

Fox News September 4, 2003

Analysis with Richard Minter

Fox News Network, News; International, FOX SPECIAL REPORT WITH BRIT HUME (18:00) (Transcript # 090403cb.254)

September 4, 2003 Thursday

By Brit Hume, Richard Minter

HUME: Madeleine Albright -- Albright, President Clinton's secretary of state, wrote recently that President Bush was wrong in believing that the 9-11 attacks had changed everything. If a new book is correct, terrorist attacks certainly did not change everything during the Clinton administration. Not the first attack on the World Trade Center, not the attack on American embassies in Africa, nor the attack on the USS Cole.

The responses to these events are detailed in a new book entitled "Losing bin Laden," whose author, Richard Minter joins me now from New York.

Mr. Minter, set the scene for me after the bombing of the USS Cole. Seventeen American sailors dead, a big hole blown in the ship there, docked there at Yemen. Little doubt, it seemed, that terrorists, and specifically al Qaeda were responsible, traceable to Usama bin Laden. Tell me what happened.

RICHARD MINITER, AUTHOR, "LOSING BIN LADEN": Well, it was a blatant act of war, Brit. I mean the ship is taking on water. The pumps are going furiously. And the captain had to brief his senior off -- commanders in the Navy that they didn't know if the ship was going to make it through the night. So for the first time since World War II, the United States is in danger of losing a naval warship.

So, cut to the White House. In the Situation Room, the cabinet is gathered to recommend a course of action to the president, how to respond to this attack. And Madeleine Albright's concern was that if they retaliated, they had lined up very detailed targets in Afghanistan, of Taliban infrastructure and bin Laden's infrastructure as command centers...

HUME: Who developed all this? This has been developed by whom?

MINITER: By the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They keep a lot of battle plans on the shelf in case the president wants them and these are routinely updated for several years. They had similar targets for Iraq, for example, going back 10 years and these were regularly updated several times a year. These are based on satellite photographs; GPS coordinates. They even specified the bomb types, particularly, types of cruise missiles and what they would be armed with and the flight path. So these are details off the shelf plans designed to be put into action at a moment's notice. When the Cole attack happened, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had a plan readied, it was given to General Clark, who was the counter-terrorism czar of the Clinton administration and he presented it in the Situation Room of the White House to the cabinet.

HUME: And this is what, February of 2000?

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MINITER: This is October 2000.

HUME: October 2000. Right. Right. Election coming, right?

MINITER: Yes. That's right. The election is coming, but the U.S. has been attacked and we need to act. And so in that room on that afternoon, they're trying to decide what to do.

Madeleine Albright, the secretary of state, was very hesitant to approve a bombing of targets in Afghanistan. She was afraid it was going to disrupt the Middle East peace process and this was supposed to be a key part of the Clinton legacy, of perpetual peace between the Palestinians and Israelis. Didn't work out that way. But this was the hope in the waning days of the Clinton administration.

Janet Reno was opposed to any retaliation because she thought it would be a violation of international law without overwhelming evidence of bin Laden's guilt. The CIA Director, George Tenet, well, he personally believed that bin Laden was behind it. He also wanted a full investigation.

So there is a lot of arguments around the table for delay, for inaction, for non-response.

HUME: Now, General Shelton was the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was his agency of course, the Pentagon, which had developed these plans presumably. Where did he come out on this?

MINITER: Shelton's position is a little bit unclear, but certainly his boss, Secretary of Defense Cohen, was not in favor of retaliatory strike on bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan. He said, according to several participants in the room, whom I spoke with for my book "Losing Bin Laden," he said it wasn't sufficient provocation. Now, I understand that since this book has come out, Cohen's backed away from that a little bit.

But surely nobody, not even Cohen disputes that Cohen was not in favor of retaliatory strike against bin Laden in October of 2000.

HUME: So, it's...

MINITER: The big question though, Brit, is what happened if this strike had occurred and we had disrupted the infrastructure and network of al Qaeda? Could they have carried off 9-11? That is a big question and we just don't know the answer to it.

HUME: But except for Clark, the counterterrorism adviser, there was no one at that table in the Clinton White House who was for this, correct?

MINITER: That's right. There were other people who were in the room who didn't have a vote, such as Michael Sheehan, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism. And Sheehan, of course, was in favor of a retaliatory strike. But only members of the cabinet and Clark were allowed to sort of vote or to make a suggestion about what should be recommended to the president. Everyone else was standing around in there as a consultant or an advisory role. Leon Fuerth, Gore's foreign policy adviser, was also in the room.

HUME: Where did he stand, by the way, on all this?

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MINITER: He doesn't remember.

HUME: He doesn't remember. All right. So now may I take it, then, that no recommendation went to the president to do this?

MINITER: The recommendation that went to the president was not for a retaliatory strike, but to press the Yemenis to cooperate with the FBI investigation to discover, you know, exactly how bin Laden carried out this attack.

HUME: Now, this is of a piece with the responses that you described to the other terrorist episodes that happened during the Clinton years. Investigate -- there was a tendency -- tell me if I'm wrong about this, but there seemed to be a tendency to treat these, rather as criminal matters than acts of war. Am I wrong about that? Or is that right?

MINITER: That's absolutely right. This is a pattern that was set in February 1993 with the World Trade Center bombing, it was turned over, within hours to the FBI and became a criminal investigation, which shut the CIA out. So, the CIA was able to supply occasionally information to the FBI, but they couldn't get information back. No one outside the New York office of the FBI, except perhaps the FBI director himself, knew what the FBI knew about the investigation.

So, the first two or three years of the Clinton administration, just how extensive bin Laden's operation was, what his role was with the 1993 bombing, none of this was known. Except on a small clique of people.

Now, intelligence is not supposed to work that way, Brit. All of these agencies are supposed to work together, under the direction of the director of Central Intelligence, who in that case was Jim Woolsey. But he said -- he told me that he was very frustrated that a 24-year-old special FBI agent knew more about the terrorist threat to America than he did as CIA director.

HUME: So, in the end, you had this consistent pattern. But Madeleine Albright, just in a word, was correct about one thing, wasn't she? That it would upset our allies if we did anything.

MINITER: It would, yes.

HUME: And since we have, it did, didn't it?

MINITER: It did upset the allies. But of course, the strikes that we carried out in Afghanistan and later in Iraq did seem to work in the sense that there have been no more attacks on American soil since September 11 2001.

HUME: The book is called "Losing Bin Laden." And the author before you is Richard Mintier. Thank you very much sir. It was a pleasure to have you.

MINITER: Thank you, sir.

HUME: Hope you'll come back.

We have to take a break for other headlines from New York. "Grapevine" next.

(NEWSBREAK)