



THE CONTROVERSIAL U.S. RETALIATORY MISSILE STRIKES

by *Oriana Zill*

On August 20, 1998, the United States attempted to retaliate against Osama bin Laden for his alleged role in the East Africa U.S. embassy bombings. On that day the U.S. launched dozens of Tomahawk cruise missiles against two targets--several bin Laden training camps in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan.

But immediately after, questions began to emerge about the choice of targets, and the Clinton administration has yet to satisfactorily answer many of those questions.

As early as August 12--five days after the embassy bombings--sources say a "small group" of foreign policy advisors met with President Clinton to let him know they believed Osama bin Laden was behind the bombings. (Early breaks in the case had led to the quick arrests of two men who linked the attacks to bin Laden.)

The "small group" consisted of the **National Security Advisor Sandy Berger**; Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; Secretary of Defense William Cohen; Director of the CIA George Tenet; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry Shelton; and a high-ranking staff member, counter-terrorism czar Dick Clarke.

"So these six very powerful people--the President, the head of the Pentagon, the head of the NSC, the head of the CIA, the head of the State Department and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs have got a real dilemma," says Tim Weiner, *New York Times* reporter. "They want to strike back, but where? Where can you hurt him? Where can you take him down? Where can you do him damage? The problem is, they may not have struck him where it hurt the most."

In the past, the U.S. has taken a law enforcement stance to terrorist attacks: the FBI attempts to uncover who was responsible and bring them to trial in the U.S. The attack on the U.S. embassies, however, was deemed an act of war against the U.S. The advisory group discussed a military response and it was recommended that the U.S. attack bin Laden's network and attempt to destroy his base of operations.

The advisors had a list of potential targets that had been developed by the CIA over many months of investigating bin Laden and his terrorist network, "**Al Qaeda**." They eventually decided on two sites:

- 1) the camps in Afghanistan which they believed would be the site of a large meeting of terrorist leaders later that month; and
- 2) a pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan where they believed bin Laden's network had been producing chemical weapons.



aftermath of the u.s. cruise missile attack on khost, afghanistan

In Afghanistan, approximately 70 cruise missiles hit three alleged bin Laden training camps. An estimated 24 people were killed. But if they wanted to kill bin Laden, they failed. Bin Laden was not at the camps when the bombs hit. In the Sudan, approximately 13 cruise missiles hit a pharmaceutical plant. The night watchman was killed.

Days later, in the streets of Khartoum, Sudanese President al-Bashir led an anti-US march. Suddenly it seemed America was transformed from a victim of terrorism to an aggressor nation. And in the days following the bombing, the President's National Security Advisor Samuel Berger faced a barrage of questions--especially on the Sudan attack. Reports quickly circulated that the Sudanese missile strike had hit a working pharmaceutical plant with no easily-proven link to bin Laden.

FRONTLINE questioned National Security Advisor Sandy Berger about the attacks and he claimed they were justified. "Well, I believe we had solid knowledge that this facility was associated with chemical weapons," said Berger. But on the day immediately following the missile strike, Berger had said that the camp was "producing chemical weapons." Berger and others had backed away from their initial assertions about the camp as more evidence emerged.

To help sort out what had happened, FRONTLINE brought **Milt Bearden** to the Sudan. Besides coordinating the CIA's covert aid program to rebels in the Afghan war, Bearden was CIA station chief in Sudan during the mid-eighties. He has been critical of the missile strikes against bin Laden.

"Last August 20, we struck with missiles two Islamic states--one totally failed state, Afghanistan, and a nearly [failed state], the Sudan," said Bearden. "My reaction is, 'Dear God, what do they know? What is this about?'"

On the day of the missile strikes, Clinton administration officials also made other statements about the Sudan pharmaceutical plant which since have been disproven. For instance, despite U.S. claims that the factory was not making pharmaceuticals, it's now known this is not true. (FRONTLINE learned that the U.S. conducted an internet search on the plant and used that as the basis for evidence that the plant was not producing pharmaceuticals.)

And, if the factory was ever producing any nerve gas-related chemicals, the evidence has been less than convincing. There are two major problems with the U.S. government's case. First, a test on a soil sample that the administration says proves that the plant was involved in chemical weapons production is, according to many experts, inconclusive. The chemical which was found, Empta, is a precursor to create nerve gas. But, experts say, Empta breaks down quickly and can be confused with other less harmful chemicals. Despite repeated tests by others, including lawyers for the plant owner, there have been no independent confirmations of the U.S. government's soil test.

Secondly, the Clinton administration has failed to demonstrate a solid financial link between the plant and bin Laden. They initially claimed that the plant was owned by the Sudanese Military Industrial Corporation, yet the plant had actually been sold to a Saudi millionaire, Saleh Idris, several months before the attack. The private investigative firm of Kroll and Associates has found no solid financial link between bin Laden and Idris.

Bearden believes the U.S. government needs to come forward and prove to people that their intelligence was accurate. "Look, if you've got intelligence sources that matters to protect, don't worry about it. Bite the bullet, lay the intelligence on the table," he says. "If you've got to move somebody up for safety, do that, but lay it on the table now. Let us see it. This is not going to go away. The doubts are not just lingering, they're growing."

Sudanese officials told FRONTLINE that they would welcome a chemical weapons inspection team from the United Nations, to prove they are not involved in chemical weapons production. And yet, despite the Sudanese claims of willingness to cooperate, it is troubling that Sudan has refused to sign the United Nation's chemical weapons treaty.

For more on the U.S.'s response to terrorism, read "[Hard Target: We Can't Defeat Terrorism With Bombs and Bombast](#)," an op-ed piece by former CIA Middle East specialist Raymond Close.

Read more on the controversy about the evidence for the retaliation in "[Decision to Strike Factory in Sudan Based Partly on Surmise](#)" a [New York Times](#) article by Tim Weiner and James Risen.

"[Chemical Weapons in the Sudan: Allegations and Evidence](#)," an article by Michael Barletta, Senior Research Associate at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, provides details and analysis of the evidence of nerve gas production at the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant.

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