

**THE BOMBING OF THE USS COLE: HOW U.S. FOREIGN AND
MILITARY POLICY LED TO 9/11**

By

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ABSTRACT

On October 12, 2000, al-Qaeda suicide bombers attempted to sink the USS *Cole*, an Arleigh Burke guided-missile destroyer that was refueling in Aden, Yemen. They almost succeeded, and seventeen sailors lost their lives. Less than a year later, nearly 3,000 American civilians would be dead and the United States would be at war, not with a nation-state, but with a transnational organization known as al-Qaeda.

Part I of this work introduces an abbreviated history of Yemen's long relationship with imperialistic powers. The arrival of al-Qaeda and the United States Navy in Yemen were each shaped by imperialism, and by the late 1990s, both of these entities were operating out of Yemen. A detailed account of their clash at Aden harbor is provided in explicit detail from both the viewpoints of the al-Qaeda cell and the sailors aboard the USS *Cole*. In spite of a gaping hole in the side of its hull, the American warship was ultimately salvaged as a result of a determined and sustained effort by the crew.

Part II provides insight into Osama bin Laden's ideological foundation, specifically examining his primary motivations for founding al-Qaeda. In addition to identifying key historic figures and events that proved transformative for the Saudi millionaire, this section outlines bin Laden's major aspirations for his organization. These goals included the removal of American military forces from the Middle East, the destruction of the state of Israel, the overthrow of Muslim governments he viewed as apostate, and the creation of a new Islamic caliphate.

Part III illuminates how al-Qaeda's escalating attacks fit into bin Laden's overall strategy for defeating the United States, and summarizes how the Clinton and Bush administrations attempted to address the issue of terrorism while failing to recognize that the growth of al-Qaeda was a serious threat. Based on naval doctrine and protocol, this section will expound on why the

USS *Cole* was in Aden, Yemen in October 2000. At the tactical level, the USS *Cole* was poorly prepared in Aden harbor because the United States Navy was deficient in its force protection training/equipment and because the crew's leadership team failed to successfully implement essential aspects of the ship's mandatory defensive plan.

The devastating impact of 9/11 left millions of Americans pondering how such a horror could befall their country. This work contends that ineffective foreign and military policies enabled this attack to transpire. Often overlooked in the larger narrative, the bombing of the USS *Cole* signified a missed opportunity for the United States government. As the final attack before 9/11, the months after the USS *Cole* represented America's last chance to avert disaster.

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One can never have too many mentors. During my doctoral studies, Adrian Lewis has supported my work and challenged me to greater heights. He has demonstrated how to be a military historian through personal example. It has been my great fortune to work closely with Dr. Lewis and develop under his leadership.

My family is a remarkable and tight knit team. Thus, when one of us has a little victory in life, we all have a little victory in life. This work is a group success. Thank you to my dad and brother for your love and endless support throughout this process. And most of all, I want to extend a special thanks to my mom, the greatest librarian of all time. This book, like my life, would not be possible without you.

During the writing of this dissertation, several of the most important people in my life passed away. This is dedicated to Betty, Alice, Rose, and Mimi. I am sorry we didn't get to celebrate together.

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As the twin towers of New York collapsed, something even greater and more enormous collapsed with them: the myth of the great America and the myth of democracy. It became clear to all that America's values are the lowest, and the myth of the "land of the free" was destroyed, as was the myth of American national security and the CIA, all praise and glory to God.¹

-Osama bin Laden, "Among a Band of Knights"

I welcome these hearings because of the opportunity that they provide to the American people to better understand why the tragedy of 9/11 happened, and what we must do to prevent a reoccurrence. I also welcome the hearings because it is finally a forum where I can apologize to the loved ones of the victims of 9/11, to them who are here in the room, to those who are watching on television, your government failed you. Those entrusted with protecting you failed. And I failed you. We tried hard, but that doesn't matter because we failed. And for that failure, I would ask, once all the facts are out, for your understanding and your forgiveness.²

-Richard Clarke to the Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

INTRODUCTION

Sixty years after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, September the 11th eclipsed December 7th as the new date which will live in infamy. On that doomed morning in September, nineteen al-Qaeda operatives boarded four commercial airliners in Boston, Newark, and Washington, D.C. with the sole purpose of killing as many Americans as possible. They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. The planes were fully fueled to make cross-country treks to Los Angeles or San Francisco, and the al-Qaeda members found their seats dispersed among business travelers and families headed west. Armed with only box-cutters and a few English phrases, the young men, who predominately hailed from Saudi Arabia, waited until their flights were in the air before forcing their way into the cockpits of the four aircraft. Using their

¹ Osama bin Laden, Bruce Lawrence, and James Howarth, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Verso Books, 2005), 194.

² The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel III, March 24, 2003.

commandeered passenger liners as guided missiles, the hijackers first struck at America's economic capital in New York's Financial District by crashing American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 into the two premier skyscrapers of the World Trade Center complex. The Twin Towers, which at one time had represented the tallest structures in the world, eventually succumbed to the ensuing inferno caused by the burning jet fuel and crumbled to the ground dragging a third building in the World Trade Center down in the process. Lower Manhattan had become a warzone.

American Airlines Flight 77 had departed Dulles International airport earlier that morning destined for Los Angeles, but the al-Qaeda hijackers redirected the plane back toward the nation's capital. Without any aerial defenses deterring his approach, the new pilot of Flight 77 could have targeted a number of government buildings inside the District, including those on Capitol Hill, the Supreme Court, or the White House. Instead, he skipped the three structures that represent the branches of the American government and settled on the Pentagon, the heart of America's military activity. The Pentagon is a mammoth structure comprised of a labyrinth of circular walkways, and the impact of Flight 77's nosedive into the Department of Defense was so forceful that it cut through the concrete walls of the building's three outer rings. The final plane, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in a field outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania, as the result of a heroic counter-attack by the passengers and crew who were unwilling to remain pawns in the al-Qaeda endgame.

Just as previous generations can vividly recall Pearl Harbor, Americans will always remember the horror of 9/11. Most can tell you where they were or who they were with as they watched as thousands of their fellow citizens were executed. As the country mourned with the great cities of the East Coast, the collective nation attempted to make sense out of the chaos. For

most Americans, the attack seemed unprovoked from a relatively obscure enemy. In this regard, the September 11th tragedy was unlike Tokyo's surprise strike against the U.S. military bases in Hawaii. Conflict with the Japanese Empire appeared a distinct possibility in the late 1930s and early 1940s; yet before the 9/11 attack, the average American could not have identified Osama bin Laden or fathomed the depths of his darker aspirations. Although bin Laden became a household name after September 11, the origins of the al-Qaeda attack initially remained shrouded in confusion.

After the destruction of 9/11, Americans were left wondering how a relatively unknown enemy could strike so easily inside their homeland with such devastating results. Many believed that the answers involved the United States being immersed in a war between Islam and the West. Nebulous theories about a clash of civilizations were easier to accept rather than the difficult task of examining the true genesis of America's conflict. The simplistic binary axiom about a fight between Islam and the West was not only ambiguous; it was misleading. Closer examination was to reveal that the September 11th attack had more to do with American foreign policy than it did with a so-called clash of cultures, particularly since the war centered on a single, identifiable group, al-Qaeda, not the vast global Muslim population. To understand this conflict, one must start by analyzing Osama bin Laden, his ideology, his organization, and his aspirations.

Al-Qaeda's ideology had its roots in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Western and Soviet competition and imperialism, the creation of the state of Israel, and foreign dependency on Middle East petroleum. The group originated from a contingent of Muslim fighters who had refused to acquiesce to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The resistance adopted the unofficial name mujahedeen, which literally translated as "one engaged in jihad." Although a

majority of the Muslims bearing arms against the Soviet troops were Afghan natives, a limited number of volunteers originated from places including Yemen, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf. This conglomerate of fighters from outside Afghanistan made up only a small percentage of those on the battlefield, but it was these guerrilla fighters who would continue the struggle even after Moscow withdrew its last troops in the early months of 1989.

Osama bin Laden, one of the founders of al-Qaeda, was a millionaire turned mujahedeen. The son of a construction tycoon, bin Laden was born and raised in Saudi Arabia with a famous last name. He believed himself to be a devout Muslim, even as a youth, and it was this love of Islam which led bin Laden to conclude that his religious obligation was to assist in the defense of Afghanistan against infidel invaders. Leaving his family behind, he departed King Abdul Aziz University on the verge of graduation and joined the war effort along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Because of his affluent background and penchant for fundraising, bin Laden found ways to contribute to the war without having to use a weapon.

The ancient city of Peshawar, Pakistan was a hub for mujahedeen activity in the 1980s, and bin Laden decided to make his mark among the flurry of activity near the Afghan border. In 1984, he established a stop-over location in Peshawar called Beit al-Ansar, translated as the House of the Supporters, to assist the foreign fighters en transit to the battlefield.³ In that same year, he joined forces with Abdullah Azzam, a former professor from bin Laden's university who taught that the Koran and a rifle were all that one needed to do God's work. Together, they created the Makhtab al-Khadamat (MK), also known as the "Services Bureau," with Azzam

³ Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001, 2002), 54.

acting as the leader while bin Laden provided the financials.⁴ Al-Qaeda was to eventually blossom from the seeds of this organization.

After a few years, Osama bin Laden concluded the time was ripe for the creation of a new organization. He discovered a willing audience among a group of disgruntled mujahedeen who were upset with the direction the Services Bureau appeared to be headed. Records recovered by Bosnian authorities confirm that in 1988 bin Laden spearheaded the creation of an all-male splinter group that eventually became known as al-Qaeda (AQ).⁵ At the time of its founding, al-Qaeda, translated as “the base,” was not focused on waging war against the West. Rather, its members, who generally shared a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, aspired to be the vanguard for their beloved religion against any individual, group, or state they perceived to be standing in the way of Islam. To expand their ranks, the al-Qaeda leaders planned to channel recruits through training camps in Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Through this process, the next generation of Muslim fighters would be ready to fortify the veterans of the Afghan campaign for future wars.

Osama bin Laden did not originally launch al-Qaeda with the intention of creating an anti-American network. However, his perspective toward the United States soured as a result of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s. As an American-led coalition prepared to face Iraq, bin Laden inveighed against the foreign armies for their intrusion into the holy land of Saudi Arabia, the home of Mecca and Medina. Exacerbating his anger, bin Laden became outraged when the United States continued its troop presence in Saudi Arabia long after Kuwait had been liberated from Saddam Hussein. For bin Laden and other members

⁴ Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54.

⁵ Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al-Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 74-81.

of al-Qaeda, this intrusion of non-Muslims foreigners into Islam's holiest lands was contrary to the wishes of the Prophet Mohammad. Bin Laden speculated that the United States government would never modify its foreign policies regarding the Middle East or abandon its military facilities located throughout the region unless coerced to do so. Convinced that Muslim governments such as Saudi Arabia were too compromised to act against Washington, Osama bin Laden turned to violence to force these changes himself.

Osama bin Laden believed that Islam was at a crossroads. Historically, Muslim rulers had been the ones responsible for protecting Islam, which had spread throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa following the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD. At his core, bin Laden felt that Muslim leaders in the twentieth century had abandoned Islam's righteous path and were neglecting their traditional responsibilities of promoting the world's second largest religion. Because of these perceived crimes, bin Laden and his followers desired regime change throughout the Middle East. The group hoped to resurrect the tradition of the caliphate, a position which had not existed since its abolishment by the Turkish President Mustafa Kemal in 1924. For al-Qaeda, the reestablished caliph, or successor of the Prophet, would once again fulfill his duties as the head of the world's two billion Muslims. Bin Laden reasoned that the establishment of a caliphate would not be possible as long as the current heads of state in the Islamic world remained in power. He proclaimed that these regimes were politically vulnerable and would fall without the overt and covert support of the American government. This rationale provided yet another reason for al-Qaeda to declare war on the United States.

With the goal of forcing U.S. foreign policy changes in the Middle East, al-Qaeda carried out a number of terrorist attacks against Americans starting in the early 1990s and continuing into the next millennium. Initially, these operations were rudimentary but grew in complexity.

Over time, bin Laden realized that small-scale attacks were never going to incite the United States to undertake a major policy shift and withdraw from the Middle East. So, he altered his strategy. The al-Qaeda leader recognized that his organization could not prevail in a conventional war with the U.S. Armed Forces. He also understood that in order to win a war al-Qaeda would need reinforcements. Bin Laden's new strategy focused on drawing the United States military into a country with a primarily Muslim population. Once this American invasion occurred, bin Laden was convinced Muslim fighters from around the world would flock to expel the invaders, much as they had in Afghanistan during the successful war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. He hoped a protracted conflict would lead to the economic weakening of the lone surviving superpower, thereby forcing Washington out of the Middle East in a similar fashion to how the U.S.S.R. had been drained from its Afghan experience. Bin Laden also had the example of Vietnam, a war where a relatively small nation defeated a superpower. With few options available to him, bin Laden settled on Afghanistan as the place to make his stand.

At the dawn of a new century, the United States remained in every way the most powerful nation on earth. American global influence was supposed to reign supreme with the defeat of the Soviet Union. For many, it was inconceivable that a foreign entity, especially a non-state actor, would attack the United States. In August 1998, however, al-Qaeda detonated two bombs outside two US embassies in two East African cities. The attacks gained international media coverage, as did President Clinton's retaliation which targeted al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and a bin Laden owned pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. The explosions at the Embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi killed hundreds of Africans and a small number of Americans, but the bombing did not cause the United States government to deviate from its

policy of housing military personnel throughout the Middle East. Having failed to affect change, bin Laden concluded that his next attack against the United States would need to be deadlier.

In October 2000, bin Laden's organization struck once again, this time targeting an Arleigh Burke class destroyer while the American warship was refueling in Aden, Yemen. The plot had been a simple one. Al-Qaeda operatives planned to drive a small vessel packed with explosives to the perimeter of the American ship before self-detonating their payload. During their approach, the suicide bombers were instructed not to act aggressively toward their target. The ruse worked according to plan. The colossal explosion penetrated the ship's hull crippling the USS *Cole*, and the Navy's warship was only salvaged because of the determined effort of its embattled crew. The gaping hole in the side of the USS *Cole* made deep-water transit impossible, and the destroyer was returned stateside on the back of the M/V *Blue Marlin*, a Norwegian ship designed for carrying petroleum equipment. The USS *Cole* ultimately survived the surprise attack, rejoining the fleet after hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of repairs. The two al-Qaeda suicide bombers with a simple scheme had succeeded in nearly sinking the destroyer, and the attack had sent seventeen Americans home in body bags. From his sanctuary in Afghanistan, bin Laden had sent yet another message to the United States government. Like the East African Embassy bombings, the near sinking of the USS *Cole* did not generate significant policy changes from the White House or Congress. In fact, the United States government failed to respond with any force at all. The country simply did not recognize that it was already at war.

The bombing of the USS *Cole* was not predestined to end as an American tragedy. The USS *Cole* was a vessel designed and armed for battle, and its highly-trained crew was supposed to be on a war footing even before entering the Red Sea. Still, al-Qaeda won the Battle of Aden

harbor for several reasons. The USS *Cole*'s crew was not properly prepared to defend their ship on October 12, 2000. The Navy's mandatory training on force protection had been insufficient, the weapons available to the sentries onboard did not offer overwhelming firepower, and there was a systemic breakdown throughout the ship's command-and-control structure during the implementation of a THREATCON BRAVO defense. At the strategic level, the feeble American response and lack of policy change did little to punish those responsible for the attack, which in turn, enabled and motivated al-Qaeda to continue escalating their war against the United States.

According to those around him at the time, bin Laden was frustrated by the apparent U.S. apathy over the bombing of the USS *Cole*. He wanted to instigate an invasion, but his enemy was refusing to fight back. Taliban officials, who were providing bin Laden with sanctuary during this time, were unsure how to handle the situation. Desperate to force change, bin Laden sought yet another escalation mission that the US government would not be able to ignore. For his next attack, his operatives would switch tactics away from targeting Americans in Africa or the Middle East and focus instead on striking inside the continental United States. On the morning of September 11, 2001, nineteen of bin Laden's followers succeeded in taking the fight to American soil, killing nearly 3,000 persons in the process. The magnitude of the 9/11 devastation coerced the United States government into undertaking drastic policy changes, most notably the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war, which led to the invasion of two Muslim nations. The al-Qaeda leader would finally get his war.

The bombing of the USS *Cole* was a pivotal event in the war between the United States and al-Qaeda. For the perpetrators of the attack, the USS *Cole* was a transcendent achievement. The operation created a boon for bin Laden's organization by attracting an influx of funding and

manpower following the strike in Aden harbor. Even after the near-sinking of an American destroyer, two presidential administrations and Republicans and Democrats alike refused to undertake offensive action against Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, or the Taliban government which had opened Afghanistan to these rogue combatants. If the United States had any chance of thwarting the 9/11 operation, the period after the bombing of the USS *Cole* marked America's last opportunity.

The lack of a targeted response can be traced to the substandard performance of the US intelligence community in the years leading up to the 9/11 attacks. The various intelligence agencies had failed to predict the East African Embassy bombings in August 1998, the aborted attempt in Aden harbor against the USS *The Sullivan's* in January 2000, or the successful suicide bombing strike on the USS *Cole* in October 2000. Interagency problems were not addressed after the *Cole*, ultimately resulting in a haphazard defense effort in the months prior to September 11th. A dearth of human intelligence (HUMINT) was a contributing factor in all these attacks, a problem which continued to haunt the Americans after 9/11. Another egregious mistake was an unwillingness to share information within the greater intelligence community even when analysts believed al-Qaeda attacks were imminent. Although the CIA had managed a successful campaign inside Afghanistan in 2001, they also endorsed the inaccurate contention that Saddam Hussein possessed a secret weapons of mass destruction program which ultimately provided the Bush administration the impetus to invade Iraq. This move played into bin Laden's overarching objective and seemed to support the clash of civilizations narrative.

The bombing of the USS *Cole* should have been a transformative event for the United States government. This should have been a time to reevaluate policies, particularly in the Middle East, and alter strategies for dealing with the growing al-Qaeda threat. Out of tragedy

comes opportunity, and the loss of seventeen crewmembers from the USS *Cole* created a defensible motive for the United States to respond with military action against a transnational group that had been targeting Americans for almost a decade. This high visibility attack against a naval destroyer should have signaled to Washington that a de facto state of war existed against a zealous and committed enemy. This fact was not fully understood until after the United States homeland came under attack, the World Trade Towers were decimated, the Pentagon was hit, and thousands of Americans had lost their lives.

Just as the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor led to the eventual destruction of its Empire, 9/11 marked Osama bin Laden's crowning achievement before his demise. His goal of forcing Washington to invade a foreign country succeeded, but bin Laden's plan did not have the results he had envisioned. The U.S. became even more embedded in the Middle East, not less. After its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States government invested over a decade rebuilding the infrastructure of those countries while engulfed in two counterinsurgency wars. Nevertheless, the costs surrounding the Afghan and Iraqi occupations were not enough to compel Washington to withdraw from the Middle East, and in fact, had the opposite effect on the world's superpower. It would have been a difficult move politically for the United States to disengage because western economies remained dependent on Middle East petroleum, and Washington had long functioned as the protector of oil as well as the sea lanes it travelled. With the United States continued commitment to the region, Osama bin Laden's strategy failed, and he died before seeing any of his major political objectives come to fruition.

