

## Blind Eyes: Did U.S. officials let a terrorist slip through their hands?

The Washington Post, Final Edition, Book World; T08

November 9, 2003 Sunday

Reviewed by Peter Bergen

LOSING BIN LADEN: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror

By Richard Minter. Regnery. 317 pp. \$27.95

+++++

By far the most serious charge that can be leveled against Bill Clinton is that his administration was derelict in its handling of the al Qaeda threat and therefore deserves much of the blame for the dreadful events of Sept. 11. If these charges were true, Clinton's considerable accomplishments on the domestic economic front and foreign policy successes such as the Dayton peace accords would be utterly eclipsed, while even the harshest appraisals of the Lewinsky matter would be rendered moot. Moreover, a plausible argument that the Democrats screwed up the hunt for al Qaeda would have obvious implications for the election in 2004.

So what is Richard Minter's case for Clinton's malfeasance? It begins back in 1993, when the World Trade Center was first bombed by a group of Middle Easterners. Despite the ensuing six deaths and the thousands who were injured, Minter observes, "Clinton never even visited the site to assess the damage." But Minter torpedoed his own argument by later noting that within a month "Clinton became obsessed with capturing and convicting Ramzi Yousef [the mastermind of the attack]." U.S. officials apprehended Yousef in Pakistan in 1995, and he is now serving a 240-year sentence for his crimes -- hardly an abject failure of policy.

Minter relies on Mansoor Ijaz, a Pakistani-American and major Clinton campaign contributor, as a principal source for the most interesting section of his book, which concerns bin Laden's sojourn in Sudan between 1991 and 1996. According to Minter, the United States missed several opportunities to garner important intelligence about al Qaeda during this period. Minter portrays Ijaz as an "unofficial envoy" of the Clinton administration to the Muslim world who claims to have made multiple attempts to interest the Clinton administration in improving relations with Sudan and in entertaining Sudanese offers to hand over intelligence on al Qaeda. These approaches were rebuffed by Clinton officials, who told Minter that they viewed Ijaz as "a Walter Mitty living out a personal fantasy."

It turns out that those officials' suspicions of Ijaz may have been well-founded. In August, Ijaz told the British newspaper the Guardian that he had learned that the Bush administration had brokered a deal with Pakistan's dictator, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, at the end of the war in Afghanistan. Ijaz said that the United States agreed not to capture or kill bin Laden so as to avoid causing further unrest in the Muslim world. Ijaz told the Guardian that "There was a judgment made that it would be more destabilizing . . . [if bin Laden were captured or killed at the end of 2001]. There would still be the ability to get [bin Laden] at a later date when it was more appropriate." This charge is ludicrous -- and would be tantamount to treasonous behavior by the Bush officials involved if it were true -- and does little to enhance Ijaz's credibility. Moreover, even assuming that the Sudanese offers of intelligence on al Qaeda were sincere, the

The Washington Post November 9, 2003 Sunday

Clinton administration had good reason to be suspicious of overtures from a regime that had long sponsored terrorism and was regarded at the time as one of the most tyrannical governments in the world.

Minter reports the potentially explosive claim that the Sudanese even offered to hand over bin Laden himself to the United States in 1996. Minter's source on this is a Sudanese cabinet official, Elfatih Erwa. He says he met in March 1996 with a CIA officer in Virginia, where the offer was made to hand over the Saudi exile. Key Clinton national security officials poured cold water on Erwa's story when Minter queried them about it. Nonetheless, it's worth recalling that Sudan had given up Carlos the Jackal, a notorious terrorist, to the French in 1994, so there might have been an opening with the Sudanese on the matter of al Qaeda that the Clinton administration did not sufficiently exploit.

Minter also addresses the feckless Clinton administration response to the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000 that killed 17 sailors and almost sank the destroyer. Based on interviews with Mike Sheehan and Richard Clarke, both key counterterrorism officials, Minter recounts that the Clinton Cabinet was reluctant to respond militarily to what was quite obviously an act of war perpetrated by al Qaeda. Strangely, it was the Pentagon that was most reluctant to strike back. At the time Sheehan exclaimed: "What's it going to take to get them to hit al Qaeda in Afghanistan? Does al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon?"

However, the manner in which the attack on the USS Cole was handled does more to damage the Bush administration's reputation than it does Clinton's, as his term expired three months after the bombing of the Cole. In June 2001, five months after Bush had been sworn in, al Qaeda released a videotape claiming responsibility for the Cole operation. If the Bush administration needed a *casus belli* to destroy al Qaeda, here it was, broadcast around the world. Instead, the response was to do absolutely nothing.

Which brings us to the central weakness of Minter's book. The American inability to truly comprehend the al Qaeda threat was a systematic failure of many institutions, including the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, the FBI and the media, failures that cannot be pinned on any one administration. Beyond all that, you, gentle reader, are also at fault. There was no political will to go to war against al Qaeda because there was no public will to do so. The public had made it very clear during the '90s that even small numbers of U.S. military casualties were unacceptable, whether in Somalia or in the Balkans. All that changed with Sept. 11. Now two wars later, at the cost of hundreds of American deaths, thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilian dead and untold billions of U.S. taxpayer money, the Bush administration is still "losing bin Laden" -- two years after Sept. 11. \*

*Peter Bergen is a fellow of the New America Foundation and the author of "Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden."*

---

**Copyright 2003 The Washington Post**