

Kill Bill: the relentless effort to blame 9/11 on President Clinton.

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By Jamie Malanowski

Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror

By Richard Minitzer. Regnery Publishing, \$ 27.95.

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Losing bin Laden might be thought of as the pilot for a series to be called CSI: Right "Wing Conspiracy." In the book, British journalist Richard Minitzer sifts through eight years' worth of the Clinton administration's approach to Osama bin Laden's terrorism, and lays the blame for failing to prevent the 9/11 attacks squarely on--altogether now, Regnery Publishing buffs!--Bill Clinton. Armed with 20/20 hindsight, Minitzer finds a long series of missed opportunities to capture or kill the terrorist. The result is an odd book that manages to raise serious questions and make serious points about the competing pressures and interests that go into creating a foreign policy, but that still overreaches in manipulative and mendacious ways.

In troth, if Minitzer were about 50 percent less tendentious, he would be 100 percent more convincing. It's distressing to read the catalog of chances to nip Osama bin Laden that went unavailed. Long before 9/11, for example, the Sudanese government had the terror kingpin under its watchful eye and was willing to unload him, but couldn't find a government that would agree to take him. Later, after more attacks, and after Clinton authorized bin Laden's execution, Predator drones had him in their sights on numerous occasions, but never was the order to fire issued. The August 1998 cruise missile attacks on bin Laden training camps in Afghanistan missed him by moments; apparently he was warned by someone in the Pakistani government, with whom we had shared our intentions. It's wrenching to read these accounts, "knowing that the atrocities of 9/11 loomed.

There's no question that these were failures. But the charge that Minitzer wants to prosecute is that Bill Clinton was responsible for these failures. Whenever he gets the chance, Minitzer likes to punctuate a scene in which Osama or one of his henchmen was industriously planning one of their mass murders with a contrasting scene in which Clinton is raising money or conducting a defense of his sexual adventures. Minitzer never says that Clinton did nothing to stop bin Laden, only that he could have and should have done more, done it earlier, and done it more forcefully, in other words, he should have gone for the big inning instead of bunting, or thrown the ball on third-and-one instead of rushing, or done any of the sorts of things recommended by the second-guessers who routinely call sports-talk programs after the game is played. No defense by Clinton is possible; after the murder of 3,000 people, very few people in positions of responsibility in our government can look themselves in the mirror and justifiably claim to have done all they could have.

However, if Minitzer had been less interested in leveling what seems awfully close to a blood libel,

it would be easier to congratulate him for producing a clear account of the competing policy questions, institutional inertia, bureaucratic competition, and the personality conflicts that thwarted the formulation and execution of a policy to stop bin Laden. When you look at these, it's clear that mistakes were made. But other times, actions were taken or not taken for good, sound reasons, and they just didn't work out. And still other times, actions were taken for silly, stupid reasons that seem beyond any president's control.

For example, Minitzer faults Clinton's "proportionate response" to Saddam's plot to kill former President George Bush: Clinton, you'll recall, fired 23 Tomahawk missiles at the headquarters of Saddam's intelligence service. Minitzer assures us that both Saddam and bin Laden "most likely" saw this as an example of "timidity and toothlessness" Well, perhaps they did, although if Minitzer is so adept at tapping into these fugitives' brainwaves, he is doing the world a disservice by using his skill on so small a project as this book. (Note that he makes the same wimpy charge about America's response to the "Black Hawk Down" battle in Mogadishu, but doesn't bring up America's failure to oust Saddam in 1991 or to back the Kurds that year; I guess we're only talking about our pussilanimity when a Democrat is in charge.) Minitzer doesn't tell us what a better response would have been. Shock and awe? Invasion? Minitzer scorns Clinton's decision to take a course that averted casualties. Okay, so it was a little Aaron Sorkinish of him. But does Minitzer seriously think that if Clinton had blown up a bunch of Iraqi spooks, Osama would have chucked the whole terrorism thing and gone into the olive oil business? Get real.

A lot of the time, it's hard to keep track of just what Minitzer is accusing Clinton of. He notes that Clinton made only one public comment after the World Trade Center attack in 1993, and says "this clearly demonstrated that he did not sense the importance of the bombing?" This is a charge that seems credible; it's hard to believe that he didn't grasp the issue more firmly. But just 48 pages later, Minitzer writes, "Less than a month after the World Trade Center explosion, Clinton became obsessed with capturing and convicting" the perpetrators. So which is it, insensible or obsessed? Minitzer then slaps Clinton for putting Richard Clarke of the National Security Council in charge of capturing the suspects, instead of "a general, a cabinet secretary or an elder statesman?" Or James Bond, for that matter. It seems that appointing someone smart, vigorous, and determined who'll bang the heads of the sclerotic generals, cabinet secretaries, and elder statesmen who don't have the celerity necessary to pursue this sort of villain is exactly the right thing to do.

