

Clinton Administration's Missed Chances

Author: President's Response To Terror Too Timid, Too Often Driven By Political Concerns

Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO), Final Edition,
OPINION/COMMENTARY/EDITORIAL; Pg. 44A
Thursday, October 30, 2003

By Thom Beal, DEPUTY EDITOR OF THE EDITORIAL PAGES.

In *Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror* (Regnery 2003) author Richard Minter lets readers know immediately where he stands with regard to the Clinton administration's record on Osama bin Laden before bin Laden became the face of global terrorism.

In the introduction Minter declares, "Clinton was tested by a historic, global conflict, the first phase of America's war on terror. He was president when bin Laden declared war on America. He had many chances to defeat bin Laden; he simply did not take them. If, in the wake of the 1998 embassy bombings, Clinton had rallied the public and the Congress to fight bin Laden and smash terrorism, he might have become the Winston Churchill of his generation. But, instead, he chose the role of Neville Chamberlain." His bottom-line thesis: If Clinton had fought back more aggressively from the beginning, the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, might never have happened.

Minter was an editorial page writer at *The Wall Street Journal Europe* and a member of the *Sunday Times* (of London) investigative team whose four-part series traced the secret war between Clinton and bin Laden. He is currently a senior fellow at the Centre for the New Europe in Brussels, Belgium.

He spoke with Thom Beal, deputy editor of the editorial pages.

Beal: When did the Clinton administration know about Osama bin Laden and what did it know?

Minter: President Clinton knew about bin Laden within months of being sworn into office. The very first attack bin Laden made on Americans was Dec. 29, 1992, a little more than a month after Clinton won the 1992 election. The target of that attack was 100 or more Marines quartered in the twin towers of the Goldmore Hotel in Aden, Yemen, a plot that fortunately failed. But it alerted the CIA's counterterrorism unit to the fact that bin Laden was out there and a threat.

Then-National Security Adviser Tony Lake told me he doesn't remember briefing the president about bin Laden's foiled Yemen plan. But he did recall briefing Clinton in 1993 with regard to the World Trade Center bombing. The FBI very quickly linked that incident to bin Laden. And so certainly it and the other intelligence agencies began connecting the dots in the earliest days of the administration. Lake told me that by mid-1994 getting bin Laden was a top administration priority.

Beal: You introduce another player in the game who by 1993 was already tracking bin Laden and

bugging the administration nonstop about him.

Miniters: That was Rep. Bill McCollum, a Florida Republican from the district that included Disney World. He was the founder and chairman of the House Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare and had a wealth of contacts among the mujahedeen in Afghanistan who kept him informed of bin Laden's training camps and intention to target Americans. This led McCollum to write a series of remarkable letters to Clinton, CIA Director Jim Woolsey, Tony Lake and other members of the National Security Council about bin Laden. His goal was to get them to focus on bin Laden and global terrorism in general. Like Cassandra, however, his warnings were accurate but ignored.

Beal: Jumping ahead, the turning point in all of this might have been the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen. Seventeen U.S. sailors were killed and the Cole was almost sunk. Your book includes an extraordinary chapter in which you describe the Clinton administration's response.

Miniters: The response was shockingly toothless. There's a pattern in American history of muscular responses to attacks on U.S. vessels. So when the Cole was attacked you'd have thought the administration would understand it as an act of war, or at least as requiring a decisive counterattack. But in the hours after the bombing in the situation room in the basement of the White House, nobody did except Richard Clarke, the White House counterterrorism coordinator. He had analyzed the intelligence that clearly implicated bin Laden. The Pentagon had a plan for cruise missile strikes against bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan and Clarke advocated springing into action.

Beal: There were in fact seven separate camps that we knew of. We had accurate satellite photographs and the GPS coordinates. The plan was ready, as you tell us in your book, and needed only the approval of the president and his cabinet.

Miniters: Right. But when the full meeting took place no one was in favor but Clarke. Attorney General Janet Reno thought a more thorough investigation was needed. What she really wanted was to push the problem off onto the desk of the next president, and there was a presidential election less than four weeks away. Then-CIA Director George Tenet also sensed his term was coming to an end, so he also favored more investigation.

Beal: I was surprised by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's counsel.

Miniters: It was most curious. At the time she said "bombing Muslims would not be helpful." In a subsequent interview with me she elaborated on what she meant by that, saying she thought retaliating against bin Laden would have disrupted the Middle East peace process, which she considered to be more important than retaliating against those who killed Americans. But then there was also Secretary of Defense William Cohen who said the attack "wasn't sufficiently provocative." Meaning he didn't think the attack on our warship and murder of 17 sailors was enough to justify a retaliatory strike. The result was that there was no formal recommendation to the president for retaliation so Clinton simply did nothing.

