responsibility."

It's the kind of story the White House might have avoided if Obama hadn't waited so long to forcefully react to the incident.

Critics on the right have predictably seized on his response as a sign of weak leadership. After Obama spoke Monday,

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Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow for defense and homeland security at the Cato Institute, said his remarks did not do a great job of calming the public.

“He didn’t try that hard,” Friedman said. “He just made that comment that we ought to be confident, but he didn’t really go into much detail about why we ought to be confident.”

But Obama’s aides say that a measured approach is Obama’s style. The president has said as much himself. When asked at a news conference in March why it took him days to respond to the AIG bonuses, Obama snapped: “It took us a couple of days because I like to know what I’m talking about before I speak — alright?”

Over the past few days that reticence created a vacuum his critics were only too happy to fill. As Obama let things play out, Republicans slammed him for not addressing Americans about the situation and Congress called for hearings on the matter. The White House released updates on how he was monitoring the situation, as well as background guidance to reporters to help shape the narrative. Obama’s chief spokesman, Robert Gibbs, was already scheduled to be on Sunday news shows, and National Security Council chief of staff Denis McDonough said it was Obama’s idea to also dispatch his Homeland Security Secretary, Janet Napolitano, to explain what was going on.

But both Napolitano and Gibbs seemed to carry a message that the White House quickly backed away from Monday morning — that “the system worked.”

Gibbs said on CBS’s “Face the Nation” that

“in many ways, this system has worked.” Napolitano also said “the system worked.” But by Monday morning she was on NBC’s “Today” show explaining that her words had been taken out of context and that she was referring to what happened after the incident occurred. “Our system did not work in this instance,” she explained clearly.

The comments of Gibbs and Napolitano — whether planned or unplanned — did not come off as being slips of the tongue, as when Vice President Joe Biden advised Americans against traveling on airlines after the swine flu outbreak, and Gibbs later cleaned up the message by explaining what Biden meant to say.

The decision for Obama to leave the talking to his aides in the aftermath of the attempted terrorist attack was not “standard operating procedure,” McDonough said after Obama’s statement Monday.

“We thought it made sense for him to handle it in that way and then we thought

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today was a good opportunity for the president to go out there,” McDonough said. “We don’t really have a standard operating procedure for when is best to go out.”

The White House pushed back against criticism that the president was not properly engaged.

McDonough told reporters that Obama is getting at least half a dozen briefings a day — a morning briefing with administration officials about the Northwest Airlines incident and five paper briefings, two from the National Counterterrorism Center and three from the Situation Room.

“The president has been very engaged on this, has been leading our response effort, asking agencies to take a variety of steps including all the steps he outlined today,” McDonough said. “He recognizes that it’s very important that we communicate to the American people what we know and the steps that we’re taking.”

Without naming names, the White House also put blame at the feet of the departed Bush administration even as Obama’s speech-to-golf-course moment Monday conjured up memories of President George W. Bush on a golf course angrily decrying recent suicide bombings in Israel and capping off his remarks with, “Thank you. Now watch this drive.”

“Obviously the procedures and the protocols employed in this instance are ones that we’ve inherited that had been built over the course of several years since 2003,” McDonough said. His comments echoed Obama, who pointed out that the

review he ordered of the government’s terrorist watch-list procedures is of a system that “our government has had in place for many years.”

“In general, I think that the president’s inclinations as a leader work fairly well for this issue — no-drama Obama,” Friedman said. “In some ways Al Qaeda is trying to be relevant and trying to be politically relevant, and in some sense they achieved that. He’s denying them that relevance by acting like it’s not the No. 1 thing on his agenda. We credit them with more power and credibility than they have.”

Obama heading to the golf course, Friedman said, “signals that it’s not a crisis, and he’s the president and he has a lot of things to do and this is just one of them.”

There are times when the Obama White House has responded swiftly. When Somali pirates captured the American captain of a merchant vessel, the president appeared engaged from the start. After the Air Force One flyover that brought back memories of Sept. 11 throughout Manhattan, the White

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House quickly apologized and Obama's aides informed reporters that he was furious when he learned about it.

But other times the administration seems to have a tin ear.

The White House refused to accept any responsibility for the security breach at last month's state dinner — allowing the Secret Service to accept complete fault — even after it became clear that Obama's social secretary, Desiree Rogers, had nixed a practice to have an East Wing staffer with the Secret Service verifying names on a guest list. Only after mounting pressure did the White House quietly order an internal review and reinstate that procedure.

And for days, as controversy over Obama's "acted stupidly" remark about the Cambridge police officer continued to swirl, the White House downplayed its significance. Indeed on the Friday after he uttered it, Gibbs still defended Obama's remark and told reporters in his office that they had heard the last from the president on the issue. But a few hours later, Obama interrupted Gibbs during his daily briefing and stepped to his podium to apologize for his remarks and offer up the now famous "beer summit."

Obama will continue to monitor the aftermath of the Northwest Airlines incident with close advisers and top aides. But Americans probably won't see more of Obama at a podium speaking about the issue again this week as he continues to balance his family vacation with his duties as commander-in-chief.

McDonough left reporters with the impression that if the public sees Obama again in Hawaii he'll likely be heading to the golf course or the beach. "We haven't really talked through when he'll go out, but you guys — I'm sure you'll see him," McDonough said half-jokingly.

Matt Negrin contributed to this report. Debate this story in [The Arena](#).

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