And of course, Ramzi Yousef; the World Trade Center bomber, was captured under Clarke's watch, and is now in a federal prison, hopefully rotting.

Minitzer criticizes the Clinton administration for spending a lot of time treating the attacks and al Qaeda as law enforcement issues. He argues, sensibly, that we could have done a lot better if the F.B.I. and C.I.A. could have worked together. That's obviously true; but should Clinton have invested his time trying to overcome both the good historical precedents for separating the agencies, as well as the entrenched prejudices of the stubborn members of the agencies themselves, in order to push through legislation to change the law that separated their spheres of action? Only with the hindsight of 9/11 would you argue that would have been a useful investment of the president's time. Besides, Minitzer soon goes on to talk about how budget cutbacks had

limited the C.I.A.'s effectiveness, leaving us to wonder how much better cooperation would have helped if the C.I.A. was so inept. Minitier blames Clinton for the C.I.A.'s problems because then director James Wolsey got himself into a feud with his budget master, Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.), who kept slashing C.I.A. appropriations, including money for Arabic translators, in revenge. In other words, Minitier expects a president to pull himself away from brokering an agreement between Rabin and Arafat to moderate a dispute between a smug, inept bureaucrat and a childish, irresponsible senator.

It seems that for most of Minitier's accusations of Clintonian ineptitude, there are extenuating circumstances. Now, no one likes an extenuating circumstance, but only a fool thinks they don't exist. That offer by the Sudanese to turn over bin Laden? Turns out the Justice Department didn't think they had enough evidence to indict him. Now, Minitier quotes an unnamed Bush administration official telling him that there was "plenty" of evidence on which to bring charges. Who knows? You have to wonder whether this official also believes there's "plenty" of evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

What about those Predator drones that had bin Laden in their sights? Minitier says that the people monitoring them were sure they had lined up bin Laden 20 times, but that the Clinton administration required an unrealistic level of certitude before firing them. Of course, he reports that at least one of those times, it wasn't bin Laden, just some sheik out playing with his falcons. One can only imagine the ebullience with which Minitier would have written the chapter that detailed how we obliterated the sheik, popped open some champagne to celebrate, called off the hunt, and allowed the elusive bin Laden to slip away.

And what about that famous Cruise missile attack that bin Laden managed to elude after getting a warning from a high-level operative in the Pakistani government? Minitier tells us that whoever that person was, he learned of our plans because we told the government what we were doing. Minitier says the United States did what because our missiles would be coming from the direction of India, and the administration was worried Pakistan would see the missiles, think that India had launched a nuclear strike upon them, and retaliate in kind. So we told the Pakistanis because we didn't want to cause the deaths of hundreds of millions of innocent people.

What a namby-pamby that Clinton was. So unlike bin Laden.

There's a person missing from Minitier's story. It's Winston Churchill. Churchill is a giant in history because he grasped the danger Hitler posed, and used all his powers to warn his countrymen, and flog the government into action—all in real time. There is no figure like that here, surely none that has a better record on this issue than Clinton. Minitier does quote some Republican congressmen like Bill McCullum and Newt Gingrich warning about the threat, but if either of these men spent a tenth of time warning us about the Islamist threat that they spent panty-sniffing after Clinton, we might remember. No one in the GOP made terrorism an issue in the 2000 election. Remember how Pakistan figured in the campaign? No, it wasn't because a reporter asked George W. Bush if he thought Pakistan would be a reliable ally if we needed to invade Afghanistan. It was because a reporter asked Dubya if he knew the Pakistani president's name. And he didn't.

One deeply tropes that the present administration learns from the Clinton administration's mistakes-and their own. Nobody wants to see Losing bin Laden II: The Bush Years on bookshelves a few years down the line. Yet somehow we doubt that Minter and Regnery would be the ones producing it, even if it were justified. They seem more interested in waging partisan political conflicts than winning the war on terror.

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NOTE TO READERS: Please be advised that Mr. Malanowski is incorrect in stating that Mr. Minter is British. He is American.