This dissertation is an examination of the bombing of the USS *Cole*, as well as the United States foreign and naval policy failures that led to 9/11. It is a study of how events at the tactical level of war should have influenced policies, doctrines, and strategies at the highest levels of

government. The purpose of this work is to add a missing piece in the field of military history. The attack upon the USS *Cole* never received the scholarly analysis it merited, particularly considering the bombing's significance in the buildup to the 9/11 attack. The final chapters of this work look to rectify this gap in historical analysis.

Historiography

This work relies upon a combination of primary and secondary sources, including numerous government documents. The majority of these documents were photocopied by the author during research trips to the Library of Congress and the Clinton Presidential Library, thereby allowing the often-lengthy papers to be examined at later dates. In addition to the Clinton Presidential Records, this work utilizes primary documents from the United States Navy, the United States Senate, the United States House of Representatives, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Department of Justice. The author has also reviewed hundreds of al-Qaeda documents that were confiscated during the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the treasure trove of miscellaneous items captured by U.S. Special Forces immediately after killing Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The early chapters of this manuscript focus on Osama bin Laden because it is impossible to understand the attack on the USS *Cole* or 9/11 without understanding the Saudi, his organization, his motivations, and his goals. One of the first publicly available government documents that discussed Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's activities at length before 9/11 was the court case *United States v. Usama bin Laden*, 92 F. Supp. 2nd 189 (S.D.N.Y 2000). Although bin Laden was named at the top of the case, federal prosecutors included twenty additional al-Qaeda members as co-defendants. Filed in the Southern District of New York, the indictment primarily focused on al-Qaeda's dual attacks in the East African countries of Kenya and

Tanzania on August 7, 1998. In total, three hundred nineteen counts were brought against the group including conspiracy to murder, conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction, and murder charges. The indictment, titled United States of America versus Usama bin Laden, indictment S (9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS), is a crucial source of facts because it lays out the extensive documentation and evidence that the Department of Justice had gathered about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in the period leading up to the bombing of the USS *Cole*.

Released in 2004, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* has remained one of the most significant government documents for understanding the conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States. The commission staff, which was headed by five Republicans and five Democrats, successfully condensed 2.5 million pages of documents, 1,200 interviews, and the public testimony from one-hundred and sixty witnesses into a readable narrative outlining the history of the September 11th attacks.⁶ The report concluded by emphasizing the need for a “global strategy” against al-Qaeda and laid out the commission’s recommendations for improving the security of the United States. The 9/11 report, while flawed, is an invaluable document because it unlocks previously classified files that elucidate what was occurring within government agencies, the intelligence community, and the military in the years before the attacks against the continental United States. Furthermore, it outlines the strategy of al-Qaeda’s leaders as well as detailing the activity of its operatives while the group prepared for their devastating strike against the U.S.

Another primary source this work will utilize is Bruce Lawrence’s *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*. The book was first published in 2005 and had

⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), xv.

translational assistance from James Howarth, an Arabic linguistics specialist. Lawrence, who is an endowed Professor of Religion at Duke University, collected various speeches and writings attributed to the al-Qaeda leader during the decade between December 1994 and December 2004. The author offers an introductory chapter to help provide context to the reader as well as a short synopsis at the beginning of each chapter. The book's numerous footnotes successfully clarify the more abstract references to the Koran or Islamic history. *Messages to the World* contains only a condensed version of bin Laden's statements and lacks anything from the al-Qaeda leader from 2005 until his death in Pakistan in 2011. Still, Lawrence contributes significantly to our understanding of bin Laden's pre-9/11 motivations through the Saudi's own words.

Kepel and Milelli's *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* is another important primary work in the study of modern militant Islam. Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli taught at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris at the time of the book's publication in 2005 and therefore the original manuscript was in French. Harvard University Press later distributed a translated English version in 2008. Unlike Lawrence's *Messages to the World* which focuses solely on bin Laden, Kepel and Milelli selected statements from other Islamic fundamentalists including Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in addition to those of the al-Qaeda leader. A concise introduction precedes each of the four parts, but Kepel and Milelli's book is not densely footnoted like Lawrence's. This omission makes the work difficult to understand for the average reader, but it clarifies who influenced bin Laden, and in turn, who the Saudi exile inspired.

Raymond Ibrahim collected, edited, and translated the thoughts of al-Qaeda's leaders for his 2007 publication, *The Al Qaeda Reader*. The project originated during Ibrahim's work at the Library of Congress, where the author was employed in the Near East Section of the African and

Middle Eastern Division. The introduction to *The Al Qaeda Reader* is provided by Victor Davis Hanson, Ibrahim's M.A. advisor. The book is divided into two parts, Theology and Propaganda, the latter of which is broken up thematically. Most of the book is composed of primary documents from Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, some of which Ibrahim gleaned from websites and then cross-referenced with books.

Growing Up bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World is a unique perspective on Osama bin Laden's personal life. In this book from 2009, the reader discovers the nuances of living with Osama bin Laden on a day-to-day basis. To create *Growing Up bin Laden*, Jean Sasson, a New York Times bestselling author, worked with Osama's first wife, Najwa, and their fourth-born son, Omar. The book alternates by chapter between Najwa's and Omar's perspectives. The bin Laden clan as a whole has been reticent to speak publicly, and *Growing Up bin Laden* is the only book published on Osama bin Laden in collaboration with members of his own family.

Prior to 2001, Osama bin Laden was more of a footnote than a subject matter, and thus, there were few scholarly works available on the al-Qaeda leader before the 9/11 attacks. In the years since, historians have started the process of analyzing bin Laden's legacy, but the dialogue has also been heavily shaped by journalists and pundits. Unfortunately, many of these books need to be carefully critiqued as largely biased pieces armed with political agendas while other substandard works suffer from a lack of overall professionalism or solid research.

A number of these shortcomings were exemplified in Richard Minter's *Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror*. The author's motive was clear in this scathing book published by Regnery Publishing in 2003. Minter, a reporter for the *Sunday Times*, attempted to establish the narrative that the Clinton administration was responsible for the

rise of al-Qaeda. The work relied overwhelmingly on news articles with a sprinkling of interviews conducted by the author. The book ends abruptly with no summary or conclusions other than an appendix in which the author inaccurately contends that there was a secret alliance between bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.⁷ The book contains other errors such as Minitzer's assertion that bin Laden declared war against the United States on five separate occasions. With scarcely any primary sources, *Losing bin Laden*'s empirical methodology is lacking, and the absence of a conclusion makes the book feel unfinished. Minitzer does not get all of the story wrong, but his agenda is clear, and it is centered on sensationalism, not objectivity.

Losing bin Laden was the unfortunate outgrowth of an author writing with a political objective in mind. While the Clinton administration's handling of al-Qaeda justly deserved aspects of Minitzer's scrutiny, his criticism appears merely anecdotal. Al-Qaeda's growth during the 1990s was the result of numerous factors, and it was naïve to simply blame the President. Minitzer places no culpability on Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, the U.S. intelligence community, or the Bush White House, all of which played roles in allowing bin Laden's organization to evolve and grow more dangerous.

Not all journalists have followed Minitzer's example. Peter Bergen has written extensively on terrorism, and he has published four books on Osama bin Laden and his organization. A journalist by trade, Bergen has also lectured at John Hopkins University. While working as a producer for CNN, he was part of the first team from a Western media outlet to interview bin Laden, and he is one of the few Americans who personally spent time with the head of al-Qaeda. Bergen's *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* is one of the most informative primary documents available on the subject. While

⁷ This neoconservative trope, which was later debunked by American intelligence, was utilized by the Bush administration in support of the Iraq invasion in 2003.

moving chronologically through bin Laden's life, Bergen provides written and oral statements from bin Laden and those closest to him. *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, which was published in 2006, was Bergen's second book on bin Laden, but it is the most important. His first book titled *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, from 2002, compared bin Laden's organizational leadership to that of a corporate executive. Published in 2011, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda* delves into the continuing war between al-Qaeda and the United States government in the years after 9/11. Bergen's most recent book from 2012, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad*, attempted to bridge the narrative on the decade long search for bin Laden following his disappearance at Tora Bora in 2001. It concludes with a detailed description of the Obama administration's complicated decision to breach Pakistan's borders to capture or kill the al-Qaeda leader and outlines the Special Forces operation that ended bin Laden's life.

Bergen's compilation of books collectively described bin Laden's journey from his earliest days in Saudi Arabia to his death in Abbottabad, Pakistan. His works will remain indispensable resources, but his narrative suffers a major omission. He contends, most notably in *The Longest War*, that bin Laden's strategy of killing Americans was not necessarily based on forcing the United States into an invasion of a Muslim country. As this work will demonstrate, bin Laden was fixated on removing American influence from the Middle East, and he came to the realization that terrorist attacks alone were never going to achieve this goal. Once bin Laden settled on this conclusion, his strategy transitioned to finding ways to compel Washington into invading a Muslim nation.

Another important contributor to the bin Laden narrative was Michael Scheuer, who headed the CIA's al-Qaeda unit known as Alec Station from 1996 to 1999. Scheuer published

Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America anonymously in 2002. He followed up his first publication with *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* in 2004, and *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq* in 2008. However, Scheuer's most noteworthy work was *Osama bin Laden* published by Oxford University Press in 2011.

Drawing on his twenty-two years at the CIA, Scheuer had extensive access to classified materials regarding bin Laden and his organization. Scheuer's position as the chief of Alec Station and training as a historian made him an ideal person to write about the al-Qaeda leader, a calling he fulfilled in *Osama bin Laden*. This book enriched the composite narrative on the Saudi, and Scheuer demonstrated growth as a writer from his previous manuscripts in terms of direction and organization. Scheuer is at his best when providing the background story, but on occasion, his writing deteriorates from this. At times, the author berates American foreign policy unnecessarily, and he enters the dangerous ground of prognosticating about the future instead of focusing on providing historical analysis. This approach detracts from his overall scholarship.⁸

Unlike the topic of Osama bin Laden, the attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden harbor in October 2000 has largely been disregarded in scholarly fields despite having a rich foundation of primary sources available. The United States government categorized the *Cole* bombing as a terrorist attack against a naval vessel, thus resulting in multiple departments and agencies becoming involved in the investigative process. Immediately after the bombing, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dispatched a team of agents from the New York and Washington, D.C. field offices with the primary goal of unearthing who was responsible for planning and executing the attack. The Department of Defense (DOD) authorized a commission led by retired

⁸ Scheuer's hard-line stances have angered employers, and his contract at Georgetown University was not renewed. He has also allegedly lost speaking engagements with major media outlets. While this is indeed alarming, this work will only make use of Scheuer's knowledge of al-Qaeda as a former CIA analyst.

General William Crouch and retired Admiral Harold Gehman to analyze how the threat had been overlooked and to create recommendations for preventing similar strikes from occurring in the future. The DOD's objectives differed significantly from the FBI's purpose. The DOD findings, which were presented to Congress, were summarized in the Crouch-Gehman Report released January 9, 2001. The report contained a section titled "Unclassified Findings and Recommendations Summary" which categorized the areas the Navy needed to address under the headings: Organizational, Antiterrorism/Force Protection (AT/FP), Intelligence, Logistics, and Training.

The United States Navy also embarked upon a series of investigations aimed at providing both an in-depth understanding of the attack and to determine if any dereliction of duty had occurred among its ranks. By the end of November 2000, an investigating JAG officer had written the *Command Investigation Into the Actions of the USS Cole (DDG 67) In Preparing For and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen On or About 12 October 2000*. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command was responsible for executing the investigation under the leadership of Admiral C.W. Moore, who endorsed the finding in a separate report. By early January 2001, the *Command Investigation* received a second and third endorsement from Admiral Robert Natter, the Commander in Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, and Admiral V.E. Clark, Chief of Naval Operations. My research will discuss this document at length, particularly the decision of the three admirals to avoid a trial for the ship's captain, the crew, or any other officers up the chain of command.

The United States Congress waited until after the memorial service honoring those who had been killed aboard the USS *Cole* before opening their hearings in late October 2000. Both the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee questioned

high-ranking government officials during a series of open and closed meetings on Capitol Hill. The Congressional testimony provided by civilian and military witnesses offered insights into the thought process of American decision-makers.

In May 2001, the findings of the JAG report conducted by the Navy and the Crouch-Gehman report from the Department of Defense were summarized in *The Investigation into the Attack on the U.S.S. Cole: Report of the House Armed Services Committee Staff*. This report did not include a finalized version from the third parallel investigation being conducted by the FBI because the case remained active at the time. The strength of the House Armed Services Committee report was its ability to condense the extensive findings of the Navy and the DOD into one abbreviated document.

While there are government documents available to the public describing various aspects of the USS *Cole* bombing, the topic has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Few books have been dedicated to the last major al-Qaeda attack before 9/11, and none of these works put its historical significance into perspective. For many years, the only book available was Betty Burnett's *The Attack on the USS Cole in Yemen on October 12, 2000* published in 2003. A freelance writer, Burnett has published over a dozen short volumes, which are targeted toward a younger audience. Filled with professional quality full-color pictures, *The Attack* was sixty-four pages long and cites only nine sources in its bibliography. As might be expected from a book of this nature, Burnett's work offered little analysis and no insight into the larger questions surrounding the bombing.

There is little argument that the most insightful work on the *Cole* bombing was written by Commander Kirk Lippold, the ship's commanding officer on the day of the attack. Published in 2012, *Front Burner: Al-Qaeda's Attack on the USS Cole* was Lippold's first-person account of

his time aboard the *Cole*. The book provides the reader a background on the warship before devoting most of the narrative to the day of the bombing highlighting the heroic effort by the crew to salvage the ship. While Lippold's work should be considered a primary source, it is not without limitations. After the *Cole* attack, Commander Lippold and members of his leadership team were accused of negligence by multiple critics inside and outside of the Navy who argued that the crew should have faced a military courtroom on the charge of dereliction of duty. In spite of this political pressure, the crew was ultimately exonerated in the Navy's official findings. Although he avoided a trial, Lippold experienced other professional setbacks, and *Front Burner* could be viewed as his polemic to these denigrations.

Phil Keith's *Missed Signals: The Story of the Terrorist Attack on the USS Cole (DDG-67) Aden, Yemen, October 12, 2000* was another recent publication on the USS *Cole* bombing, distributed independently by the author in 2013. Keith, a retired naval aviator and businessman, has written multiple fiction and non-fiction works. On the cover of *Missed Signals*, there is a phrase describing Keith's work as, "A tale of dangers ignored, clues missed and unlucky circumstances that led to tragedy." Rather than building this promising case, the author instead focused on the actions of the crew on the day of the USS *Cole* bombing and memorializes the Navy personnel who were killed-in-action. While Keith's experience in the Navy allows him to relate to the crew, *Missed Signals* has a series of shortcomings. Keith's work, which is only seventy-four pages long, encounters a litany of problems which include few footnotes and a complete lack of bibliographical information. This failure to identify sources is unprofessional, as are the typos found throughout the paperback edition. Ultimately, *Missed Signals* is an unreliable work that fails to add to the overall understanding of the USS *Cole* attack.

Future historians who choose to examine modern history will undoubtedly discover that over time, their path will become easier as more governmental documents become declassified and archives receive new primary materials. To aid in the process, the author has taken the necessary steps of requesting that previously classified government sources be opened to the public domain. Although many of my mandatory review cases at the Clinton Presidential Library did not come to fruition, it was rewarding on the occasions when my requests proved fruitful. These newly declassified sources have been included in this manuscript.

From the outset of this project, my overarching goal has been to contribute to current narratives in the field of military history by evaluating the contributions to date and striving to fill gaps in the discourse. While there are already a number of works in various academic disciplines about Osama bin Laden and his war with the United States that range from superb to subpar, a thorough examination of the bombing on the USS *Cole* has been at best overlooked and at worst completely ignored. This dissertation seeks to fill a part of this void. The story of the USS *Cole* may not have received the scholarly attention it deserved because it and other precursor al-Qaeda missions were wholly overshadowed by the September 11th attacks. However, the USS *Cole* and 9/11 attacks, which occurred less than a calendar year apart, need to be seen as part of a continuum in order for comprehensive analysis to be possible. My hope is that other historians will choose to build upon the foundations of this work as we address the dearth of scholarly publications about the bombing of the USS *Cole*.

Through his series of attacks, Osama bin Laden generated enormous damage to the United States and the American people. The al-Qaeda leader altered the way the world travelled, caused the creation of new multi-billion-dollar government agencies, such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Office of Homeland Security, and was a pivotal factor in

the American commitment to decade-long wars in the Middle East. The cost was heavy: thousands of American lives, hundreds of thousands of Muslim lives, and over a trillion dollars. Americans need to better understand what happened, and how we got here.

PART I



USS *Cole* in the Atlantic Ocean on September 14, 2000¹

¹ Naval History and Heritage Command, “Cole – (DDG-67),”
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/c/cole--ddg-67--1996-.html>.

The martyr is granted seven special favors by God: He is forgiven his sins with the first drop of his blood, he sees his place in Paradise, he is clothed in the raiment of faith, he is wedded with seventy-two wives from among the beautiful maidens of paradise, he is saved from the punishment of the grave, he is protected from the Great Terror (of the Day of Judgment), on his head is placed a crown of dignity, one jewel of which is better than the world and all it contains, and he is granted intercession for seventy people of his household.²

-Abdullah Azzam, *Join the Caravan*

However, the desire for engagement with Yemen outpaced an understanding of the terrorist threat in that country, increasing the risk to U.S. military personnel. The requirement for engagement with Yemen led to an increase in the number of U.S. Navy ships refueling there. Changing geo-political conditions in the AOR should have led to a more critical reassessment of U.S. vulnerabilities and engaging plans for Yemen, but they did not.³

- House Armed Services Committee, *Investigation into the Attack on the U.S.S. Cole*

Foreign Visitors: Yemen and the Making of the USS Cole Bombing

Foreign powers have played a significant role in the development of modern Yemen. Great Britain was especially influential in the southern region, an area London considered so vital to British foreign policy that it came to be designated as a Protectorate. Cultural and ideological differences between the people living in the North and South regions paved the way for the eventual creation of two separate Yemens, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). It was not until after the unification of these two entities into the Republic of Yemen in 1990 that the United States military pursued bilateral projects with local security forces aimed at cultivating a relationship. These exercises continued in spite of annual State Department reports which clearly indicated that multiple terrorist groups

² Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 119.

³ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 7.

were operating freely in Yemen. The Department of Defense was not influenced by the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* papers and moved ahead with their plans to make Aden harbor the Navy's new refueling point between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

While Osama bin Laden narratives almost always reference the importance of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, the country of Yemen has been overlooked even though it was similarly vital for the development of his al-Qaeda organization. Bin Laden was of Yemeni descent on his father's side, and he travelled there in the early 1990s to speak out against the communist infiltration. Aden was also the site bin Laden chose as the place for his inaugural strike against the United States Armed Forces. The attack had minimal consequences for al-Qaeda, and the group continued operating in Yemen without government surveillance for the rest of the decade. To understand the bombing of the USS *Cole* in Aden harbor on October 12, 2000, it is vital to briefly examine Yemen's history, British imperialism in Aden, the country's importance to al-Qaeda operations, and the Fifth Fleet's experience in the Red Sea.



CIA map of Yemen⁴

⁴ Library of Congress, "Southwest Asia," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7420.ct002250/>.

The Geostrategic Importance of Yemen

Yemen, like much of Southern Arabia, has historically seen a rise in foreign contact when it possesses a desirable export. Although modern-day Yemen remains in search of exportable natural resources on an international scale, the area known as Arabia Felix was considered a hotbed of valuable commodities in pre-Islamic times with two of the most important being frankincense and myrrh.⁵ In the opening pages of the New Testament, the Gospel writer Matthew describes the visit of the Magi and explicitly outlines how the three wise men anointed the baby Jesus in a kingly fashion. “They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”⁶ The Bible does not clarify where the Magi obtained their frankincense and myrrh, but it is possible that their precious cargo originated in Yemen. The religious and medicinal uses of frankincense and myrrh were desired by other civilizations, and the Egyptians and Romans were willing to barter or use force to commandeer their supply. Centuries later, Europeans landed in Yemen looking to exploit the coffee trade.

Nine years after the creation of the East India Company, one of its ships known as the *Ascension* landed in what is modern-day Yemen hoping to open trade in Southern Arabia.⁷ The attempt at creating intercontinental trade did not take root, but the British merchants were not easily discouraged by their initial failure. The East India Company continued sending ships to the area eventually seeking trading permits from the Ottoman Turks, who at various periods were the self-proclaimed rulers over the Yemen tribesmen. Trade eventually developed between the British and Yemeni at the coastal towns of Aden and Mocha, the latter renowned for its coffee

⁵ Richard F. Nyrop, ed., *The Yemens Country Study* (Washington, DC: American University, 1986), xix.

⁶ *The New American Bible*, Matthew, Chapter 2:11.

⁷ Harold Ingrams, *The Yemen: Imams, Rulers, and Revolutions* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1964), 46.

production. The East India Company denoted its serious interest in Yemeni coffee by establishing a post at Mocha in 1618.⁸ The lucrative coffee trade peaked at ten million kilos a year, but demand from European businesses disappeared once slave labor in Africa, South America, and Asia began producing the beans at a significantly reduced cost.⁹ For two hundred and thirty years, the British presence in Yemen consisted primarily of traders who were generally content to stay by the shoreline and disregard the hinterland.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made ports located along the Red Sea to the Bab el Mandeb valuable assets to European nations seeking shorter routes to India. Before the project in Egypt had even broken ground, London had become disturbed that the Suez undertaking had been awarded to a Frenchman, Ferdinand de Lesseps. When attempts to stymie the venture could not prevent the project's completion, the British eventually purchased a controlling stake in the Canal from the Egyptian government in 1875.¹⁰ The fear that the French military would monopolize the Canal never materialized, but the struggle to control the Mediterranean took on a new importance for the Crown once Britain's shipping routes no longer had to navigate the southern tip of Africa but instead could cut through the Egyptian waterway. The magnitude of the change was apparent by 1881 when over 80% of the ships utilizing the Suez Canal flew the British flag.¹¹ To keep up with this enormous increase in traffic, the British developed Aden into a major coaling station.

⁸ Roby C. Barrett, *Yemen: A Different Political Paradigm in Context* (MacDill Airforce Base, FL: The JSOU Press, 2011), 19.

⁹ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

¹⁰ Arthur Goldschmidt and Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 8th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006), 166, 189.

¹¹ William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 97.

Yemen, which has remained a tribal society since before the time of Christ, has frequently been the target of foreign invasion. Historically, the Yemeni people only had to contend with one would-be conqueror at a time but this changed in the nineteenth century. In 1839, Captain S. B. Haines captured the settlement at Aden on behalf of the East India Company, which proceeded to rule the port-city from India for the next century.¹² With the establishment of a British foothold on the fringes of their territory, the Ottoman Turks responded by landing troops on the Red Sea coast in 1849 and began the laborious task of moving inland against the Yemeni tribes.¹³ Unlike the aggression displayed by the Ottomans, the British developed a more peaceful methodology for controlling their areas of influence in Yemen. While the Ottoman's strategy caused constant conflict with the northern tribes from this time until the First World War, London took a more diplomatic approach involving treaties with the various tribes of the south. By 1886, nine tribes had agreed to terms with the British.¹⁴ This process was not without its own drawbacks. Multiple men might claim to represent one tribe, territorial disputes were commonplace between tribes, and cultural differences existed between the Europeans and the tribesmen. The British were willing to tolerate these inconveniences because it was critical to keep the Yemeni ports open and maintaining the peace proved much easier than subduing multiple hostile tribes. By making treaties with the tribes located between British Aden and Ottoman territory, the British expanded their influence into deeper parts of Yemen.¹⁵

¹² Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 3.

¹³ Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁴ Nyrop, 46.

¹⁵ Isa Blumi, "Shifting Loyalties and Failed Empire: A New Look at the Social History of Late Ottoman Yemen, 1872-1918," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: MacMillan, 2004), 107.

While the British were signing protection treaties in the south of Yemen, the Ottomans were concerned about an open rebellion in the north, especially once the clouds of World War I began to swirl. Istanbul recognized that it was dangerous to have internal threats during wartime, so the Ottomans agreed at the Treaty of Daan in 1911 to allow Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid al-Din to rule pockets of northern Yemen in exchange for a ceasefire.¹⁶ After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, Imam Yahya continued with his expansionist aspirations while consolidating his power over the northern tribes. He eventually garnered dominion over much of the country outside of the British-controlled south. Bolstered by the confidence of his success against the Ottomans, Yahya decided to push south against the European power. When it came time for Britain's tribal allies to block northern incursions, the clans aligned with Great Britain were unable or unwilling to stop Yahya's determined forces. To defend the British Protectorate, the Royal Air Force was first used against Yahya in 1922 with devastating efficiency, and Aden's sovereignty remained safely in British hands under the watchful eye of airpower.¹⁷ The Imam never succeeded in controlling South Yemen and was assassinated in February 1948 while on a ride with his grandson.

In spite of the civil disorder caused from tribal fighting, foreigners remained optimistic about the possibility that Yemen possessed natural resources. Because it was located in a part of the world renowned for petroleum, there were grand expectations of massive oil reserves. A German company garnered a twenty-year deal for salt and petroleum in 1953, but the Yemenis reallocated the deal to an American firm known as the Yemen Development Company two years

¹⁶ Barrett, 21.

¹⁷ Blumi, 143.

later.¹⁸ As it turned out, the Americans fared as poorly as the Germans, and little came from the undertaking.¹⁹ The lack of oil in the ground did not discourage Great Britain, which simply began importing foreign supplies, often from Iran. By 1952, British Petroleum had established an oil refinery at Little Aden, which transformed the port into one of the busiest harbors in the world by 1957.²⁰

With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the tribes of northern Yemen no longer had to worry about imperial aspirations from Istanbul, and the British appeared to harbor no desire to push into the imamate territories. Still, Aden remained important in Great Britain's Middle East strategy and became a Crown Colony in 1937.²¹ A short power struggle ensued following Imam Yahya's assassination in 1948, and Ahmed bin Yahya succeeded his father as Imam of the north territories.²² Concerned with maintaining dominion over his lands, Imam Ahmed became known for his cruelty against political opponents. This repressive leadership style led to rebellions in 1955 and 1959.²³ After Ahmed died in his sleep in September 1962, his son al-Badr survived less than a month before a group of military officers declared the end of the imamate.²⁴ Thus, the Yemen Arab Republic was born.

The British control of south Yemen did not last much longer. London, which had fought two world wars under the aura of freedom, appeared to have no plans for creating an independent Yemeni state. Britain's strategy had relied heavily on diplomacy, and the colonizers had signed

¹⁸ Ingrams, 92.

¹⁹ Standard Oil of New Jersey took over for the Yemen Development Company when its concession ran out.

²⁰ Robin Bidwell, *The Two Yemens* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), 81-82.

²¹ Sarah Searight, *The British in the Middle East* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 119.

²² Ingrams, 76.

²³ Barrett, 39-40, 42.

²⁴ Dresch, 87.

thirty-one major treaties and held ninety conventions with the tribes between the inter-war period and 1954.²⁵ In spite of these declarations of peace, the rapport between Great Britain and the people of South Yemen soured and soon calls for an independent southern state grew louder. The great British diplomat Harold Ingrams could see the storm rolling in. He wrote, “Until the eve of the 1950’s, British imperialism was not evident in the form in which imperialism has always called Arab defensive reflexes into play. Up till then the British were accepted as valued friends by the people of Aden and the Protectorate, and, even by Imams in the Yemen, as a beneficent presence.”²⁶

From the 1950s to the late 1960s, Britain continued its presence in Yemen until the political and financial weight of the relationship became too much to bear. The exit did not take long. The United Kingdom envisioned using Yemen as a major base as late as 1957, but by June 1964, the British were making promises to withdraw all troops within the next four years.²⁷ This strategic reversal occurred after the Labour Party replaced the governing Conservatives at the same time that Great Britain became crippled with economic hardships due to a devaluation of sterling in 1967.²⁸ Britain literally could not afford to keep costly ground forces in Yemen, and the century-old model of European colonialism had gone out of political fashion. While much of the Yemeni population in the south was concerned about what life might look like without European leadership, political groups like the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) initiated violent campaigns against each other and the British. After one-hundred-twenty-nine years of occupation, the final British soldiers were

²⁵ Nyrop, 46.

²⁶ Ingrams, 5.

²⁷ Dresch, 76, 100.

²⁸ Brehony, 11.

airlifted out South Yemen in 1967. South Yemen's independence occurred not only due to internal unrest, but also because the British treasury could no longer afford the costs.

The British withdrawal led to the creation of two culturally and ideologically different states: North Yemen, officially called the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and South Yemen designated as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The PDRY came to be ruled by the Yemeni Socialist Party which moved the country toward Moscow's sphere of influence. Already at odds, the two Yemens were further divided by regional and Cold War politics that culminated into border wars in 1972 and 1979. A series of negotiations to discuss the creation of a single state proved fruitless, and North and South Yemen remained divided for the duration of the Cold War. The separate countries remained in this alienated state until a 1990 accord succeeded in realigning the two Yemens under the stipulation that the country move toward a democratic system of governance.²⁹ Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had negotiated the reunification as President of North Yemen, took control of the new Republic of Yemen, an office he had not relinquished at the time of the USS *Cole* attack a decade later.

The unification of the two Yemens was celebrated by its overjoyed citizens with dancing in the streets in the North and the South. The outpouring of emotion was triggered by the hope for peace and a better life for the Yemeni people, but the harmony displayed in the aftermath of the unification turned out to be short lived. The new constitution was intended to establish Yemen as one of the most democratic societies in the Middle East with universal suffrage, freedom of speech, and an impartial justice system. These ideals never materialized. Unwilling to compromise, Yemeni delegates from the YAR and PDRY instead squabbled over

²⁹ Lisa Wedeen, "Seeing Like a Citizen, Acting Like a State: Exemplary Events in Unified Yemen," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: MacMillan, 2004), 250.

governmental posts, access to funding, and the future direction of the country. The power struggle upended the uneasy truce of 1990, and a new civil war broke out four years after the country had optimistically united.

A former military officer, President Saleh was prepared for such a contingency. For much of Yemen's history, the tribal territories had rarely been brought under any real form of government control, and Saleh's reign was no exception. This meant huge swaths of the country were left unchecked. These areas were the perfect environment for groups seeking to remain out of government oversight. Starting in the 1970s, the government in the North had allowed members of the Muslim Brotherhood to seek refuge, and the Wahhabi-influence from neighboring Saudi Arabia was spreading throughout the YAR.³⁰ Mujahedeen fighters later took sanctuary in Yemen after their campaigns had ended in Afghanistan. Many of these were native Yemenis returning home. Collectively, this seasoned force could have been dangerous to the stability of Yemen's government. Rather than initiating a surveillance program or starting the tedious process of rooting out these dissident groups, Saleh settled on a less confrontational path that allowed the mujahedeen to operate in his country with indemnity.

Saleh's gamble paid off. During the 1994 civil war, the mujahedeen veterans provided upwards of three brigades of soldiers, an act not soon forgotten by a grateful Yemeni president.³¹ For their assistance in quelling the uprising, Saleh rewarded many of the mujahedeen with government jobs and a presidential promise to continue ignoring the shadowy activities transpiring outside the limelight. By brokering this deal, Saleh allowed the fighters to become engrained in his government, a political decision which left him no real option for removing

³⁰ Brehony, 184.

³¹ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Struggle for Yemen and the Challenge of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 23.

groups like al-Qaeda. This became a major problem once Washington started demanding that Saleh police his state, remove terrorist groups, and hand over bin Laden's operatives.

Al-Qaeda Arrives in Yemen

Against the backdrop of Moscow's exit from Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden began turning his attention to other corners of the Muslim world. A region that troubled him was the two Yemens, an area in which bin Laden had familial connections. Like much of the Saudi labor force, bin Laden's father Mohammad had emigrated from Yemen in search of work. Yet, the younger bin Laden's interest in Yemen had more to do with his expanding worldview than his paternal ties. In Yemen, bin Laden saw an opportunity for his newly created organization, al-Qaeda, to start affecting regional politics. His goal was to influence the direction of the newly-formed Republic of Yemen following the unification between the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. After spending much of the 1980s attempting to dislodge a socialist country from a Muslim one, the al-Qaeda leader decided to purge the new Yemen of the communist holdover from the PDRY.

In many ways, Osama bin Laden viewed Yemen as the new Afghanistan. His ambitions were similar for both places. He wanted to remove all traces of communism from the Yemeni government on the Islamic basis that Southwest Arabia must be ruled by Muslim leaders. Bin Laden had hoped that his native Saudi Arabia would be a major supporter in Yemen just as it had been during the Afghan campaign. Riyadh had been staunchly anti-communist during the Cold War, but the Saleh government had lost favor with the Saudis by refusing to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on the floor of the United Nations and in the media. The Saudi government retaliated to this slight by expelling its massive Yemeni labor force and refusing to

provide aid to Yemen.³² The standoff peaked amidst the Yemeni civil war during which time the Saudis supported factions tied to the Southern rebellion. Bin Laden was disdainful of the Saudi hypocrisy in failing to condemn the PDRY and its socialist leaders. In a written diatribe against the Saudi government, bin Laden protested, “It is ludicrous to suggest that Communists are Muslims whose blood should be spared. Since when were they Muslims? Wasn’t it you who previously issued a juridical decree calling them apostates and making it a duty to fight them in Afghanistan, or is there a difference between Yemeni Communists and Afghan Communists?”³³

Without official assistance from Saudi Arabia, the al-Qaeda leader initiated his own campaign. Bin Laden, who at times provided journalists with suspect testimony, claimed to have been involved in the struggle in Yemen at the same time he allegedly fought with the mujahedeen against the Russians in Afghanistan. In an interview from November 1996, bin Laden recalled that he had, “participated, in the beginning of the 1980s, with the mujahidin against the Communist party in South Yemen, participating once again in the 1990s until the downfall of the Communist Party.”³⁴ His actual participation in Yemen came in a variety of forms. Besides funding two training camps in the northern and southern parts of the country, bin Laden also traveled to Yemeni cities delivering impassioned speeches urging devout Muslims to stand against the Yemen Socialist Party. He later stated,

We fought the communist socialist party before the union and the union plan because they are atheist, communist, and oppressive socialists. They oppressed the people, destroyed everything, destroyed God’s religion and sanctified their party, saying nothing is louder than the party’s voice. I delivered a number of lectures in mosques inciting Muslims to fight them, which prompted the Saudi government to prevent me from

³² Barrett, 66.

³³ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

making speeches. But with God's grace, the youths continued the jihad, and we continued to cooperate with them against the heads of atheism in the socialist party.³⁵

The violence he promoted during his public speeches was more than just rhetoric, and the Saudi was behind a series of politically motivated assassinations aimed at eliminating communist sympathizers in Yemen in the early 1990s.

Al-Qaeda's first attack against the United States transpired in Aden, Yemen on December 29, 1992. The organizers for the mission had grand ambitions of ambulances and body-bags, but the strike fizzled from inexperience and technical difficulties detonating the crude homemade bomb. The target was approximately one-hundred US military personnel housed at a hotel awaiting transfer to Somalia as part of Operation Restore Hope. The explosion at the Gold Mihor Hotel killed an Australian civilian, injured others, but failed to kill a single American.³⁶ In spite of this failure, al-Qaeda considered its first attack against the United States a victory for their group because it resulted in Washington no longer housing troops in the country. They had successfully expelled the infidels from Muslim soil.

Like Sudan from 1991-1996 and Afghanistan from 1996-2001, Yemen was a major theatre of operation for al-Qaeda activity throughout the 1990s. In addition to bin Laden's followers who were of Yemeni descent, the country was also welcoming to foreign operatives who could often speak the native language and dress to blend in with the local population. The country's porous borders allowed al-Qaeda operatives to move freely throughout the region, and the government's tolerance toward terrorist groups operating within its borders offered no deterrent to their activities. The al-Qaeda leader felt so secure in Yemen that he established

³⁵ Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 122.

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1992* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993).

multiple training camps. His ability to carry out assassination attempts against Yemeni citizens and American military personnel without any repercussions demonstrated that Yemen was the perfect location for al-Qaeda to act with impunity.

The US Navy Arrives at Aden

Coming out of the Second World War, the United States government hoped that Great Britain would be able to retain its influence in the Middle East. Strategists seemed to have reasons to be optimistic. After all, London still controlled military bases in Egypt and Palestine, had political clout in the Persian Gulf especially with the sheikhdoms, and had contractual access to petroleum in Iran. Although Washington experts were unsure of how the Cold War was going to be fought, few doubted that it would be anything less than a herculean task to contain the world's largest country. As policymakers struggled to address this communist threat, they hoped that their Atlantic allies could help shoulder the burden in the Middle East.

