

'Clinton did not have the will to respond'

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By Mindy Belz

INTERVIEW: Author **Richard Minitzer** chronicles how the Clinton White House passed up opportunities to seize Osama bin Laden

AN AMAZON SEARCH FOR CURRENT books on Osama bin Laden turns up 50 or so choices. But search for books about the terrorist mastermind and Bill Clinton, and you will find precisely one. Losing bin Laden is the first book to explicitly overlay the ephemeral plottings of al-Qaeda with the chimera that was the 42nd president.

George Bush may absorb all current heat for failing to score decisively in the global war on terror, but, in the words of author **Richard Minitzer**, Osama bin Laden "is the unfinished business of the Clinton administration."

During the Clinton years the number of Americans who fell victim to terrorist plots grew steadily and Mr. bin Laden publicly declared war on the United States at least five times. At the same time, Mr. bin Laden learned that his forces could strike prime U.S. targets - the World Trade Center, U.S. soldiers (in Somalia), U.S. warships (USS Cole), and U.S. embassies (Nairobi, Dar es Salaam) - without drawing a serious counterattack from the White House.

Mr. bin Laden progressed from "a small-time funder of militant Muslim terrorists in Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan" at the beginning of Mr. Clinton's term to operating a "terror network ... in more than 55 countries and already responsible for the deaths of thousands" by 2000, Mr. Clinton's last year in office. The worldwide network by then was well along with plans for the 9/11 attacks.

It's old news that Mr. Clinton was distracted by poll readings and impeachment proceedings, leaving the war on terror to law-enforcement agencies and obscure State Department bureaucrats. But Mr. Minitzer, a former Wall Street Journal editor, has a few new things to say about the license for liberty Mr. Clinton handed al-Qaeda. Relying on intelligence documents from Sudan and a Clinton donor-turned-Islamic-power-broker named Mansoor Ijaz, Mr. Minitzer describes too many opportunities when the Clinton administration had Mr. bin Laden within its grasp - and refused to take him.

More remains to be said about Mr. Ijaz, a highly successful Pakistani-American businessman and millionaire contributor to the Clinton and Gore campaign war chests. When Mr. Ijaz first exposed Clinton administration bungling in the war on terror, he became an overnight darling of the right, appearing on places like Fox News and in National Review to tout his own attempts to bring in Mr. bin Laden. Some think Mr. Ijaz - who shuttled between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan right up until 9/11 - has too many friends in the wrong places. But Mr. Minitzer has sifted the Ijaz material through an impressive list of longtime intelligence and counterterrorism sources to ably document the Clinton White House's pre-9/11 passivity - a fond hope that its mastermind would simply go away.

WORLD: What started you down this trail, picking up the empty traps where Bill Clinton had let the bin Laden rabbit get away?

RM: On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, I almost lost my brother, Brendan. Brendan Minter works at The Wall Street Journal on the tip of Manhattan, across the street from the World Trade Center towers. Every morning, he takes the 8:30 a.m. train into the city and gets off underneath the North Tower of the World Trade Center around 8:45 a.m. As you know, the first plane hit at 8:48 a.m. By the time the second plane hit, I was frantically calling New York City from Brussels, Belgium, where I was based, also working for The Wall Street Journal. Like thousands of other Americans, I was only getting busy signals - and the gnawing sense that I might have just lost my brother. Within hours my prayers were answered and I learned that my brother had been spared.

But the 9/11 attacks got me thinking. So I queried intelligence sources that I had developed over the years and was surprised to learn that the planning for the 9/11 attacks began in May 1998 (Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the 9/11 operational commander, now says the planning started in 1996). In other words, the planning for the 9/11 attacks began during the Clinton years. That led me to ask three questions: (1) What did Bill Clinton know about bin Laden? (2) When did he know it? (3) What did he do about it?

Losing bin Laden is the result of a two-year investigation to answer those three questions.

WORLD: You describe Bill Clinton as waging a private war against terrorism. In doing so, was he not simply reflecting the will of the 1990s electorate, saturated with economic prosperity and preoccupied with dot-com mania?

RM: Clinton pollster Dick Morris told me that polls in the Clinton years consistently showed strong public support for taking military action against terrorists. Indeed, public support was usually north of 60 percent in favor of such action. So the will of the electorate was actually to the right of President Clinton.

As for the economic prosperity and Internet technology distracting Americans from the war on terror, I think I disagree with that notion. Remember in the 1980s - when Americans enjoyed hitherto unprecedented prosperity and technological innovation - Ronald Reagan waged a public war on terrorism. Mr. Reagan bombed terrorist training camps in Libya for retaliation for a Libyan bombing of a Berlin disco in 1986. That bombing claimed the lives of two Americans and Mr. Reagan responded with a bombing run involving dozens of fighters, bombers, and surveillance aircraft.

In the Clinton years, we also had prosperity and new technology but Mr. Clinton did not have the will to respond strongly to terrorist attacks, even though bin Laden terrorist attacks claimed 59 American lives.

WORLD: Can you describe how you first came upon Mansoor Ijaz and other back-door offers to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States? Why haven't we heard of these before?

RM: Former CIA director Jim Woolsey first told me about Mansoor Ijaz. I interviewed Mr. Ijaz more than a dozen times, checking and re-checking his account. He showed me copies of e-mails from the White House and confidential memoranda he had drawn up for top Clinton administration officials. Interviews with other top Clinton administration officials, including former National Security Advisor Tony Lake, former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, and a number of veteran State Department officials rounded out my account of the offers to share Sudanese intelligence files and hand over Mr. bin Laden.

