

TERROR-BOOK

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"Plan to finish off al Qaeda after Cole attack never took off" A US plan to neutralise terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network immediately after the October 2000 devastating attack on USS Cole had to be aborted following serious differences among President Bill Clinton's top advisors, a book says.

"On October 12, 2000, the day of devastating terrorist attack on the USS Cole, President Clinton's highest national security team met and Counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke wanted to strike Afghanistan, aiming at Osama bin Laden's complex and the terrorist leader himself. But he was all alone and did not receive any support for the retaliatory attack", the book based on interviews with policymakers, past and present, says.

"The attack, had it materialised, would have prevented the September 11, 2001 carnage in New York and the strike against the Pentagon", the work authored by Brussels-based investigative reporter Richard Minter said.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defence William Cohen, Attorney General Janet Reno and CIA Director George Tenet all said no to the attack.

Though the a majority of the cabinet members were convinced that the Cole attack was the handiwork of Laden and cohorts, the FBI and CIA representatives wanted more investigation.

"Clinton could have overridden the objections to retaliate but he listened to the majority of his advisers", it said.

"Around the table," Minter writes, "Clarke heard only objections." The meeting exemplified Ministerial caution.

Attorney General Reno, told by the FBI that the terrorists were still unidentified, argued that retaliation violated international law.

According to Minter, Albright said that with renewed Israeli-Palestinian fighting, "bombing Muslims wouldn't be helpful at this time", and he also feared reaction in other Islamic countries including Pakistan.

Albright later told Minister she would have taken a different position if she had had "definitive" proof of bin Laden's involvement.

Secretary of Defence Cohen, the only Republican in the Clinton Cabinet and the architect of missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan after the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Africa, according to the book said that the attack on the Cole "was not sufficiently provocative".

Sheehan, formerly with Special Forces, did not blame Cohen. "It was the entire Pentagon," he told Minter, adding that he was "stunned" and "taken aback" by the lack of Defence Department desire to retaliate.

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After the meeting, Sheehan told Clarke prophetically "What is it going to take to get them to hit al Qaeda in Afghanistan? Does al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon?"

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