By the late-1940s and early 1950s, policymakers in the Truman administration had concluded that the Middle East would be pivotal in America's economic and military future. In November 1947, the Department of State assessed that, "The security of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East is vital to the security of the United States."³⁷ A few years later, the United States Armed Forces expressed a similar sentiment. The Joint Chiefs of Staff decided on Oct. 26, 1950 that, "the Middle East in war is of importance second only to Western Europe" also assessing that military required, "The oil resources of Arabia, Iraq and Iran."³⁸

In spite of this idealized division of labor, there were also doubts along the Potomac about British strength and longevity in the region. In a memo from December 1950, the Near

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, Vol. V, The Near East and Africa (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1951), 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs warned the Secretary of State that, “The UK, which has primary responsibility for the defense of the area (Middle East), lacks both manpower and resources successfully to defend the area and has no plans for defense of the Saudi Arabia oil fields and the Dhahran Air Base.”³⁹ Another Top-Secret paper drafted for the Department of State expressed similar trepidation. It stated, “To follow the time-honored assumption that the US can rely upon the UK to defend the Middle East is to indulge in wishful thinking: British capabilities are too small to be a sound basis for the defense of the US interests in the area.”⁴⁰ Although these predictions did not immediately come to fruition, the Americans correctly prognosticated that the British would not remain in the Middle East long-term. Over time, the United States replaced Great Britain in the region.

As concern mounted over Britain’s role in the Middle East, the United States Navy initiated a series of institutional changes in the 1940s to ensure the sea-lanes to the Persian Gulf remained unimpeded. The Department of Defense created the Middle East Force (MEF) in August 1949 as a way of keeping a permanent American presence in the region.⁴¹ The MEF remained the United States’ primary command in the region until the 1980s. During the Reagan administration, the Department of Defense developed a series of command and control initiatives based on the White House’s Cold War priorities. One of the more ambitious undertakings was the creation of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) which joined the previously established Pacific Command, European Command, and Southern Command. CENTCOM was formed to handle military issues in the Middle East and Northeast Africa, two areas rapidly

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹ Robert Schneller, *Anchor of Resolve: A History of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 2007), 4.

expanding in importance for Washington.⁴² Headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, CENTCOM was activated on New Year's Day 1983.⁴³

American military involvement in the Middle East expanded in the 1990s, a trend that did not revert following the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. To meet this continuing need, Secretary of Defense William Perry elected to stand up a new fleet, designated as Fifth Fleet, in the spring of 1995. Perry's decision marked the return of Fifth Fleet. After distinguishing itself in the Pacific at the Battles of the Philippine Sea, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, the Fifth Fleet was eventually disestablished during President Truman's fiscal cuts in January 1947.⁴⁴ The area of operation for the reappearance of Fifth Fleet included the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and extended into the Indian Ocean where it buttressed against America's Seventh Fleet in the east and Sixth Fleet to the south.

Under the MEF, the US Navy had frequented friendly ports along the Red Sea at Asmara, Ethiopia and Dhahrab, Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ These stopping points, primarily for fuel, were necessary because of the great distance that a vessel must cover traversing from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Throughout the Cold War, Washington and Moscow had both coveted naval sanctuaries along this stretch of water. Yemen's ties to communism and the Soviet Union had prevented a favorable relationship with the United States during the Cold War, and its diplomatic support of Saddam Hussein following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 only deepened the rift. Thus, the U.S. had not cultivated its own relationship with Aden until other options in the region became untenable.

⁴² The Central Asian Republics known as the "stans" were later added under CENTCOM's jurisdiction.

⁴³ David Winkler, *Amirs, Admirals, and Desert Sailors: Bahrain, the U.S. Navy, and the Arabia Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 86.

⁴⁴ Schneller, 41.

⁴⁵ Michael Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992* (New York: MacMillan, 1999), 47.

The harbor of Djibouti served as an oasis for American naval vessels until 1998 when concerns over port security forced the Navy to relocate across the Gulf of Aden from the African side to the Arabian Peninsula at Aden, Yemen.⁴⁶ Geography played a part in this decision. The Horn of Africa was rife with violence in the late 1990s including a war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a bloody civil war in Sudan, and the ongoing conflict inside Somalia that had already claimed the lives of American military personnel. Complicating matters, the infrastructure at Djibouti harbor was in disrepair, the petroleum was often low grade, and the authorities in the busy port would often make the Americans wait twenty-four hours before refueling their ships.⁴⁷ These problems, combined with the Navy's assessment that the port left its warships vulnerable to land-based attacks, encouraged CENTCOM to begin seeking alternative locations.

The United States considered operating instead out of Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, but US Central Command became concerned following the bombing of the Khobar Towers in 1996. Jiddah, a city known as a place for housing Muslims during their hajj pilgrimage, would have been an interesting choice since it was the long-time home of Osama bin Laden. This point was not the concern for CENTCOM, but the death of twenty-four American military personnel at the Khobar Towers made the city problematic for future military operations. The Khobar Towers, which housed American military personnel as well as other foreign nationalists, was believed to have been targeted as a message against Western imperialism in the Middle East. A number of different groups were blamed for the attack including al-Qaeda, Saudi Hizbullah, and Iran, but there remains no consensus on the identity of those responsible for the American deaths.

⁴⁶ C.W. Moore, First Endorsement of *Investigation to Inquire into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000* from November 30, 2000 (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 2004), 123-125.

⁴⁷ House Committee on Armed Services, *Attack on the USS Cole in Yemen*, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess., October 25, 2000.

Ultimately, the decision was made by the leaders at Central Command to move refueling operations to Aden, Yemen. General Anthony Zinni, Commander in Chief of CENTCOM, outlined the timeline for the move. He stated, “We looked in late-’96 to moving the contract out of Djibouti. We began in ’97 looking at ports. And we began in late-’97 looking hard at Aden. My naval component commander asked the Defense Energy Support Center to conduct a survey of the port, and they did in November of ’98, and they put bids out. The contract was awarded in December of ’98.”⁴⁸ Zinni had met with Yemeni’s President Ali Saleh on multiple occasions in 1998, while Admiral C.W. Moore, the head of Fifth Fleet, visited Saleh in September 1998.⁴⁹ Each of these high-ranking officers visited Tawahi Harbor as part of their tour. President Saleh did not object to the American use of Yemen’s port because he hoped that building closer ties to Washington might generate expanded economic and military assistance to one of the poorest countries in the Middle East.

The deterioration in Djibouti had raised the Navy’s initial concern with its suitability, but recent successes in Yemen solidified the switch to Aden. Prior to the transfer, the U.S. was already accommodating President Saleh’s requests to help establish a native coast guard, and there was another American program in 1997 to assist/train divers to clear underwater mines left over from the Yemeni civil war.⁵⁰ These American-led projects generated goodwill between the two countries while providing a proving ground for future joint-endeavors.⁵¹ The relationship expanded to include the American training of Yemen’s Special Forces units as well the inclusion

⁴⁸ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

⁴⁹ Winkler, 166-167.

⁵⁰ Tommy Franks, *Opening Remarks of General Tommy R. Franks Commander in Chief U.S. Central Command before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee 25 October 2000*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 25, 2000.

⁵¹ During these programs, there were not any reports of problems between the Americans on the ground and the local population. Thus, CENTCOM felt safe in moving forward with its refueling plans.

of Yemeni personnel at military schools in the United States through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.⁵² These efforts were considered successes, and the CENTCOM brass were confident that it had developed a new partner in the Gulf of Aden.

One of the most attractive aspects about stopping in Yemen's Tawahi Harbor for the United States Navy was that the refueling dolphin was located in the middle of the port and therefore, completely surrounded by water. Because of this design, the initial assessments of Tawahi concluded that American ships could refuel without the dangers of land-based threats, one of the major concerns in Djibouti. The fact that other foreign navies were already utilizing the harbor was an additional draw. The British, French, Italian, and Dutch had pre-existing port contracts with the Yemeni government, so the international port had the infrastructure available to handle the additional American workload.⁵³

At the request of Military Traffic Management Command, CENTCOM held a Vulnerability Assessment for Tawahi harbor in May 1998.⁵⁴ These findings remain classified. However, the information was available for "Need to Know" personnel operating in the Middle East at the time. Multiple American warships, including the USS *Cole*, did not have a copy of this report during their refueling stops in Aden harbor. The Vulnerability Assessment would have been beneficial to the leadership teams aboard these ships, particularly for those who had never visited the port. By the time of the USS *Cole*'s deployment in 2000, the military already

⁵² Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

⁵³ Moore, 124.

⁵⁴ Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, Fifth Fleet, *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*. Report to Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, November 27, 2000, 78.

considered the information to be outdated because of changing political instability found in various parts of the region.

While the decision to abandon port operations at Djibouti was a practical decision and American-Yemeni relations appeared headed in a positive direction, the Department of Defense's choice to move to Aden was somewhat perplexing considering that Yemen was widely recognized among government agencies for allowing terrorist groups to operate freely. As the DOD was in the process of analyzing refueling options across the Red Sea, the Department of State had been concurrently publishing in its annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* series about the dangers in Yemen. The State Department reports stated,

Excerpt from the 1996 edition: Yemen, however, remained a base for some terrorist elements. The Yemeni Government has been unable to exercise full control over its territory, and terrorists have committed kidnappings and attacks on foreign interests in remote areas of the country. . . . Moreover, Yemeni border security measures are lax and Yemeni passports are easily obtained by terrorist groups. The ruling government coalition also includes both tribal and Islamic elements which have facilitated the entry and documentation of foreign extremists.⁵⁵

Excerpt from the 1997 edition: Sanaa took major steps during 1997 to improve control of its borders, territory, and travel documents. It continued to deport foreign nationals residing illegally, including Islamic extremists identified as posing a security risk to Yemen and several other Arab countries. The Interior Ministry issued new, reportedly tamper-resistant passports and began to computerize port-of-entry information. Nonetheless, lax implementation of security measures and poor central government control over remote areas continued to make Yemen an attractive safehaven for terrorists. Moreover, HAMAS and the PIJ maintain offices in Yemen.⁵⁶

Excerpt from the 1998 edition: Continuing efforts begun in 1997, the Yemeni Government took further steps to rein in foreign extremists. Sanaa increased its security cooperation with other Arab countries and reportedly forced several foreign extremists to leave Yemen. The government also instituted the requirement that Algerian, British, Egyptian, Libyan, Sudanese, and Tunisian nationals seeking entry into Yemen travel

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1996* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997).

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1997* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998).

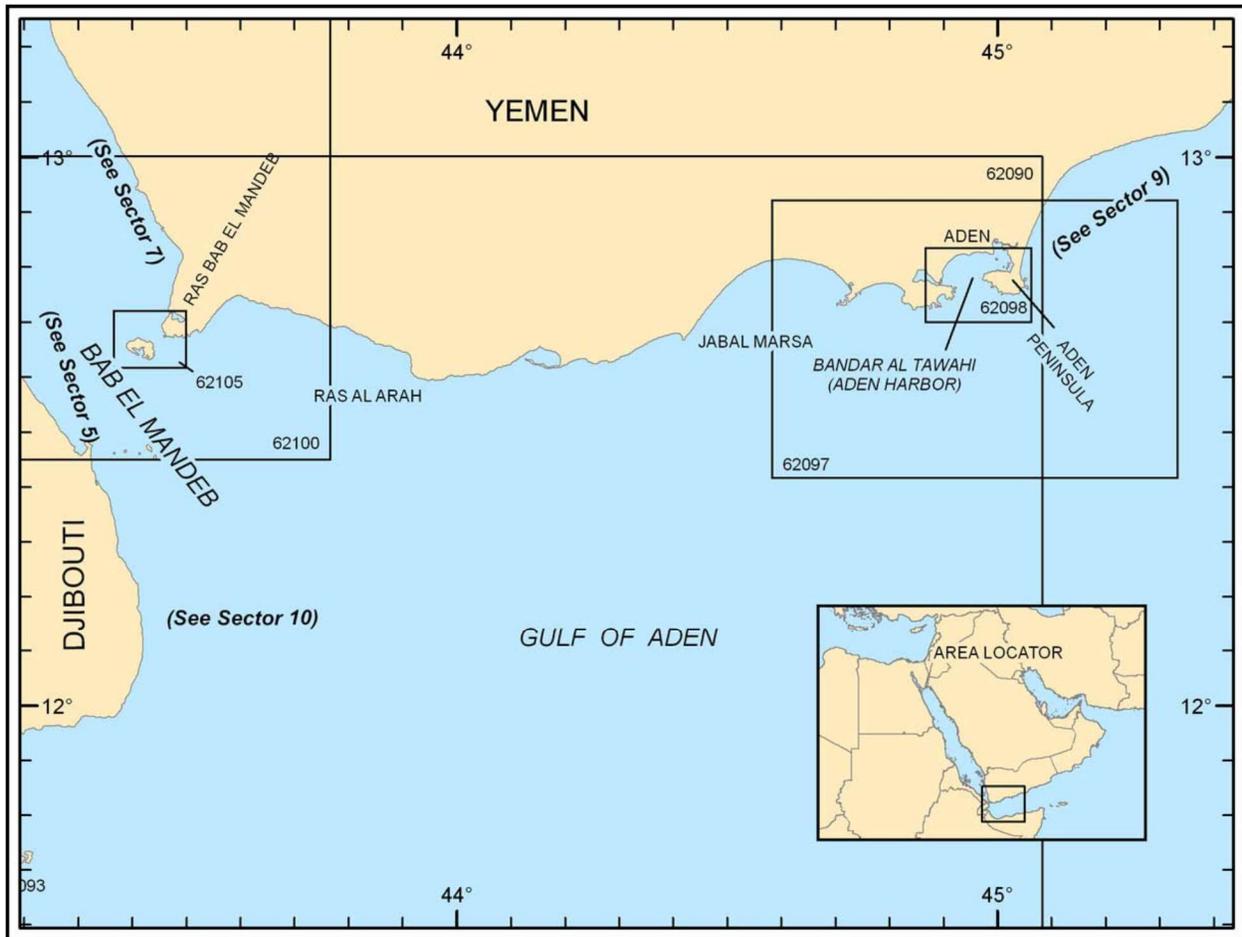
directly from their home counties. Nevertheless, the government's inability to control many remote areas continued to make the country a safehaven for terrorist groups.⁵⁷

Excerpt from the 1999 edition: Yemen expanded security cooperation with other Arab countries in 1999 and signed a number of international antiterrorist conventions. The government introduced incremental measures to better control its borders, territory, and travel documents and initiated specialized training for a newly established counterterrorist unit within the Ministry of Interior. Nonetheless, lax and inefficient enforcement of security procedures and the government's inability to exercise authority over remote areas of the country continued to make the country a safehaven for terrorist groups.⁵⁸

Hindsight can be a cruel judge, but the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* clearly show that the Americans responsible for selecting Yemen were not naïve at the time of their assessment to the dangers of operating in Aden harbor. Officials hoped that the minor bilateral successes between the American and Yemeni military were a sign of things to come, ignoring in the process that groups hostile to the United States were known to be operating throughout the country.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1998* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1999).

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1999*.



National Geospatial Intelligence Agency Map of the Gulf of Aden⁵⁹

Al-Qaeda Prepares to Strike in Yemen

If al-Qaeda had possessed an official navy, then Abdul Rahim Hussein Mohammad Abda al-Nashiri would have been its founding father.⁶⁰ Like bin Laden, Nashiri was a native of Saudi Arabia with familial ties to Yemen. Both men had supported the Taliban efforts in Afghanistan. Nashiri trained at four or more al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan which led to a personal

⁵⁹ *Sailing Directions (Enroute): Red Sea and the Persian Gulf*, 21st ed. (Springfield, VA: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, 2017), 149, https://msi.nga.mil/MSISiteContent/StaticFiles/NAV_PUBS/SD/Pub172/Pub172bk.pdf.

⁶⁰ As a precautionary move, al-Qaeda members are taught to use aliases to make it more difficult to identify them. During the USS *Cole* operation, Abdul Rahim Hussein Mohammad Abda al-Nashiri used a number of different names to keep the authorities from tracking his movements. It was not unusual for an al-Qaeda member to have ten or more nom de guerres.

introduction with bin Laden in 1994, but he did not join al-Qaeda until after learning that his cousin had been one of the suicide bombers in the 1998 East African Embassy attack.⁶¹

Nashiri's commitment to the cause was so fanatical that he reportedly had injections to create impotency so that sex would not get in the way of his work.⁶²

The Prophet Mohammad once promised that any Muslim who died fighting on the sea would receive twice the rewards in the afterlife compared to those who were slain on land.⁶³ Perhaps inspired by these heavenly riches, Nashiri became the al-Qaeda mastermind behind a number of sea-based missions, including the one that hit the USS *Cole*. It appears he first proposed a naval attack against an American vessel in late 1998, and a delighted bin Laden financed the mission and even suggested Aden harbor as the kill-zone.⁶⁴ Nashiri, who took orders directly from bin Laden, established a small cell of loyal followers in Yemen and the group began preparing for an attack.

Unbeknownst to US intelligence agencies at the time, the al-Qaeda cell headquartered in Yemen had been planning sea-born missions in the years leading up to the millennium. Originally, the group had aspired to make a political statement by bringing down an oil tanker, but Osama bin Laden preferred the symbolism of targeting the American Navy.⁶⁵ There were also hypothetical discussions within al-Qaeda about hitting multiple ships simultaneously or going after an aircraft carrier, but the final decision was made to bomb a warship en route to the

⁶¹ Rear Admiral, Commanding, Joint Force Guantanamo, *Combatant Status Review Tribunal Input and Recommendations for Continued Detention Under DoD Control for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S)*, Memorandum for Commander, United States Southern Command, December 8, 2006, <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/10015-abd-al-rahim-al-nashiri>, 2-3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1955), 113.

⁶⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 152-153.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

Iraqi theatre. Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, who became the leader of the Yemeni cell, did not originally consider the Port of Aden. However, when casing indicated that other locales along the Red Sea were not suitable for the mission, Nashiri deferred to bin Laden and settled on Tawahi harbor.

Although some of bin Laden's lieutenants disagreed with his decision, selecting Yemen increased the odds that the mission would be successful. A number of al-Qaeda fighters either hailed from or had family ties to Yemen, including bin Laden. Others were from neighboring Saudi Arabia. Their Arab passports, combined with a lack of border control discussed at length in the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, enabled the cell to move easily in and out of Yemen. By operating in their native country, the cell did not appear out of place and could rely on assistance from friends and family. Unlike some of its authoritarian neighbors, Yemen's domestic security allowed former mujahedeen forces to operate with relative impunity. Adding to its appeal for the planned mission, Yemen is known for its weapons bazaars, which made it significantly easier to purchase explosives than in many countries. Perhaps most importantly, the Americans did not have their own defensive units guarding the harbor and had chosen to leave Aden's security to the locals. This policy was allowed because Aden was not a high-traffic stop for the US Navy, and CENTCOM was operating under the impression that the state-of-the-art warships could protect themselves during the short refueling process. All of these factors led to bin Laden's final decision to choose Yemen for what al-Qaeda referred to as the "boats mission."

Osama bin Laden's recommendation to utilize Aden as the location for the bombing was symbolic in addition to being operationally sound. Bin Laden did not want the United States in any Muslim land, and he was angered by the growing relationship between Washington and

Sana'a. Aden Harbor, which was already being frequented by European vessels, had only recently extended a port contract with the United States. For bin Laden, these Westerners were only in Yemen to pilfer the Middle East's most precious commodity: petroleum. His impending attack was meant to send a message for non-Muslim foreigners to stay out of the Middle East. He also anticipated that the sinking of an American warship would finally force the United States to go to war. A successful attack would inform other Muslim communities that the US was vulnerable and could be defeated under the right conditions. Recruitment and fundraising efforts might also be advanced after his attack.

