

## Losing Bin Laden: Interview with Richard Minter

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**BILL HEMMER, CNN ANCHOR:** Tomorrow, once again, is the second-year mark of the 9/11 attacks. The man who's widely regarded as the instigator of the attacks still at large. But should Osama Bin Laden have been captured years ago? There's a new book that asserts that the Clinton administration had more than a dozen chances to either capture or kill the Al Qaeda leader. The book is called losing Bin Laden. The author, Richard Minter, joins us live in D.C. to talk about it.

Good morning to you, Rich. How are you today?

I want to take our viewers back to October of 2000. The USS Cole is blown apart in Yemen. There's a situation room back at the White House. All the administration has to get together and talk about it. What was the tone of that conversation in terms of the anticipated response from the U.S.?

**RICHARD MINITER, AUTHOR, "LOSING BIN LADEN":** Well, it was a pretty schizophrenic meeting. Now remember, that in both the Spanish- American War and World War I attacking a U.S. ship led to a declaration of war and a war. So it was -- there were some people in the room who thought that though that Osama Bin Laden's attack on the USS Cole which injured 17 sailors and injured another 44 in October of 2000 was going to lead us into war. In fact, Bin Laden himself was later said that he was hoping for that war.

But in the situation room there was really not a council of war. Richard Clark, the counterterrorism coordinator, had passed out detailed plans for retaliation against Bin Laden's camps, his infrastructures, his arms caches, and he said, let's blow them up, but no one else in the room agreed with him.

**HEMMER:** You're saying he was the only one in that room, and the president was there at the time, Bill Clinton, is that what you're saying?

**MINITER:** No, the president was not there. It was called a principals meeting of the cabinet. They were meeting to recommend a course of action to the president.

**HEMMER:** OK, I just want to move this forward just a little bit. They eventually took a vote based on an action that should come. What was that vote?

**MINITER:** It essentially 7-1 against. Janet Reno was afraid it might be a violation of international law. CIA director George Tenet wanted more investigation. Madeleine Albright, she

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was concerned that it would destroy the Middle East peace process if we began bombing a Muslim country, even in retaliation for a deadly attack.

**HEMMER:** So we can look back at this vote and say 7-1, what in the world were you thinking? But at the time, 9/11 was still a few years removed. In hindsight, sure, it looks pretty good. 20/20 vision looks perfectly right now that Osama Bin Laden should have been taken care of at that point.

Why is it that you claim that the former administration, the Clinton administration, passed on numerous occasions to get Osama Bin Laden and take him out?

**MINITER:** Well, I hear this hindsight point a lot. And it's important to remember what people knew at the time and what they didn't know. Obviously, they did not know about 9/11. But on Clinton's watch, 59 Americans were killed by Bin Laden. So there was a series of escalating attacks by Bin Laden on Americans both at home and abroad, going back to December 1992.

Of course, no one can forget the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing in which seven people died, including a pregnant woman, Monica Smith. And he was behind other attacks, such as on U.S. troops in the streets of Mogadishu in October 1993.

So the danger of Bin Laden was there, and by the end of the Clinton years, by October 2000, when the Cole was attacked, he had blown up embassies, killed Americans in Saudi Arabia, as well; he had declared war on the United States five times.

**HEMMER:** And, Richard, your critics will say the current President Bush came into office in January of 2001, eight months before the attacks on 9/11, and eight-month period where they could have taken action. Your reaction and response to that is what?

**MINITER:** Well, that's actually the subject of my next book is "Bush's Secret War." And you're absolutely right. Bush was in power for eight months, and Clinton was in power for eight years. But there probably were some things that President Bush could have done better.

Of course, a lot of people in the Bush administration weren't actually put into office, put into their jobs until very late. The FBI director started one week before 9/11, for example. And the CIA director, George Tenet, was a Clinton holdover. So it's a very mixed bag.

I don't want to get partisan about this. It's about learning the lessons from the Clinton years. And it's also about learning a history which really hasn't been documented, which is what Clinton knew about Bin Laden and what he did about it.

**HEMMER:** In the short time left here, give us a bit of perspective from yourself on this question: Even if Bin Laden were taken out 1998, 1999, 2000, first part of 2001, there is nothing to suggest the attacks of 9/11 would have been prevented, correct?

**MINITER:** I wouldn't necessarily agree with that. Bin Laden maintains a very strict -- at least up until 9/11, maintained a very strict control over his operations, and there's a lot of oversight and micromanagement. If you destroy the leadership structure, they wouldn't be able to provide money and funds. And remember, in January 2001, most of the hijackers were not yet in the United States. Just a handful were. So it might have been possible to prevent 9/11.

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But a more aggressive approach against Bin Laden surely would have made a difference. Just as we're seeing now. Since 9/11, there hasn't been a terrorist attack inside America. That's evidence that an aggressive approach probably does work. You can just wonder what would have happened if Clinton was able to have an aggressive approach following the 1998 embassy bombings. History might have been a little bit different.

**HEMMER:** The book is called "Losing Bin Laden." We'll wait for the next one, "The Secret War" with the current president. Richard Minter, thanks for talking with us in D.C.

**MINITER:** Thanks for having me on.

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