WORLD: As difficult as bringing down Osama bin Laden is proving under the overt war of President Bush, do you believe the back-door offers really had a chance to succeed in shutting down al-Qaeda terrorism? To be plain, could Bill Clinton have prevented 9/11?

RM: Yes, the Sudanese wanted to get rid of Mr. bin Laden for their own selfish reasons. Mr. bin Laden was backing Hassan al-Turabi, the rival of Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan. By getting rid of Mr. bin Laden, the president of Sudan was weakening an internal enemy.

Sudan also wanted to get credit from the United States for doing something "good," in hope of getting trade sanctions weakened. Sudan wasn't doing this because they necessarily cared about the United States.

Keep in mind that two years earlier, Sudan had turned over the infamous terrorist, Carlos the Jackal, to the French. At the VIP lounge of the Khartoum airport, he was surprised by armed members of French intelligence and flown to Paris. He now sits in a French prison. Sudan wanted to repeat that process with Osama bin Laden - but Mr. Clinton wasn't interested.

Without Mr. bin Laden, al-Qaeda cannot function as a global entity. Only the force of his personality can hold its various factions together. If Mr. bin Laden was seized in 1996, al-Qaeda would have shattered into many dangerous pieces. Would that end terrorism? No. But it might well have prevented the 9/11 attacks.

WORLD: Our readers will be troubled by your generous view toward the Islamic regime in Sudan. Is it possible the State Department and others didn't take the Sudanese offers of Mr. bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members seriously because Khartoum at that very time was starving and slaughtering Sudanese Christians and other minorities?

RM: I have traveled extensively in southern Sudan and saw the slaughter of innocents (including many of my fellow Christians) close-up. I was in the southern city of Yei while the government of Sudan bombed it. I do not have a generous view towards the unelected Islamic government of Sudan.

But while that government hosted Mr. bin Laden from April 1991 to May of 1996 and, for its own selfish reasons, wanted to rid themselves of Mr. bin Laden, I don't see why the Clinton administration couldn't have accepted this offer. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice did cite the suffering of Christians as one reason that she doubted the integrity of the Sudanese offers. But her analysis largely overlooked the view of U.S. Ambassador to Sudan Tim Carney, who argued for calling Khartoum's bluff. Accept their offer of Mr. bin Laden and see if the National Islamic Front actually hands him over. If they do, we would have taken a major terrorist off the streets. If they do not, the civilized world will see that, once again, Sudan's critics are proven right.

Ultimately, the issue should not have been whether or not the Sudanese government was good or bad. Unfortunately, terrorists tend to associate with unsavory people and governments. The ultimate question should have been whether taking this offer seriously was in the national security interest of the United States.

WORLD: Why, when the subject of the book is the failings of the Clinton administration to deal with the bin Laden threat, do you treat Mr. Ijaz, a bona fide friend of President Clinton and one of his largest campaign contributors, as a premium source?

RM: When writing a book that gives the first detailed inside account of the failure of Mr. Clinton's war on terror, the best sources were naturally those friends of Bill and top Clinton administration officials who knew

exactly what went on. That's why I interviewed Mr. Ijaz and other campaign contributors as well as both of Clinton's national security advisors, Tony Lake and Sandy Berger; Bruce Lindsey, his lawyer and advisor; the president's pollster, Dick Morris; Richard Clarke, his counterterrorism czar; and others. There is simply no better way to document what went on than to interview the players. It is simply a fact of the Clinton administration that campaign contributors were players.

Of course, like any good reporter, I treated my Clinton sources the same way Ronald Reagan treated Gorbachev: "Trust but verify."

WORLD: You do a good job of documenting the very un-Islamic lifestyles of Mr. bin Laden's followers. But to what should we attribute their devotion, if not to radical Islam? Is it a cult of bin Laden?

RM: True religion is about submitting yourself to the will of God, not letting your private demons and worldly temptations drive your behavior. I question whether Mr. bin Laden's followers have any religion at all, based on their willingness to murder innocents, to steal to finance their terrorist cells, to attend strip shows and pay for sex, and to kill themselves in the hopes of having their way with 72 virgins in the afterlife.

The ideology of radical Islam owes a huge debt to the communist and Nazi ideologies. The writings of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's No. 2 man, cite Iranian and other communist parties. Even al-Qaeda's facile anti-Americanism is based on the propaganda generated by various Soviet-backed front groups in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s. While they are perhaps not as godless as the communists, their behavior, rhetoric, and ideology are virtually indistinguishable from Marxist revolutionaries.

Is there a "cult of bin Laden"? In one Arabic-language newspaper report I saw, one of bin Laden's discontented followers said that bin Laden considered himself to be a prophet of God. In traditional Islam, this is heresy. And bin Laden and his top lieutenants routinely give their followers permission to break Islam's oldest laws - something only a cult leader can do.

WORLD: Having seen what President Clinton did wrong, what is President Bush doing right? Is bureaucratic bungling truly being worked out of the system or just being papered over?

RM: Unlike Mr. Clinton, Mr. Bush is decisive. He takes action and measures results. While Mr. Clinton was Hamlet, Mr. Bush is Fortinbras. While too many bureaucratic restrictions remain, the president and his men have been very active in forcing the CIA and FBI to work together overseas and in coordinating law-enforcement efforts to hold terrorists at bay at home.