To assist in the Yemen mission, Nashiri was joined by an operative called Khallad, whose real name was Walid Mohammad Salih bin Attash.⁶⁶ Born in Saudi Arabia, Khallad had joined the fight in Central Asia where he lost his leg and his brother, causing him to swear allegiance and offer his life to Osama bin Laden.⁶⁷ In 1996, Khallad became the head of bin Laden's bodyguard detail, a position considered prestigious by al-Qaeda members because of the job's daily proximity to their Saudi leader.⁶⁸ Bin Laden expanded Khallad's responsibilities to become a project manager as well as his personal envoy. Kallad carried some of al-Qaeda's most sensitive commands directly from its leader to his operatives in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

For the Yemen mission, Khallad played several different roles. He acted as a messenger between Nashiri and bin Laden, who was doing everything he could to stay off the grid in

⁶⁶ Khallad was also known as Tawfiq bin Attash.

⁶⁷ Roy Gutman, *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008), 210.

⁶⁸ Rear Admiral, Commanding, Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Combatant Status Review Tribunal Input and Recommendations for Continued Detention Under DoD Control for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN:US9YM-010014DP(S)*, Memorandum for Commander, United States Southern Command, December 8, 2006, <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/10014-walid-bin-attash>, 4.

Afghanistan. Khallad also assisted in other logistical capacities such as acquiring the explosive material that the cell needed for the attack. Preparations for the boats mission were going according to plan until Khallad was arrested in Yemen by local authorities in the spring of 1999. His imprisonment coincided with the day that Nashiri was moving the explosives, and the cell's leader fled to Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Worried that the Yemenis might extract the details of the attack from his captured operative, bin Laden contacted a sympathetic official who released Khallad from prison by the summer of 1999.⁷⁰ After gaining his freedom, Khallad withdrew from Aden so he would not jeopardize the rest of the cell and the impending mission.

When bin Laden became aware that his satellite phone was being tracked by the U.S., he was forced to allow the leaders of each al-Qaeda cell to act more independently. Yet, the Saudi was reluctant to relinquish all control, and he continued using face-to-face meetings with cell leaders in Afghanistan and couriers like Khallad to ensure his imprint remained at the core of each operation. In the case of the Yemen boats mission, bin Laden allowed Nashiri to make a number of the decisions concerning the attack, but he insisted that Taha al-Ahdal and Salman al-Adani be designated as the suicide bombers.⁷¹ The al-Qaeda leader took a personal interest in who was going to be sacrificed for the mission, but he showed little concern over the selection of the actual ship to target as long as it was an American warship. In this regard, the USS *Cole* turned out to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even though Aden was not a high-traffic stop for the US Navy to refuel, American ships used the port each month. In accordance with general operating procedure in all al-Qaeda operations, the Yemen cell cased the harbor to learn the habits of the Americans and watch for

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁰ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 156.

⁷¹ Ali H. Soufan, *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against Al-Qaeda* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011), 262.

tactical vulnerabilities. After purchasing the suicide boat with bin Laden money, the group practiced driving their new weapon around the harbor without attracting the attention of any security personnel. In order to get their craft to their exact specifications, the cell made structural adjustments to the boat which included welding.⁷² The operatives were aware that the naval vessel would be heavily armored, and these modifications were aimed at getting as much explosive onto the boat as possible. As it turned out, the group became overly ambitious with this goal.

Before their eventual triumph against the USS *Cole*, the al-Qaeda group in Yemen had planned a similar operation to sink a different Arleigh Burke class destroyer in the same manner in the same harbor on January 3, 2000.⁷³ The group targeted the USS *The Sullivan's*, a destroyer which was named after a group of five brothers from Iowa killed in the Pacific during the Second World War, when the American warship had stopped at Aden harbor. In a blunder worthy of a movie script, the plot was quickly foiled after the al-Qaeda operatives exceeded the weight limit of their attack craft by overloading it with heavy explosives. Fearing that their plot would be discovered, some of the members of the Yemeni cell fled the country in the wake of the fiasco.

Multiple narratives have attempted to explain what actually happened to the explosive-laden fishing boat set to target the *The Sullivan's*. According to one account, the boat sank harmlessly to the bottom of the harbor and was later retrieved by the al-Qaeda cell from its watery hiding place. Another narrative suggests that cell members returned to the scene only to discover local children using the boat as a playground. The third speculation is that the al-Qaeda

⁷² Roland Jacquard, *In the Name of Osama bin Laden: Global Terrorism and the Bin Laden Brotherhood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 84.

⁷³ Great Britain, Prime Minister, *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States, 11 September, 2001* (London, England: 10 Downing Street, 2001), 17.

team arrived to find a group of young men stripping the boat and its contents, unaware that they were moving explosive material. All of these accounts share the common threads that the would-be attackers were able to recover their vessel and that the al-Qaeda members were amazed that the local Yemeni authorities had not been tipped off to their plan.

In spite of their earlier ineptitude, the al-Qaeda cell was undeterred and embarked upon a second mission. However, the group faced another setback. Both of the suicide bombers, who had been hand-selected by bin Laden, had gotten their wish and died, although ironically not as human bombs. To replace the loss of the would-be bombers, Khallad requested that bin Laden utilize him as a suicide bomber, but his request was denied because he had become too valuable to the al-Qaeda leader. Moreover, his previous arrest in Yemen might have attracted unwanted attention to the cell. Bin Laden decided instead that he wanted Mu'awiya al-Madani to be one of the suicide-bomber replacements.⁷⁴ As it turned out, Madani was eventually killed in a suicide attack, but he never got the chance in Aden harbor.

Before being hand-selected by bin Laden to be part of the Yemen team, Ibrahim al-Thawar, known as Nibras, attended an "elite" al-Qaeda training camp called Mes Aynak in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ As the mission in Aden approached, Nashiri selected Hassan al-Khamri to join Nibras as the new team of suicide bombers. Nashiri's decision was in direct contradiction to bin Laden's orders which had called for Mu'awiya al-Madani to be onboard the suicide boat on the day of the attack. Nashiri's revised plan called for Nibras and Khamri to pilot the vessel towards the American warship, while another member of the cell named Fahd al-Quso was responsible for videotaping the explosion in order to broadcast the demise of the ship to a global audience.

⁷⁴ Soufan, 263.

⁷⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 156.

Nashiri would later explain that Nibras had been selected because he knew how to drive the boat, while Khamri was picked because he was familiar with the harbor.⁷⁶

Because not everyone could be a suicide bomber, the cell was also made up of operatives willing to help with the logistics surrounding the mission. Like many members of al-Qaeda, Jamal al-Badawi had fought in Afghanistan. Born in Yemen, Badawi was a great asset to the boats operation because his local knowledge allowed him to move around Aden without drawing attention to himself or the mission. Another Afghan veteran, Fahd al-Quso, had also joined the fight against the U.S.S.R and then fallen under bin Laden's spell. He had only learned of the Yemen mission a few months before the attack from Badawi.⁷⁷

One of the great strengths of al-Qaeda was that it compartmentalized information allowing each cell to only know its mission at hand. The organization did this deliberately so that if one cell became compromised, it could only incriminate itself and not endanger other active missions. With such a strategy in place, it was not surprising that Quso only learned of the attack in the countdown phase. In terms of the USS *Cole* plot, the descending order of the need-to-know pipeline of information would have looked like this: Osama bin Laden assigned Khallad to the mission, Khallad recruited Badawi, and Badawi enlisted Quso.

Success is often found through trial-and-error, but Osama bin Laden grew impatient with Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri's leadership in Yemen and his foot-soldiers' incompetency during the failed strike on the USS *The Sullivan*'s. Bin Laden wanted results. The head of the Yemeni cell was summoned to Afghanistan to have a face-to-face with bin Laden after the al-Qaeda leader recommended the dismissal of Nashiri's suicide bombers.⁷⁸ But before leaving for Afghanistan,

⁷⁶ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 8.

⁷⁷ Soufan, 232.

⁷⁸ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 3.

Nashiri green-lighted the mission. Nibras and Khamri would prove bin Laden's doubts to be unfounded.

Conclusion

The limitations of naval vessels, the geographic configuration of the Middle East, British and American worldwide security interests, petroleum, and the U.S. Navy leadership put the USS *Cole* in the Port of Aden on October 12, 2000. Like many countries in the Middle East, the development of modern Yemen was impacted by foreign powers, both welcomed and reviled. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British placed great prominence on the geostrategic importance of Yemen's port cities located on the route between London and its prized colony, India. Great Britain came to govern parts of the southern region of Yemen through force and treaties until the European country withdrew in 1967 under political pressure and the burden of financial constraints. In the subsequent years, two new countries were founded, the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. After a series of border wars, these two states unified in 1990 under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former YAR president who remained in office until 2012.

With mounting safety concerns about their refueling station in Djibouti in the mid-1990s, the American Navy elected to move across the Red Sea selecting Aden Harbor as their new port of call. The decision was influenced by a series of minor bilateral successes between the US-Yemeni militaries, but it failed to fully account for the violence that had recently transpired in Yemen. CENTCOM overlooked or disregarded al-Qaeda's previous attack against Americans in Aden in 1992, the destabilizing Yemen civil war of 1994, and the Department of State's repeated warnings that anti-American terrorist groups were operating freely throughout the country. The decision to switch from Djibouti to Aden harbor would prove disastrous.

Al-Qaeda did not descend on Yemen in the weeks preceding the USS *Cole* attack. Rather, elements of the organization had been living and operating in-country since the time of North and South Yemen's unification in 1990. Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen was not an anomaly, and President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government did nothing to discourage radical groups from operating inside its borders. In fact, the opposite was true, and the victorious mujahedeen had been welcomed into President Saleh's military and security forces particularly after their assistance during the country's civil war in 1994. Yemen was the perfect environment for bin Laden's organization to operate with impunity, and al-Qaeda targeted Yemeni communist holdovers during much of the 1990s. Bin Laden felt so secure that the Saleh government would not impede his work that he opened training camps which channeled discontented Muslims into the al-Qaeda ranks. With little to stand in his way, bin Laden selected Yemen as the place to launch his naval attack against the United States.

A destroyer: even the brave fear its might.
It inspires horror in the harbor and in the open sea
She sails into the waves
Flanked by arrogance, haughtiness and false power.
To her doom she moves slowly
A dingy awaits her, riding the waves.⁷⁹

-Osama bin Laden's poem celebrating the USS *Cole* attack

When we finally did get the last sailor off, it was time to put a new flag up. When the flag was finally at the top of the pole, we beamed a halogen light as bright as we had to show them sons of bitches that we were not defeated. That was our proudest moment.⁸⁰

-Master Chief James Parlier, USS *Cole*

Determined Warriors: The Bombing of the USS Cole

At the turn of the century, al-Qaeda was considered by the intelligence community as primarily a land-based threat because until then, all of their attacks had transpired on the ground. Yet, underestimating the versatility of Osama bin Laden's organization was exactly the reason al-Qaeda continued to find success against the United States. Bin Laden was able to survive the 1990s because of his ability to adapt, and this skill proved pivotal during the planning phases of al-Qaeda missions. The bombing of the USS *Cole* in October 2000, the last major pre-9/11 mission, exemplified al-Qaeda's willingness to experiment with various delivery methods. The naval attack went undetected by U.S. intelligence, ultimately claiming the lives of seventeen sailors and nearly sinking the warship.

The USS *Cole* was more than just a ship to the men and women who worked and lived aboard the American destroyer. It was their home. Although caught off-guard by the al-Qaeda

⁷⁹ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 256.

⁸⁰ America Abroad Media, "Remembering the Cole," <http://americaabroadmedia.org/radio/remembering-cole>.

attack, the crew of the USS *Cole* fought for multiple days, ultimately salvaging their crippled ship. Their sustained, determined effort battling against exhaustion and seawater exemplified the ideals of the United States Navy. These sailors saved the ship.

Destroyers

Throughout much of history, navies have sought dominance through technological advances which increase size, speed, firepower, armament, or stealth. Prior to the Great War, the world's most powerful governments raced against each other to build battleships that symbolized national greatness and were capable of projecting global power. The unprecedented firepower of the battleship ruled supreme through the interwar period, but naval supremacy transitioned to the aircraft carrier by the conclusion of the Second World War. The Pacific War proved to strategists that while carriers were capable of delivering unparalleled offensive power, the ships themselves remained susceptible to air and sea attacks. To overcome this deficiency, navies protected their aircraft carriers by grouping them with other surface and sub-surface ships to create aircraft carrier battle groups, a term that the U.S. Navy later amended to aircraft carrier strike group in the years after 9/11 to emphasize the fleet's ability to hit land-based targets.⁸¹ During the Cold War, the aircraft carrier became the platform for demonstrating strength over both sea and land, and the United States invested heavily in these superstructures in preparation for a fleet v. fleet conflict with the Soviet Union. The significant airpower housed aboard the aircraft carrier provided an unprecedented naval reach capable of striking deep inside hostile territories.

As a counter against torpedo threats from smaller and more mobile attackers, destroyer-class vessels were originally designed around the turn of the century to protect cruisers and early

⁸¹ Vern Clark, "Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities," *Proceedings*, October 2002, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno/proceedings.html>.

battleships.⁸² Known collegially as the greyhounds of the sea, the destroyer became instrumental in the defense of convoy groups during the First and Second World Wars, eventually adopting anti-submarine and anti-aircraft capabilities to meet changing needs. Following the rise of the aircraft carrier, destroyers continued their traditional function of fleet protection. In the 1970s, the Department of Defense introduced the Spruance-class destroyer, which remained the Navy's workhorse through the conclusion of the Cold War. The Navy briefly introduced a newer version of the Spruance known as the Kidd-class destroyer, but few of these were introduced to the fleet. Once the previous destroyers' anti-air defenses and missile capabilities were considered outdated, the Navy replaced the Spruance-class with the Arleigh Burke.

Naval experts hoped the Arleigh Burke destroyer would prove so effective at fleet protection that it would render previous models obsolete. The new destroyer, which was named after a former Chief of Naval Operations, was constructed with the Navy's latest defensive and offensive technology. Engineers began design on the Aegis combat system as early as 1973, but it was not until ten years later that the Navy finally introduced this pioneering computer into the Ticonderoga class cruiser.⁸³ The Aegis provided naval commanders a complete, real-time understanding of a battle, and its AN/SPY-1 Radar was capable of tracking more than one-hundred targets simultaneously while ranking the highest possible threats. The Aegis was the future for carrier battle group protection, and the Navy made the decision to expand this capability from being only available in its cruisers to all Arleigh Burke destroyers.

In addition to its considerable defensive upgrades, the Arleigh Burke destroyers were fitted with Tomahawk cruise missile capabilities with significant offensive range against both

⁸² Department of the Navy, "The Destroyers: Greyhounds of the Sea" http://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=140.

⁸³ Eric Osborne, *Destroyers: An Illustrated History of their Impact* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 166.

land or sea based targets. The Tomahawks, which could be outfitted with conventional or nuclear warheads, had entered America's arsenal in the latter part of the 1980s. These missiles provided unprecedented accuracy from their GPS enhanced tracking system. All Arleigh Burke destroyers were built with a twenty-nine cell vertical launching system (VLS) in the bow, and a sixty-one cell VLS in the aft capable of firing Tomahawks or surface-to-air missiles.⁸⁴ As the Navy moved forward with additions for its fleet, the Arleigh Burke was laid down in 1988 and commissioned in 1991. With the closing of the Cold War, the Arleigh Burke class was going to be a new destroyer for a new age.

Sailing to the Middle East

The USS *Cole* was not an inviting target by most standards. Reaching 505 feet from bow to stern, the ship stretched 148 feet in the air rivaling the height of a thirteen story building.⁸⁵ The ship was one of four Aegis-equipped Arleigh Burke class destroyers procured in 1991 at the cost of \$789 million per vessel.⁸⁶ Built by Ingalls Shipbuilding on the shore of Mississippi near the state's border with Alabama, the USS *Cole* was laid down in February 1994 and commissioned in June 1996.⁸⁷ If the sheer size of the destroyer was not intimidating enough, then the armament should have dissuaded most would-be enemies from attacking the American vessel. Clearly, the USS *Cole* was a ship of war, and it boasted a gun mount, vertical launching systems, close-in weapons systems, and torpedo tubes designed for hitting surface vessels. The VLS were armed with standard missiles, Tomahawk land attack missiles, and vertical launched anti-submarine

⁸⁴ Osborne, 276.

⁸⁵ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

⁸⁶ Raphael Perl and Ronald O'Rourke, *Terrorist Attack on USS Cole: Background and Issues for Congress*, RS20721 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, January 30, 2001), 1.

⁸⁷ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 24.

rockets. The ship was also capable of holding a helicopter. These weapons were supported by state-of-the-art sensor and radar systems which funneled into the Aegis system. In spite of its size, the powerful gas turbines were capable of propelling the hulking vessel to speeds in excess of thirty knots. All of these engineering marvels prepared the USS *Cole* to dominate any confrontation with other professional militaries that might possess surface ships, submarines, or aircraft. Ironically, it was a common fishing boat which nearly sank it.

For the sailors of the USS *Cole*, the years leading up to the Yemeni attack were filled with accomplishments as well as heartfelt sorrows. 1999 opened with emotional highs and lows. In February, the ship was awarded a CNSL Battle Efficiency Award for its praiseworthy performance, but tragedy also struck that month when one of the ship's petty officers died in an automobile accident.⁸⁸ By March, the USS *Cole* was back to work. After a refueling stop in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba which included enough time for a short tour, the ship set off to perform counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean.⁸⁹ The mission was uneventful, and only one suspicious-looking ship was boarded. May offered the crew a chance to mix business with pleasure. The USS *Cole* sailed to Newport, Rhode Island for work with the Naval War College before participating in Fleet Week in New York City. The USS *Cole*'s crew provided the honor guard for a New York Mets game while another detachment marched in the King's County Parade, and more than four thousand onlookers toured the ship throughout the week.⁹⁰ June was a particularly important time for the USS *Cole*. The ship passed a number of proficiency tests, but the biggest news was a change in command. Commander Richard Nolan, who was departing the ship to lead the Command Department at Surface Warfare Officer School, was replaced by

⁸⁸ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

CDR Kirk Lippold as the commanding officer.⁹¹ Lippold was in command on the day of the al-Qaeda attack a year and a half later in Yemen.

Prior to taking command of the USS *Cole*, Commander Lippold had successfully navigated his way through advanced schooling and had experience on the high seas. Lippold, who received his naval commission upon graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1981, had served on the USS *Fairfax County*, the USS *Yorktown*, and the USS *Arleigh Burke* in a number of different capacities before becoming the executive officer of the USS *Shiloh*.⁹² In addition to his deployments, Lippold received a Master's of Science in System Engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1989 and completed the requirements for the Army's Command and General Staff School in 1994.⁹³ A decorated officer with plenty of blue-water experience, Lippold had also received a number of awards and ribbons for action off the shores of Lebanon and Libya in the 1980s.