Beal: You look at the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 under a microscope. I found it bizarre that the FBI determined fairly quickly that it was a terrorist attack but Clinton refused to believe

it. What happened?

Minitzer: A couple of things. First, the FBI director was a man plagued by petty scandals and Clinton intended to replace him. So he didn't trust the FBI director. But he also refused to believe it was terrorism. To admit it was a bombing would have required a military response from the United States and he was 30 days into his first administration and just wasn't prepared to wage war on terrorists.

We can give Clinton credit for wanting to follow his campaign slogan and focus on the economy. But it blinded him to reality. He refused to visit the site of the bombing which, by the way, killed seven people including a pregnant woman named Monica Smith. He was only a 15-minute limousine ride away, giving a speech in New Jersey. He didn't want to cross the river and see the damage for himself. And I can't help but wonder whether history would have been different if Clinton would have looked into the mouth of that bomb crater or looked into the eyes of the people who had lost family members that day. If he would have sensed the enormity of what happened it might have changed his mind, but he just wasn't open to any information on the subject of terrorism.

Beal: Eventually, Clinton was offered bin Laden's head on a platter, so to speak. This remarkable deal involved the Sudanese, which two years earlier had turned the infamous terrorist, Carlos the Jackal, over to the French. The Sudanese sought to ingratiate themselves with us and the world community and offered to arrest bin Laden and hand him over. But Clinton declined to take advantage of this opportunity.

Minitzer: That's right. The Sudanese wanted to rehabilitate themselves on the world stage and lift both United Nations and U.S. sanctions. It's one of the world's poorest nations, so the Sudanese had a big incentive. They made all this clear from the beginning when they said they'd give up bin Laden, who had a house and family there. Moreover, bin Laden was an ally of the speaker of Sudan's legislature, who was an enemy of the country's president. So the president of Sudan thought getting rid of bin Laden would weaken his rival and that ultimately he would be able to consolidate his control over the Sudanese government.

Sudan's offer was credible because it was made through official channels by Elfatih Erwa, who was then Sudan's defense minister. Erwa confirmed to me that he did in fact make this offer to U.S. officials several times. I interviewed the U.S. ambassador to Sudan, Tim Carney, and U.S. State Department Director of East African Affairs David Shinn, and they were both told by Erwa and other Sudanese officials that "if you want bin Laden we'll give you bin Laden." All the Sudanese really wanted to do was repeat the Jackal scenario but put bin Laden in the starring role.

But the Clinton administration balked and that of course raises the question, "Why?" You don't get too many straight answers. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger said he was told by the Justice Department and FBI that there wasn't enough evidence to convict bin Laden in a U.S. court. But that is very questionable because there was already a lot of evidence linking bin Laden to the World Trade Center bombing and to the attacks on U.S. troops in Yemen and Somalia. Yemen in fact had filed a warrant with Interpol asking for help arresting bin Laden. So clearly

there was a lot of evidence.

The truth is the administration was afraid of the political repercussions. The offer was made on March 8, 1996, in a presidential election year, and a Democrat had not been re-elected to the White House since Harry Truman. Clinton wanted to restore the party's lustre and regain the White House, but was afraid that if he did a deal with Sudan he would be accused by either the media or the Republicans of dealing with a terrorist state - and Sudan certainly was listed by the State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism. So political considerations trumped national security and that's why we didn't ultimately accept the offer from the Sudanese.

Beal: You claim that by the spring and summer of 1998 the Clinton administration had descended into a deadlock over bin Laden.

Miniter: George Tenet essentially vetoed covert operations by the CIA to seize bin Laden. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Henry Shelton, advised against any small surgical operations by Special Forces, recommending instead a campaign involving thousands of troops. Unwilling to send troops into harm's way, Clinton froze up, while our enemies continued to pursue our destruction. The U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi, Kenya, occurred on Aug. 7, 1998. At about the same time, you'll recall Monica Lewinsky was testifying before a federal grand jury. By Aug. 14, Clinton had approved a cruise missile strike on several bin Laden camps in Afghanistan.

Beal: But you don't buy the wag-the-dog theory.

Miniter: Oh, I don't agree with the prevailing wisdom that the missile strike was a wag-the-dog attempt to distract the nation from the president's scandals. More than a dozen Americans were dead in Nairobi so I think Clinton made the right call.

Beal: But the missiles misfired. And, as you write, rather than strength and resolve, the retaliation communicated a quite different message.

Miniter: A few days after the missile attacks bin Laden emerged to give a press conference during which he sneered that he was still alive - "Look, the Americans can't get me" - and that really improved his standing in the Islamic world. The fact that we had tried to kill him and failed seemed to indicate he really did have Allah on his side, which brought him more recruits and more money. So he was handed another victory, triumphantly proclaiming his survival and emboldening his minions. By the time of the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, the administration's already tepid desire to use force against bin Laden has completely evaporated.