

Clinton missed chance to hit bin Laden: When USS Cole bombed, U.S. knew location of al-Qaeda camps

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By David Rennie

WASHINGTON - Bill Clinton refused to order a strike on Osama bin Laden after the bombing of the destroyer USS Cole even though the al-Qaeda leader's whereabouts were known, according to a book to be published this week.

In early leaks from *Losing bin Laden*, Richard Minitzer, an investigative journalist, claims Mr. Clinton allowed the Sept. 11 attacks to happen by squandering more than a dozen opportunities to capture or kill bin Laden. In two cases, the terrorist leader's exact location was known, the book says.

Although Clinton supporters would doubtless reject the implication of responsibility for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, senior members of the Clinton White House did confirm, in interviews for the book, that they shied away from an attack immediately after the Cole bombing for reasons of diplomacy and military caution.

Robert Novak, a conservative columnist given early access to the book, reported that on Oct. 12, 2000, the day the warship was bombed at Aden, killing 17 sailors, Mr. Clinton's counter-terrorism chief, Richard Clarke, urged an immediate strike on al-Qaeda camps and Taliban buildings in Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Such a strike would destroy terrorist infrastructure and, with luck, might kill bin Laden, Mr. Clarke told senior colleagues. But he was overruled -- first by the CIA and FBI, which wanted more investigation of the attack, and then by the Clinton Cabinet.

Janet Reno, then the attorney-general, said an attack would break international law. Madeleine Albright, then secretary of state, is quoted as saying, "Bombing Muslims wouldn't be helpful at this time." Most controversially, the book quotes William Cohen, then the defence secretary, as saying the Cole attack "was not sufficiently provocative" and retaliation might cause trouble in Pakistan.

Mr. Cohen told *The Washington Post* he did not recall the Cabinet meeting, but "certainly regarded the Cole as a major provocation."

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