In the United States Navy, the authority of a commanding officer is absolute. Even with this power, commanders require a capable leadership team. For the USS *Cole*'s deployment in 2000, the executive officer was Lieutenant Commander John Christopher Peterschmidt, who had joined the crew in late 1999. The position of the XO is essential. *Command at Sea*, the Navy's informative guidebook on how to run a ship, described the importance of the second-in-command as, "It is clear, however, that the most important duties of the XO lie in the conforming to and carrying out of the policies of the commander and in keeping the CO informed of all significant matters relating to the ship and crew."⁹⁴ The command master chief, who is the

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ James Stavridis and William Mack, *Command at Sea, Fifth Edition* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 65.

highest ranking enlisted crewmember, was Command Master James Parlier. Lieutenant Joe Gagliano held multiple roles on the ship including weapons officer and force protection officer. Together with Lieutenant Robert Mercer, these two officers were responsible for creating, implementing, and overseeing the force protection plan whenever the USS *Cole* entered a port.

The Navy did not allow female sailors onto combat ships until the end of the 1970s, and this decision changed the composition of the fleet by the turn of the century. The new Navy benefitted from having women in leadership positions. The USS *Cole* was an example of this, and the ship's chief engineering officer was Lieutenant Deborah Courtney while Lieutenant Denise Woodfin acted as the ship's supply officer. These officers played important roles on the morning of the attack.

Setting Sail

The USS *Cole* was headed to the Middle East to assist in the US-led coalition that had been operating off the shores of Iraq since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. American intelligence struggled to predict Saddam Hussein's actions after Desert Storm had liberated Kuwait, and there had been multiple occasions in the 1990s when the coalition had reacted to Iraqi mobilization efforts. The USS *Cole* was deployed to this continuing standoff to provide flexibility for the American naval force circulating throughout the region.

In 2000, the USS *Cole* began its voyage towards this combustible theatre of war to join its aircraft carrier battle group led by the nuclear-powered USS *George Washington*. The ship had spent the early part of 2000 completing the Intermediate and Advanced portions of the Inter-Deployment Training Cycle (IDTC).⁹⁵ The USS *Cole* departed in June from its home base in

⁹⁵ Commanding Officer, USS *Cole* (DDG 67), Department of the Navy, *USS Cole (DDG67) Command History for Calendar Year 2000*, Report from Commanding Officer USS *Cole* to Director of Naval History (NO9BH) Naval Historical Center.

Norfolk, Virginia for a six-month deployment. It sailed with the George Washington Battle Group to Vieques, Puerto Rico, but then returned to Naval Station Norfolk because the destroyer was to deploy later. On August 8, the warship sailed once again, this time for a lengthy tour far from the continental United States. Ten days later, the *Cole* chopped from Second Fleet to the Sixth Fleet where it came under the control of US Naval Forces Europe. The *Cole*'s initial timetable in Europe resembled a Mediterranean cruise more than a military operation. From the end of August to early September, the USS *Cole* stopped at Barcelona, Spain, Villefranche, France, Valletta, Malta, and Koper, Slovenia.⁹⁶

Not all of its time with the Sixth Fleet was about goodwill. Operating in the Adriatic, the USS *Cole* was prepared to defend other American ships or undertake offensive action while elections were taking place against the backdrop of the Serbian conflict.⁹⁷ From September 15 to October 4, this short stint off the coast of what had been Yugoslavia was called Operation Silent Lance.⁹⁸ Some of the after-action reviews would later assert that the USS *Cole* had been unprepared for the al-Qaeda attack because the ship had arrived from the more lax European theatre, and therefore, was not prepared for the highly combustible environment of the Middle East. Naval doctrine indicates that all deployed ships should be ready to face any threat, and this excuse seemed even more dubious considering that the USS *Cole* was deploying from an area which had only recently required the crew to be on a war-footing.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Kirk Lippold, *Front Burner: Al Qaeda's Attack on the USS Cole* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2012), 26-27.

⁹⁸ Commanding Officer, USS *Cole* (DDG 67), Department of the Navy, *USS Cole (DDG67) Command History for Calendar Year 2000*, Report from Commanding Officer USS *Cole* to Director of Naval History (NO9BH) Naval Historical Center.

At this time, the USS *Cole* had twenty-six officers along with two-hundred seventy enlisted men and women aboard.⁹⁹ Naval ships often operate below their full capacity, and these numbers did not meet the three-hundred and forty-six crewmembers that an Arleigh Burke destroyer was capable of carrying.¹⁰⁰ Concerned over the state of his crew, Commander Lippold recalled, “In preparation for COLE’s entrance into the FIFTH Fleet Area of Operations, I made at least one 1MC [general announcing system] announcement to the crew about our need for increased Force Protection. The fact that we would now be operating in a theater where the threat was much higher and the possibility of direct action being taken against the crew and ship was a real possibility.”¹⁰¹ Lippold’s warning was not enough.

By the time the USS *Cole* was preparing to leave the Mediterranean, changes were already underway at its destination in the Middle East. In September of 2000, the *George Washington* Battle Group was relieved by the *Abraham Lincoln* Battle Group. After chopping at the Red Sea, the USS *Cole* left the control of the Sixth Fleet and came under the command of US Naval Forces Central Command under the Fifth Fleet.¹⁰² Once through the Suez Canal, Aden harbor was the USS *Cole*’s first stop on its 3,300-mile transit. The visit was intended to be a brief stop for fuel, known in the Navy as a BSF, before the destroyer continued out the Gulf of Aden to link up with its carrier battle group. The Navy required its ships to arrive in their operating area with their fuel tank filled to at least fifty-one percent of capacity.¹⁰³ To stay inside this naval regulation, the USS *Cole* needed to refuel. The crew was not permitted to go ashore,

⁹⁹ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Osborne, 276.

¹⁰¹ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 77-78.

¹⁰² The term “chopping” is used by the Navy when a ship switches from one command to another.

¹⁰³ Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 224.

which is known as a port visit, because of the shortness of the layover and because of concerns over security inside the city.

Like the rest of the Navy, the crew of the USS *Cole* had been trained that land-based threats were the primary danger when in port. The stop on Thursday, October 12th was not supposed to cause any defensive problems for the USS *Cole*, partially because of the layout of Aden harbor. Aden's refueling station was different from other ports, such as the one in Djibouti, because the refueling dolphin was located in the middle of the bay away from the shore and docks. Thus, the crew had no need to worry about potential threats from pedestrians or automobiles, and its centralized position in the harbor would allow the destroyer to monitor any marine activity in its vicinity.

USS Cole in Aden Harbor

When US naval ships depart the high-seas for a stop in a foreign port, protocol demands that the vessels act in a diplomatic manner with the authorities of the host nation. Although commanders try to respect local customs, these interactions can be problematic for both sides. On the morning of October 12th, the USS *Cole* was running a half-hour behind schedule because of communication issues with the Aden Port Control.¹⁰⁴ Even though the ship was deploying for a stint in the Middle East, the USS *Cole* did not have an Arabic specialist on board. This hampered contact with the shore. It is customary for a local pilot to join a foreign captain on his ship to offer local knowledge of the harbor. After a short waiting period, a Yemeni pilot eventually came aboard the American destroyer. The USS *Cole*'s delay was not unusual, and other American warships had reported that they too had experienced similar complications during their refueling stops in Tawahi Harbor.

¹⁰⁴ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 42.

The USS *Cole*'s arrival at Aden marked the thirtieth visit by an American warship since September 1997, and the USS *Hawes* and USS *Donald Cook* had also encountered minor inconveniences with the locals during their refueling stops in August.¹⁰⁵ Against the wishes of the Yemeni port authorities, the USS *Donald Cook* had refueled on the starboard side so that the ship could make a quick exit in case of an emergency. The USS *Cole* would follow the *Donald Cook*'s example during its stop at Refueling Dolphin Seven in the middle of Tawahi Harbor even though the local Yemeni pilot was originally against this plan. By refueling starboard side to, the USS *Cole* could head directly out of the harbor without the need of tugboats should the need arise.

Even though the previous port visits in Aden had gone without incident, the commander of the USS *Cole* made the prudent decision to face his ship toward the entrance to the harbor. His rationale might have been based on earlier warnings from his command. In July, all vessels had received a warning from the commander of the George Washington Battle Group stating, "The potential for our ships and personnel to become targets for terrorist groups significantly increases while inport/ashore in the gulf. No port should be considered completely safe. To help prevent terrorist attacks against personnel, ships, and aircraft, commanders must make force protection a top priority and an integral part of the planning process."¹⁰⁶ Commander Lippold's use of the dolphin appeared to be heeding this warning.

The sea lane into Aden harbor had been dredged only two years earlier in 1998 to a depth of 15 meters, and approaching ships could rely on a 200-meter wide channel from two miles

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 15-16, 36.

¹⁰⁶ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 14.

offshore to accommodate their approach into port.¹⁰⁷ On the morning that the USS *Cole* arrived in Yemen, the harbor was filled with the sights and sounds of an active port. Two large tankers, one of which was called the *Red Sea* and registered in Panama, sat only a few hundred yards from the *Cole*. The tankers were being supplied by a yellow ferry, and there were five or six other craft operating in the water near the American destroyer.¹⁰⁸ The bustle of the harbor was not unusual for the *Cole*'s crew, and the sailors went about their mission of refueling the ship without a heightened sense of concern.

To protect itself from smaller threats, the crew was armed with lethal (guns and grenades) and non-lethal (fire hoses) weapons systems to discourage anyone from getting too close to the ship. In spite of this, a small boat managed to pull alongside the fantail on the morning of the fuel stop. Two men looking to get paid to remove the USS *Cole*'s garbage attempted to climb onboard before an alert Gunner's Mate, 2nd Class Petty Officer, used her M-14, which was loaded with shot line at the time, to prevent the men from reaching the top of the ladder.¹⁰⁹ Without her intervention, the men could have boarded virtually unimpeded.¹¹⁰ Crewmembers forced the intruders back to their craft before dispatching the trash boat. This incident was viewed as minor and refueling continued as planned.

Prior to the USS *Cole*'s arrival in Aden, the commanding officer was required to file a force protection plan with USNAVCENT. On that particular morning, the ship was operating at

¹⁰⁷ *Sailing Directions (Enroute): Red Sea and the Persian Gulf*, 21st ed. (Springfield, VA: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, 2017), 155, https://msi.nga.mil/MSISiteContent/StaticFiles/NAV_PUBS/SD/Pub172/Pub172bk.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 66.

¹⁰⁹ Shot line is a projectile attached to a line that can be fired from a gun.

¹¹⁰ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 47.

THREATCON BRAVO. General Tommy Franks, who was in charge of CENTCOM on October 12th, summarized the threat levels as,

A threat condition of Alpha means that there is a general threat in the area, a general terrorist threat. It has been identified, but it is unpredictable, and its patterns are indefinite. That condition, that set of measures, is to be used over the long term by a friendly force and is not expected to have any sort of grave consequence to that force.

Threat Condition Bravo exists when a threat is in fact increased and is more predictable. And this has to do with the amount and type of intelligence information received. And Threat Condition Bravo is a maintainable standard over a mid-length of time. You can go to conditions under Bravo and continue to operate.

When you get to Threat Condition Charlie, that's – that occurs when an incident has occurred or when appears to be imminent.¹¹¹

Under THREATCON BRAVO, the *Cole*'s crew was required to implement sixty-two measures for force protection. The fact that a small garbage boat was able to reach the hull should have been alarming. This potentially threatening approach should never have been allowed to occur, even if the *Cole* had been operating at the lesser THREATCON ALPHA. Measure Eighteen, which is required for both ALPHA and BRAVO, specifically designated that all unauthorized craft be kept at bay and closely monitored. It stated, "Water taxis, ferries, bum boats, and other harbor craft require special concern because they can serve as an ideal platform for terrorists. Unauthorized craft should be kept away from the ship; authorized craft should be carefully controlled, surveilled, and covered. Inspect authorized watercraft daily."¹¹²

Accounts differ on how well the USS *Cole* completed its force protection protocols throughout the morning of October 12th. According to the JAG report completed after the attack, the crew completed thirty-one measures of THREATCON BRAVO, waived nineteen that were

¹¹¹ House Committee on Armed Services, *Attack on the USS Cole in Yemen*, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess., October 25, 2000.

¹¹² House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), Appendix C.

deemed not necessary by the commanding officer, and failed to accomplish twelve others.¹¹³

This report became a hotly contested source as the USS *Cole*'s commanding officer and other Admirals have refuted the JAG's findings. The JAG report ultimately concluded that nineteen measures could have either prevented the al-Qaeda attack or blunted its effectiveness. In his summary, the author contends that only seven of these nineteen measures were properly accomplished in Aden harbor.

At or around 1030, the USS *Cole* began refueling. Around 1050, Executive Officer Peterschmidt and Lieutenant Denise Woodfin convinced Commander Lippold to change his mind regarding waste disposal, and the crew was notified that three small Yemeni vessels had been cleared to come alongside the destroyer to haul away the ship's trash.¹¹⁴ During this same period of time, Lippold was informed that refueling was going faster than anticipated. In order to expedite the entire process, the Commander allowed the lunch crew to begin serving thirty minutes before their usual routine time of 1130.¹¹⁵ At or around 1115, the two trash boats departed from the *Cole* to dispose of their cargo. The crewmembers guarding the ship were not clear if a third small boat would be returning to pick up any remaining trash.

¹¹³ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 23.

¹¹⁴ Lippold, 44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.



USS Cole at the refueling dolphin in Aden, Yemen¹¹⁶

The Attack

According to government reports, sailors on the USS *Cole* observed the suicide bombers approaching from a distance. Because the attackers did not demonstrate any hostile intent towards the warship and because they had been alerted to a possible third vessel, the force protection crew did not initiate any defensive measures. This was the real genius of the al-Qaeda plan. Their non-confrontational approach was reinforced by the fact that the *Cole* was expecting a small Yemeni vessel to come and haul away any remaining trash. American personnel, who witnessed the suicide bombers pulling up to their boat, recall that the attackers were smiling and waving.

¹¹⁶ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 6.

The ruse worked to perfection. The al-Qaeda members knew that the closer they could maneuver their bomb-laden vessel to their target, the more damage it would cause. The suicide bombers were aware that close proximity would give them the best chance to actually sink the ship. There was no way of knowing exactly what Nibras and Khamri were thinking in their final moments, but they must have felt that they were atoning for their cell's debacle during the failed raid on the *The Sullivan's* as they closed their distance with the American warship. Fueled by bin Laden's teachings that martyrs were heroes, Nibras and Khamri must have prayed their sacrifice would be remembered forever as a great strike for al-Qaeda. They hoped their friends and family could celebrate their martyrdom by watching the video of their valiant exploits.

Several of the USS *Cole's* crew recalled seeing a small, white boat with red trim headed towards the American destroyer. A Gas Turbine System Technician Fireman, who happened to see the al-Qaeda team approaching, estimated that the boat was thirty-five feet long and six to seven feet wide with a four to five foot storage well in the front.¹¹⁷ Another member of the *Cole* was unnerved by the speed which the suicide bombers originally sustained, causing him to consider calling for help, but he decided against sounding an alarm once the boat slowed down.¹¹⁸ The al-Qaeda approach offered only a short window to assess the situational threat, which the witness later judged to have only been about thirty-five seconds.

When the attackers ignited their payload at 1118, the blast literally rocked the giant American warship, forcing the crew located throughout the ship to struggle just to stay upright. The detonation was so loud that people reported hearing it onshore from miles away. The mammoth explosion ripped a jagged forty-by-forty-five-foot hole in the port side of the ship,

¹¹⁷ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 69.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

which immediately began taking on water.¹¹⁹ The hull of an Arleigh Burke destroyer was partially constructed with Kevlar, a synthetic fiber stronger than steel that is used to make body-armor. According the Navy, the USS *Cole*'s hull was designed to withstand 51,000 pounds of pressure per square inch.¹²⁰ This gives some indication of the magnitude of the bomb.¹²¹

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, it appeared al-Qaeda had executed a major victory against Washington. The operation had transpired in the Middle East, the very place bin Laden wanted the United States to abandon. Bin Laden's operatives had managed to kill naval personnel, and it seemed as though there was no way the American crew would be able to salvage the ship given the sizable hole in its side. The only serious glitch in the al-Qaeda plan appeared to be that Fahd al-Quso failed to capture the explosion on videotape.¹²² The USS *Cole* was successfully attacked without firing a single shot in its defense.

Operation Determined Response

Military leaders often receive credit for victories, but it is important to remember that it is the grunts at the tip of the spear who win and lose battles. Osama bin Laden eventually gained the notoriety for nearly sinking an American warship. However, it was his Yemen cell and its two suicide bombers who made the operation a success. In a similar way, American admirals could do little to prevent the USS *Cole* from sinking, and it was the training and fortitude of the

¹¹⁹ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 1.

¹²⁰ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

¹²¹ There is some discrepancy over the size of the hole. For instance, the *Investigation to Inquire into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000* reported the size to be thirty-two by thirty-six foot hole. Since that report came from November 27, 2000, this paper will make use of the measurements found in the report for the House Armed Services Committee from May 2001.

¹²² Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2006), 361.

crew that kept the ship alive. Immediately following the blast, reinforcements were sent to help provide medical treatment, food, lodging, and protection from a possible second-wave attack.

In the minutes after the *Cole* attack, protection and damage control became the immediate priorities. Led by Rear Admiral Mark Fitzgerald, CENTCOM commenced with Operation Determined Response to meet these needs. The destroyer USS *Donald Cook* and frigate USS *Hawes*, the two American warships which had only recently refueled in Aden, were ordered to return to Yemen posthaste. Even at this speed, the two ships did not arrive until the day after the attack, at which time, the *Donald Cook* and *Hawes* provided security, mechanical parts, food, and a place for the *Cole*'s crew to shower and rest.¹²³ They were joined by an Amphibious Ready Group comprised of the USS *Anchorage*, USS *Duluth*, and USS *Tarawa* as well as the USNS *Catawba*, a tugboat.¹²⁴ The NAVCENT's Emergency Response Team was in Aden ten hours after the explosion, and a Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team (FAST) platoon later arrived to provide security for the entire effort.¹²⁵ The 2nd Fleet FAST platoon had been in the midst of training exercises in Qatar when the bombing occurred, so the interim void was filled by a dozen Marines dispatched from Bahrain.¹²⁶ While other countries provided medical assistance, Great Britain ordered the frigates HMS *Marlborough* and HMS *Cumberland* to aid in any capacity necessary.¹²⁷ The HMS *Marlborough* was actually the first ship to come to the *Cole*'s assistance because of its close proximity to Aden on the morning of the bombing.

¹²³ Winkler, 171.

¹²⁴ Schneller, 77.

¹²⁵ Moore, 116.

¹²⁶ Winkler, 169.

¹²⁷ Tommy Franks, *Opening Remarks of General Tommy R. Franks Commander in Chief U.S. Central Command before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee 25 October 2000*.

As often happens with bombings of this magnitude, not all of the deceased were immediately recovered. The explosion had caused such devastation to the *Cole*'s hull that it became difficult to navigate individual sections of the sinking ship. Thus, there was originally a short list of sailors who were considered missing-in-action. The initial search-and-rescue attempt located five killed-in-action. These first five bodies landed at Ramstein Air Force base in Germany, coffins draped in the Stars and Stripes, and were met with a naval honor guard dispatched for the solemn occasion from Naples, Italy.¹²⁸ The remains of eleven more sailors were eventually uncovered in the wreckage. Ultimately, sixteen crewmembers were killed on the USS *Cole*, and one died after being evacuated from the ship.

While the on-base flags in Germany were lowered to half-mast as the news of the bombing came in, the life and death struggle continued in Aden harbor. The USS *Cole* was not a safe place to tend to the injured. The infirmary had been destroyed in the blast, and the fight for the ship's survival remained in doubt. This left no sanctuary for the wounded sailors who could not remain on the deck with the scorching Aden sun beating down on the harbor. The *Cole*'s medical personnel treated the wounded as best as could be expected under the circumstances, but the seriousness of some of the injuries required medical attention only available with evacuation off the ship. The decision was made quickly. Lieutenant Ann Chamberlain, a navigations officer, requested and was granted permission from Commander Lippold to go ashore with the wounded.¹²⁹

Aden housed several medical facilities which offered to assist with the destroyer's wounded, but the local hospitals did not have the specially-trained trauma units necessary to address the complexities associated with military injuries. Still reeling from the surprise attack,

¹²⁸ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

¹²⁹ Lippold, 86.

the Americans were also concerned with the concept of leaving their incapacitated crewmates in local hospitals without adequate protection. The possibility of a second-wave of attacks loomed heavy in Aden harbor. With these concerns in mind, nineteen injured sailors were sent to Germany for medical assistance, while others were transported in French planes to Djibouti to have their wounds treated.¹³⁰ Refusing to leave her volunteer post, Lt. Chamberlain travelled with the most seriously wounded across the Gulf of Aden to the French Military Medical Center in Djibouti. The patients in Djibouti who were stable enough to travel were picked up in Air Force C-9As and joined a small contingent of their dead and wounded comrades in Germany.¹³¹ The number of seriously wounded was reported in subsequent military investigations to range between thirty-nine and forty-seven.¹³² With her mission completed, Chamberlain rebuffed the idea of continuing on to Germany, and the Lieutenant instead flew back to Aden to return to her besieged ship.

The Americans were not the only ones attacked in Yemen on October 12th. The British embassy in Sana'a was also bombed, although there were no injuries from the attempt.¹³³ There was initial speculation that the near-simultaneous attacks on the United States and Great Britain were part of a larger plot against the West. This reaction made sense since both of the East African embassy bombings in 1998 had been perpetrated by the same group. However, the theory of a collaborative effort was discredited upon closer examination. The Aden bombing was a well-planned, suicide attack designed to ensure significant bloodshed, while the Sana'a

¹³⁰ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² The *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000* puts the number at forty-two injured from the blast and five others who were treated for non-explosive related injuries or pre-existing conditions.

¹³³ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

plan seemed rudimentary in comparison. Throwing explosives over a wall in the chance that someone was maimed or killed did not fit al-Qaeda's modus operandi. No definitive connection between the *Cole* bombing and the Sana'a attack was ever made.



In a dire situation, the USS Cole's crew fights against the elements to save their ship¹³⁴

Life and Death

In dire situations, the priorities of the captain are to 1) assess the situation for immediate danger to the ship and crew, 2) issue orders designed to save the ship and lives, 3) communicate with higher command for reinforcements, assistance, and additional orders. Commander Lippold was in his cabin when the blast shook the USS *Cole*. Intuition told him the ship had been hit by an enemy force, and he grabbed his personal 9mm pistol from its storage before leaving his room. The CO headed topside to assess the damage for himself. Unsure if the attack was over

¹³⁴ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 10.

after the initial explosion, Lippold ordered the Inport Watch team to remove the curious crewmembers who had wandered outside to see what had transpired for themselves. Unable to see the full extent of the damage, Lippold's initial instinct that the ship had been attacked was confirmed by reports from witnesses who had seen the al-Qaeda approach. He left the deck to contact the Yemeni authorities to warn that the destroyer would defend itself against any boat that came too close and to request local assistance transporting the wounded to hospitals. Next, Lippold contacted Fifth Fleet from a borrowed cell-phone to convey the message that an American ship had been struck and was in need of immediate assistance.

The ship's Executive Officer Christopher Peterschmidt immediately started giving orders in the moments after the attack. Peterschmidt, who had been in a training room when the al-Qaeda bombers had detonated their payload, was concerned with internal and external contingencies that he feared might finish off the ship. The initial problems included flooding and fires. He stated, "We had to cut power to those cables. We had to get firefighting foam onto those puddles of gasoline. We had to make sure that all the hatches and temporary bulkheads that we could create were stopping the flooding from progressing into the rest of the ship."¹³⁵ Peterschmidt's other trepidation hinged on the possibility of a secondary attack. He issued a command for the crew to pass out the ship's small arms and to establish a defensive perimeter topside. This order was superfluous by this point as the crew had already dispersed all the weapons in the ship's armory.

The violence of the explosion had literally knocked much of the crew off their feet. Although it was immediately clear to those on the ship that a major event had transpired, many sailors did not know if the explosion had been an internal malfunction aboard the ship, or if an

¹³⁵ Jordana Gustafson, "Crewmembers' Efforts After the Cole," America Abroad Media, <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Crewmembers%E2%80%99%20efforts%20after%20the%20attack.pdf>.

external enemy had attacked them. Uncertainty and confusion swept across much of the crew. Some wondered if perhaps there had been a mishap during the refueling process. Master Chief Petty Officer Pamela Jacobsen encountered Commander Lippold on the bridge. She recalled, “He had his 9-mm drawn. I remember thinking, ‘Well, something really bad must have happened because he has got his weapon. He is running around here with a gun.’ There was lot of things running through my head as you can well imagine. I was really worried about another attack. Maybe there was some kind of chemical or biological poison in the air? I mean a lot of things went through your head.”¹³⁶ Jacobsen’s concern about a second-wave attack was a shared sentiment among the crew as the initial shock of the attack began to wear off. Having the ship’s commanding officer brandishing a firearm only further endorsed the suspicion that the attack was not over, and Lippold relinquished his weapon after realizing the negative effect it was having on those around him.

It did not take long before the crew started facing the agonies of war. Master Chief James Parlier was a corpsman aboard the USS *Cole* on the day of the attack. He was popular among the crew, perhaps because of his innate desire to help others, a trait that continued in the months and years after the bombing. Like the rest of the non-injured sailors, Parlier scrambled to the defense of the ship. He recalled,

I made my way down the starboard passage way towards what we call the log room. That’s where I saw one of the sailors that was in the worst condition. As a matter of fact, his right side didn’t even look human. I decided to do CPR – probably shouldn’t have because I knew there were sailors that needed help in triage but I wanted to give it a go. I wanted to save this young man. When I first started doing mouth to mouth, I got a mouth full of blood. I knew he was bleeding internally into his lungs. There was so much going through my head. A chief came over and said, ‘James, you are going to have to stop.’ So I had to make the call. First time in my life I ever had to do that. I had to let him die.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ America Abroad Media, “Remembering the Cole,” <http://americaabroadmedia.org/radio/remembering-cole>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

With each passing hour, the environment aboard the USS *Cole* turned even more grim. The ship's communication systems and fresh drinking water system had been rendered useless. Each of these was a major issue. Without a way to communicate throughout the ship, some individuals acted as runners carrying information from point to point. No matter how determined the effort, the *Cole*'s crew would be unable to sustain their effort without clean water.

Although undiagnosed at the time, some of the crew were dealing with early effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder that can present symptoms in the immediate wake of an event or take months before appearing. Yemen's extreme heat burdened the crew as they struggled to repair their damaged ship while coping with the emotional toll of losing their fellow sailors also weighed heavily on the group. Executive Officer Chris Peterschmidt would later realize that the crew had not been properly treated for PTSD after the bombing. He stated, "In 2000, you were given medication for sleeping and that was about it — all of us were having trouble sleeping following the bombing. And the psychologists they sent to the ship were really there to get the crew reorganized."¹³⁸

The attack had knocked the USS *Cole*'s power offline leaving the ship with only the emergency lighting system, and so the search for the dead and wounded commenced in the dark. Will Merchen, a Damage Controlman Third Class, was a "red hat" which meant that he specialized in dealing with emergency contingencies such as fire and flooding. Wearing protective gear, lights, and a self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), Merchen was part of the crew that immediately began a search-and-rescue operation in the darkened halls below deck. The lack of light was only one obstacle. The detonation had been so powerful that it had sealed

¹³⁸ David Larter, "After 15 years, USS *Cole* Crew Reflects on Terror Attack," *Navy Times*, October 11, 2015, <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/10/11/cole-peterschmidt-parlier-carlson-2000-terror-attack/73607718/>.

entry to parts of the ship, and perhaps most pressing, the areas closest to the hole in the *Cole*'s side were filling with rushing water.

Screams filled the dark hallways as Merchen's team tried to get to the source. As might be expected, the most damaged areas were the ones nearest the explosion. After forcing their way into the Chief's mess, the red hats tried assuaging the pain of a group of severely injured sailors, one of whom had an eye that was on the verge of leaving the socket and another whose leg had been pressed backward into the man's chest.¹³⁹ Upon discovering a Master Chief face down in the dark, Merchen recalled, "One of my guys rolled him over, and there was blood bubbling from his neck and chest. He opened his eyes and looked right at us, and he died."¹⁴⁰ With the ship's fate still in doubt and others still in need, there was little time to mourn the dead. Working against the clock, Merchen and others bravely returned to their struggle to locate the wounded and free trapped crewmembers. They refused to stop for forty-eight straight hours.

The search-and-rescue operations transpiring in the depths of the USS *Cole* were taxed by the overwhelming heat. In addition to disabling the lighting system, the attack had also knocked out the air conditioner creating a nightmarish environment inside the ship. Operations Specialist 1st Class Greg Carlson provided a visceral description of what was occurring below deck. He stated, "Being surrounded by that ... that death and that tragedy, was not a healthy thing. It was hard thing. So when we were inside — no light, no ventilation — it turned that ship into an oven. All the perishable stuff starts to smell."¹⁴¹ He continued, "I really want to

¹³⁹ Bill Harlan, "Rapid City Sailor Searched USS Cole for Injured, Dead," Rapid City Journal, Nov 17, 2000, http://rapidcityjournal.com/rapid-city-sailor-searched-uss-cole-for-injured-dead/article_987a15e8-bbb1-5309-bcdb-1b4fb24d74ce.html.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ David Larter, "After 15 years, USS Cole Crew Reflects on Terror Attack," *Navy Times*, October 11, 2015, <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/10/11/cole-peterschmidt-parlier-carlson-2000-terror-attack/73607718/>.

think that was the majority of the odor was the food going over — there was lots of food down there. But it wasn't just the smell of food.” Al-Qaeda’s war had arrived at the USS *Cole*.

Dating back to its creation in 1775 under the Continental Congress, 13 October is considered the US Navy’s birthday. Unfortunately, there was no time for celebration in Aden harbor in the early hours of Friday, October 13, 2000. The USS *Cole* had miraculously survived the initial attack because of the ship’s design and the extraordinary efforts of those onboard. However, the danger had only abated for a short period. After a bitter struggle against both the environment and the damage to the ship throughout Friday the 13th, the crew began seeing progress on a variety of fronts. For starters, the highly-feared second-wave attack had never materialized. The ship’s engineers had managed to return power to sections of the ship, and pumps appeared to be making a dent against the water level. This was only a short reprieve from the danger.

Late Saturday night, the lone working generator failed, and the ship began taking on water. The rising flood in Main Engine Room Two threatened to once again entomb the USS *Cole* to a watery grave. The exhausted crew, which had finally been given a chance to try and sleep on the flight deck, was awakened only to return to the chaotic fight for the survival of the ship. Summarizing how quickly the situation had turned septic, Damage Controlman Will Merchen recalled, “It took five minutes to fill up all three decks again.”¹⁴² Unable to pump the water out of the engine room, engineers suggested cutting a second hole in the ship’s side to act as a bypass. This action was outside the Navy’s damage protocol, and no one knew with certainty if making additional incisions would alleviate the expanding problem. There was also apprehension that the blowtorches might accidentally ignite the fuel which had washed unabated

¹⁴² Bill Harlan, “Rapid City Sailor Searched USS Cole for Injured, Dead,” Rapid City Journal, Nov 17, 2000, http://rapidcityjournal.com/rapid-city-sailor-searched-uss-cole-for-injured-dead/article_987a15e8-bbb1-5309-bcdb-1b4fb24d74ce.html.

through various parts of the ship. Running out of options, the decision was made to cut. Hull Technician Second Class Chris Regal volunteered to climb down into the darkness and burn a hole above the waterline. But, when he arrived to begin the procedure, Regal was unable to get the torch to light. It was quickly apparent to Regal that the ship needed new welding equipment to make the repair.

The ship was once again in mortal danger. The explosion had blown a forty-by-forty-five foot-hole in the side of the ship, and anxiety-filled conversations were held at the highest levels of Operation Determined Response to decide if the *Cole*'s crew should be pulled off their sinking ship. The decision was made to continue the operation at all costs. Some members of the crew returned to their earlier pursuit of plugging holes by hand, a technique used by navies since antiquity. Reaching levels of desperation, damage control teams used anything available to them to try and stop the water level from its upward creep. This was a maddening endeavor, and the sailors found that as soon as one hole was plugged, the water would simply start coming in from a different spot in the room. Describing the frustration and personal danger the crew faced, XO Chris Peterschmidt stated, "All the progress we had made in the two days beforehand almost all but evaporated. In our minds, [we were] losing the ship. You had to put your hand against the wall that had water on the other side, feel around to find those cracks that were now developing and then plug them in the dark knowing if that bulkhead that you had your hands against gives way, you would not have much chance of survival."¹⁴³

There is some contradiction as to what happened next. According to his personal account, Commander Lippold held a meeting with a desperate Peterschmidt before giving the order for the crew to form a "bucket brigade." Lippold remembered the conversation as, "XO,

¹⁴³ Jordana Gustafson, "Crewmembers' Efforts After the Cole," America Abroad Media, <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Crewmembers%E2%80%99%20efforts%20after%20the%20attack.pdf>.

we have over two hundred able-bodied sailors on this ship. I want every one of them to find a bucket. Line them up going down into main two and if we have to use a bucket brigade for the next two hours until I can get a portable torch from *Hawes* or *Donald Cook* and we can make those cuts, that's what we'll do. *We are not going to lose the ship.*"¹⁴⁴ Chris Peterschmidt recalled a different set of events. In an interview with America Abroad Media, the USS *Cole*'s second-in-command claimed he was the one who had ordered the "bucket brigade."¹⁴⁵

After borrowing a blowtorch from the USS *Donald Cook*, Hull Technician Second Class Chris Regal was finally able to cut an additional hole in the side of his already sinking ship. Accounts vary on whether Regal cut one hole or two four-inch holes in the hull just above the waterline.¹⁴⁶ Regardless, the move opened a new avenue for the crew to begin pumping seawater out of the flooded chamber. Personal danger had been averted, the operation had not sparked the fuel in the water, and Regal returned safely to the deck. His brave effort was rewarded with a chili mac, the first warm meal he had stopped for in three days.¹⁴⁷

Regardless of which member of the leadership team was first to order the bucket-brigade, this desperate call to arms was answered by the USS *Cole*'s crew who lined up to pass seawater-filled buckets over the side of the ship. The "bucket brigade" and Regal's cut bought enough time for the ship's engineers to regain power and get the water-pumps back online. In essence, the three-quarters of a billion-dollar destroyer was saved by men and women with buckets. The

¹⁴⁴ Lippold, 130-131.

¹⁴⁵ Jordana Gustafson, "Crewmembers' Efforts After the Cole," America Abroad Media, <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Crewmembers%E2%80%99%20efforts%20after%20the%20attack.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ According to David Winkler's *Amirs, Admirals, and Desert Sailors* page 172, Regal made two cuts. According to Kirk Lippold's *Front Burner* page 131, Regal made one cut.

¹⁴⁷ Jordana Gustafson, "Crewmembers' Efforts After the Cole," America Abroad Media, <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Crewmembers%E2%80%99%20efforts%20after%20the%20attack.pdf>.

Cole's crew had embraced the ship's motto of "determined warriors" and found the strength to overcome exhaustion, hunger, and shock. Under punishing conditions, these sailors persevered for ninety-six consecutive hours of damage control.¹⁴⁸ Their drive to save the USS *Cole* should be remembered as nothing short of heroic. Unfortunately, acts of valor are often accompanied by times of sorrow.

In the *Cole* attack, al-Qaeda accomplished its goal of killing American sailors. A bomb does not differentiate among its victims, and the massive explosion against the USS *Cole* had killed indiscriminately. Those who perished in the line of duty were representative of the melting pot that is the United States. The victims hailed from Virginia to Wisconsin, and Texas to North Dakota. The deceased were a multicultural group of individuals ranging in age from nineteen to their mid-thirties.¹⁴⁹ Five of these sailors were so young that they could not yet legally purchase alcohol. Two of the casualties were women, Lakiba Palmer of San Diego, California and Lakeina Francis of Woodleaf, North Carolina. These sailors became the first women killed-in-action since the Navy had allowed women to begin serving on all combat ships in 1994.¹⁵⁰

The al-Qaeda bombing of the USS *Cole* was the deadliest attack against the United States Navy since thirty-seven sailors were killed aboard the USS *Stark* during the Shipping Wars of the 1980s. On October 18, a memorial service for the fallen sailors was held in Norfolk, Virginia.¹⁵¹ The President and Mrs. Clinton attended the solemn occasion along with their

¹⁴⁸ USS *Cole* (DDG 67) Memorial Dedication (program from event). Naval Station Norfolk. October 12, 2001.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS *Cole* 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

¹⁵¹ Commanding Officer, USS *Cole* (DDG 67), Department of the Navy, *USS Cole (DDG67) Command History for Calendar Year 2000*, Report from Commanding Officer *USS Cole* to Director of Naval History (NO9BH) Naval Historical Center.

daughter, Chelsea. The Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry Shelton, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet Robert Natter joined a crowd of 15,000 to remember those who gave their lives for their country.¹⁵² Some of the injured sailors from the USS *Cole* were flown back to attend the service, even as the majority of the crew was still fighting to salvage the ship in Aden Harbor. Arriving at the memorial service in seven ambulances, thirty-seven injured sailors were greeted with a standing ovation from the sizable crowd. A second service was held a year after the al-Qaeda attack. On October 12, 2001, a war memorial made of granite and bronze was dedicated to the crew of the *Cole* in Naval Station Norfolk.¹⁵³ “Taps” was played, and there was a twenty-one-gun salute.

The Journey Home

In the week after the bombing, the USS *Cole* had nearly succumbed to a watery demise on multiple occasions, but the men and women on the crippled ship had refused to surrender the ship. Unable to find a suitable facility to repair the sizable vessel in Yemen, the Navy decided that the best option was to return the USS *Cole* stateside. This was no small order. The destroyer had a forty-by-forty-five-foot hole in its hull, and it was half-way around the world. At 505 feet long and 8,400 tons, the size and weight of the ship complicated matters. Utilizing a team of tugboats was considered too dangerous. The sinking of the ship on the journey home would have been disastrous after the colossal effort expended to save it. The answer was discovered by thinking outside the box.

The Navy elected to lease the M/V *Blue Marlin*, a highly specialized Norwegian boat designed to transport oil rigs. The *Blue Marlin*, which was already in the Middle East, was

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ USS Cole (DDG 67) Memorial Dedication, Naval Station Norfolk, October 12, 2001.

leased for \$4.5 million to carry the destroyer to the United States.¹⁵⁴ The USS *Cole*'s sheer mass and height posed serious obstacles for the trans-oceanic voyage, but a group of engineers developed a method to overcome this obstacle. On October 29, seventeen days after the bombing, the USS *Cole* finally departed Aden harbor. Marines deployed to Yemen as part of Operation Determined Response established a naval perimeter around the wounded destroyer as a precaution against a second attack. As the USS *Cole* was being pulled out to sea by multiple Yemeni tugs, the crew played a traditional version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," followed by Jimi Hendrix's version of the same song, and "American Bad Ass" by Kid Rock while interested locals stopped their daily activities to listen and watch from the shore.¹⁵⁵ With American helicopters patrolling the skies, the USS *Catawba* took over the duty of towing the destroyer into deeper water. The USS *Cole*'s crew was transferred to the USS *Tarawa* for the long transit back to the United States, eventually arriving stateside on November 3. A crowd numbering in the thousands assembled to welcome the sailors home.

A team of engineers and mechanics worked assiduously to prepare the damaged destroyer for the long voyage home. Welding crews had to secure the hull before the millions of gallons of seawater could be pumped out of the lower half of the ship. Twenty-five miles out to sea, the M/V *Blue Marlin* began the process of picking up the USS *Cole*, a process that experts believed might take up to thirty-six hours to complete.¹⁵⁶ The Norwegian ship was designed to carry petroleum rigs, not naval destroyers. Even with the constant repairs to the ship, there was serious trepidation throughout the Navy's ranks that the USS *Cole* could still be lost to sea. In

¹⁵⁴ John Burns, "A Maimed Destroyer Cole Starts for Home," *New York Times*, October 30, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/30/world/a-maimed-destroyer-cole-starts-for-home.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Lippold, 214-215.

¹⁵⁶ John Burns, "A Maimed Destroyer Cole Starts for Home," *New York Times*, October 30, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/30/world/a-maimed-destroyer-cole-starts-for-home.html>.

order for the *Cole* to be secured across the *Blue Marlin*, the Norwegian ship pumped water into its own tank to partially submerge the ship and get it under the American destroyer. The *Blue Marlin* then pumped the seawater out to lift the *Cole* onto its main deck.

A team of damage control specialists stayed aboard the USS *Cole* during the thirty-six-hour process to report and address any structural concerns during the loading process onto the M/V *Blue Marlin*.¹⁵⁷ After the USS *Cole* had been secured and the oceanwater pumped out of the *Blue Marlin*, the *Cole*'s remaining crew including Commander Lippold assembled below the hull of their damaged ship. This marked the first time they had been able to see the full extent of the detonation. The sight proved so overwhelming that the group stared at their former home in absolute silence.

Riding aboard the M/V *Blue Marlin*, the USS *Cole* arrived six weeks later on the crisp winter morning of December 13 to Litton Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Mississippi.¹⁵⁸ The *Cole* had returned to its birthplace. After receiving a patch over the mangled hole in the ship's side, the USS *Cole* returned to the water on Christmas Eve to begin the lengthy and expensive renovation process. During the journey home, the replacement crew accompanying the *Cole* had discovered human remains that had gone undetected in Aden. At the time, there was no way to determine if they belonged to the bombers or the sailors.

¹⁵⁷ Bill Harlan, "Rapid City Sailor Searched USS Cole for Injured, Dead," Rapid City Journal, Nov 17, 2000, http://rapidcityjournal.com/rapid-city-sailor-searched-uss-cole-for-injured-dead/article_987a15e8-bbb1-5309-bcdb-1b4fb24d74ce.html.

¹⁵⁸ Commanding Officer, USS *Cole* (DDG 67), Department of the Navy, *USS Cole (DDG67) Command History for Calendar Year 2000*, Report from Commanding Officer USS *Cole* to Director of Naval History (NO9BH) Naval Historical Center.



The USS *Cole* returns stateside on the M/V *Blue Marlin*¹⁵⁹

The Investigation

At the time of the USS *Cole* attack, President Clinton and his wife were celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in Chappaqua, New York.¹⁶⁰ The President responded as might be expected by denouncing the bombing and ordering the necessary agencies to swing into action. The DOD was to save the ship and protect the harbor, the Department of State was to press for allied cooperation, the FBI was to identify the perpetrators, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) was to figure out what had transpired onboard the USS *Cole*, and other intelligence agencies such as the CIA were to collaborate in the process. By October 25th,

¹⁵⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Famous Cases and Criminals - USS Cole Bombing,” <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.

¹⁶⁰ Clinton Presidential Records, “Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1],” OA/ID 21113.

5,000 Americans had descended upon Aden to provide support to the *Cole*'s crew, protect the ship from a second attack, begin the investigative process, and increase security throughout the city.¹⁶¹

The government also began the tedious process of trying to understand what had gone wrong. The USS *Cole* bombing contrasted with previous al-Qaeda attacks such as the East African bombings because it had been directed at a military target rather than civilian one. Because of this change, the Department of Defense was at the forefront of the investigation. Almost immediately, the military launched a series of exploratory commissions seeking answers to some serious questions. Since the bombing had targeted an American warship, the Navy's investigation addressed the question of dereliction of duty by either the commander of the USS *Cole*, the officers, or the crew. To this end, the Naval Judge Advocate General (JAG) commenced with an official inquiry into the USS *Cole*'s performance in the lead-up to the bombing.

As the Navy tried to determine how one of its destroyers had nearly been sunk by only a handful of men, the search began to identify the attackers. Before the United States could retaliate for the *Cole* bombing, first it had to sieve through the suspect pool of known terrorists and cells. There were not any intelligence reports that Osama bin Laden had specifically mentioned a planned attack on Tawahi harbor prior to October 12. However, al-Qaeda had previously issued statements inveighing against the presence of Americans in Yemen, specifically stating that it was a disgrace to the Muslim world that American warships were

¹⁶¹ House Committee on Armed Services, *Attack on the USS Cole in Yemen*, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess., October 25, 2000.

allowed to utilize the port of Aden.¹⁶² Even though al-Qaeda's former missions and recent actions in East Africa made it the logical suspect, a number of other Islamic groups were considered as well. Prior to the attack, the Islamic Aden-Abyan Army notified an Al-Jazeera television station that it was planning to hit American and British targets in Yemen.¹⁶³ One day before the USS *Cole*'s stop in Aden, a Jordanian newspaper had published similar statements by the Unified Fighters Group demanding a withdrawal within thirty days of all American, British, and Israeli ships.¹⁶⁴

To further complicate matters, multiple groups had claimed responsibility in the aftermath of the attack. Jaysh Muhammad, translated as Muhammad's Army, alleged that it had been the force behind the bombing in the Aden port as well as the strike against the British Embassy in Sana'a.¹⁶⁵ A second group, Quwwat al-Rad al-Islamiyah, known as the Islamic Deterrent Force, also took credit for the attack.¹⁶⁶ Although bin Laden had called for a worldwide campaign against the United States during an al-Jazeera interview aired on September 22, there was no official claim from al-Qaeda that they were behind the strike against the USS *Cole*.¹⁶⁷

It is not uncommon for multiple groups to claim responsibility for the same attack. This tactic is generally used as a way for an organization to gain regional or international recognition regardless of their actual involvement. A group's recruitment might be directly affected after a grandiose attack. One example of this would be al-Qaeda's increased enlistments following the

¹⁶² Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, *List of Terrorist Groups*, OA/ID 3784.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

East African Embassy bombings. The second reason is more practical. If two or more organizations claim responsibility for an attack, it complicates the investigative process by obscuring the suspect pool. Al-Qaeda's decision to remain silent in the aftermath of the *Cole* did just that.

Although al-Qaeda remained at the top of the list of suspected terrorist organizations, U.S. intelligence received reports that other groups might have been involved. In addition to the two groups which officially took credit for the bombing, the Americans were also concerned that Egyptian Islamic Jihad or the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group might have participated in the Aden bombing.¹⁶⁸ According to White House documents, there was a report from a senior member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad that, at the command of Asbat al-Ansar, the group had been planning an attack against the Fifth Fleet. A contrasting report concluded that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a group with known ties to al-Qaeda, was responsible for the *Cole* attack. Even though there was some evidence that one of these other groups might have been involved, al-Qaeda remained the Americans' primary suspect.

The US government's response was swift. The Secretary of State Madeleine Albright contacted Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Yemeni president who had only recently been in the United States, to discuss how the two countries should handle the bombing.¹⁶⁹ With the President's blessing, Albright immediately deployed a Foreign Emergency Support Team (FEST) to the scene. The attack on the *Cole* propelled more than just the State Department to action, and Aden was soon awash in American military personnel as well as members of the CIA and FBI. Louis Freeh, the director of the FBI, joined his team to inspect the damage first-hand. According to

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Madeleine Albright and Bob Woodward, *Madam Secretary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003, 2013), 378.

Director Freeh, President Clinton had not spoken to him in the four years prior to the USS *Cole* bombing. Although the icy relationship continued, Clinton did speak briefly with Freeh after the attack. Unsure of who was responsible in the hours after the attack, Freeh had sent multiple teams to Yemen, one from the Washington field office (WFO) and the other from New York.¹⁷⁰ If it appeared that al-Qaeda was involved, the New York office was instructed to assume control of the federal investigation.

Even though the President of Yemen promised his full support to American officials, Ali Abdullah Saleh's actions after the bombing only added confusion and paranoia to an already hostile situation. The Yemeni President went on CNN to allege that, "Yemen does not have any terrorist elements..."¹⁷¹ Denying any personal accountability for allowing the bombing to occur, President Saleh claimed that the attack had been an operation carried out by Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad. The Middle East is always replete with conspiracy theories, and the Yemeni President embraced the common Arab conspiracy that Israel was at the heart of every problem. Saleh contended that the Israelis had bombed the USS *Cole* to stir up trouble for the Arabs, even though he had no evidence, and the investigation had barely begun. The unfounded allegations against Tel Aviv fed the anxieties of the local population and angered the Americans on the ground.

In addition to the Israeli trope, there were other conspiracy theories swirling in the aftermath of the attack. According to one theory, no one had bombed the USS *Cole* at all. The American ship had simply exploded of its own accord due to inexplicable internal malfunctions. This claim was easily disproved as it did not require a forensics expert to tell that the bombing had blown the ship's hull inward. There was even a far-fetched allegation that the United States

¹⁷⁰ Soufan, 158.

¹⁷¹ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

had assailed its own ship. According to this story, Washington had wounded its own destroyer as an excuse for increasing its military presence in the Middle East. Similar tropes were born after September 11 which contended that the US government had foreknowledge of the attacks, or worst, that the government had played a part in the death of nearly 3,000 of its citizens.

One of the problems that the U.S. investigation encountered was the local fear that the Americans might unearth something politically embarrassing against the Yemeni government. During the country's two-month long civil war in 1994, a number of mujahedeen fighters had assisted in the conflict and their efforts had been rewarded with government employment, often in the military or intelligence agencies. Others were allowed to operate in Yemen with promises that their activities would be unimpeded by the new government. For the Yemenis to have properly restrained the activities of these groups thriving in the tribal territories, the Saleh government would have needed to confront its own corruption before it could begin to expunge potential terrorists or their support networks. This undertaking was not something President Saleh wanted to face.

Under significant pressure from Washington, President Ali Abdullah Saleh once again agreed to assist with the investigation. General Tommy Franks, who had only recently taken command of CENTCOM in July, flew to Aden to visit the crippled ship and discuss the affair with the Yemeni President in person.¹⁷² During a meeting at one of the Presidential palaces, Saleh provided port videos from the morning of the attack as well as a list of suspects his intelligence agents thought were involved in the bombing.¹⁷³ The gesture was a good sign for American-Yemeni relations, but the cooperation at highest levels did not trickle down to those on the ground.

¹⁷² Franks, *American Soldier*, 198, 221-222.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

The in-country FBI agents ran into obstacles working with their Yemeni counterparts, some of whom seemed to be either negligent in their assistance, complacent at solving the bombing, or even sympathetic to the al-Qaeda cause. This apathy was not true in all cases, but international coordination was an on-going tribulation between the Americans and their hosts. Some of the local officials felt there was no need for an investigation at all. Special Agent Robert McFadden was part of the NCIS team on the ground in Yemen. McFadden recalled, “One of the senior ranking officers of the host nation security service had exclaimed in frustration that he didn’t understand why the Americans were so obsessed about interviewing persons that might know about this situation because two young lads conducted a martyrdom operation. They are dead. Case is over.”¹⁷⁴ This attitude complicated the investigative effort, and the Yemeni’s refusal to share intelligence, and later on, to allow the US agents access to suspects, were serious dilemmas. As might be expected, the wariness did little to create cohesion during the investigation process.

In addition to these frustrating complications, the investigators did not have the support of the local population. The sudden influx of Americans was not well-received by portions of the native Yemenis, who were suspicious of the true intentions of the Western visitors. Some local clerics used their sermons to reinforce the conspiratorial belief that the United States had blown up its own ship to create a motive for an extended foothold in the Muslim country. The American investigation was hampered by this environment of distrust which made witnesses hesitant to contribute information to the case.

Friction with the Yemeni hosts and local population was not the only thing slowing the search, and the investigators faced several problems stemming from their fellow Americans. The

¹⁷⁴ America Abroad Media, “Remembering the Cole,” <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/The%20investigation%20into%20the%20Cole%20bombing.pdf>.

FBI team had a series of disagreements with the United States Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine, who contended that the agents were not properly respecting local laws and customs. If this was not problematic enough, there were also complaints about territorial officials from the CIA unwilling to share information about al-Qaeda with the FBI. This type of parochial bickering between the FBI and CIA continued up to September 11, even after both agencies had become aware that a post-*Cole* al-Qaeda attack appeared imminent.

Although Saleh and other government officials did eventually assist in the investigation, Yemen did not crack down on subversive organizations domestically. Groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continued to operate unhindered maintaining a public profile in Yemen even after the October 2000 bombing.¹⁷⁵ Some local officials did begin calling for stricter policies concerning these organizations, but there was no serious push to expel them or initiate other reform. The Saleh government refused to banish or eradicate these groups because some of their members and leaders were respected members of Yemeni communities. A second reason was that the government was incapable of controlling the country's porous borders which allowed for individuals and weapons to move relatively unimpeded. This lack of ability mixed with Saleh's personal reluctance to curb the activities of known terrorist groups put the American investigation in danger.

Nashiri's cell was not the only al-Qaeda group operating with impunity in Yemen. According to the National Security Agency, a team of al-Qaeda operatives travelled from Afghanistan to Yemen on October 18.¹⁷⁶ Sent less than a week after the *Cole* bombing, these operatives were a second-wave hit squad deployed directly under the direction of bin Laden to target the American investigators. On various occasions, the U.S. intelligence community

¹⁷⁵ Woodward, 217.

¹⁷⁶ Clinton Presidential Records, "List of Terrorist Groups," OA/ID 3784.

concluded that the threat level was critical, meaning that an attack against the American contingent was imminent. This assessment forced the group to seek refuge on multiple occasions. At one point, the Americans were flown to an off-shore naval ship as a defensive measure against a possible al-Qaeda assault. In June 2001, the team was pulled from Yemen altogether when it was deemed too perilous to continue operating safely, but FBI agents returned a few months later in August determined to conclude their investigation.¹⁷⁷

While the investigation was still in its initial phases in Aden, reports arrived from Central Asia that al-Qaeda was responsible for the USS *Cole* attack. The Northern Alliance, which was led primarily by Ahmad Shah Massoud, was a coalition group that had united to challenge the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan.¹⁷⁸ Massoud's intelligence agents had received information from sources on the ground inside Afghanistan that al-Qaeda had planned and executed the bombing against the American destroyer.¹⁷⁹ These findings were allegedly passed on to the CIA, but the U.S. intelligence community would later deny this claim. This report should have received serious attention since it was sourced out of bin Laden's backyard. The Northern Alliance reports might not have been sufficient to prove the al-Qaeda link, but they could have been viewed in conjunction with other evidence to verify al-Qaeda's culpability.

In addition to the intelligence provided by the Northern Alliance, the investigation received additional help from America's Cold War rival. Initial research suggested that the explosive used to line the suicide bombers' boat had originated in Russia.¹⁸⁰ Consequently, the FBI solicited Moscow's help in tracing the roots of the bomb. With Russian cooperation, the

¹⁷⁷ Soufan, 242, 250.

¹⁷⁸ Massoud was known as the "Lion of Panjshir" for his insurgency efforts against the Russians following their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He was assassinated by an al-Qaeda hit team posing as journalists two days before September 11th.

¹⁷⁹ Gutman, 213.

¹⁸⁰ Freeh, 282.

investigators were able to locate where the al-Qaeda bomb had been made. It was later discovered that the material had been purchased by Khallad from Hadi Muhammad Salih Ibada Dulqum al-Waili known as Hadi Dulqum, a well-known al-Qaeda supplier in Yemen.¹⁸¹

In spite of all their pre-attack planning, the al-Qaeda cell in Aden did a poor job of covering their tracks. The group abandoned their truck and trailer at the scene of the crime, a crucial mistake that led to a series of breakthroughs including the discovery of al-Qaeda safe-houses.¹⁸² Special Agent Mike Dorsey headed the NCIS investigation in Aden. As his team continued its investigation, Dorsey believed the evidence was pointing in a direction that appeared familiar to the Americans. He recalled, “We began getting out into the Port of Aden where some of the information told us there might have been a safe house – a house where bombs were constructed. Agents from the FBI and the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force – who had been a part of East Africa bombings – when they got to the houses said, ‘This is exactly what we found in East Africa. It’s almost a mirror image.’ As we got out to see some of those locations, there was a recognition that this had the degree of sophistication that we would associate with an al-Qaeda attack.”¹⁸³

Even though the relationship between the Americans on the ground and their local counterparts verged on contempt at times, Yemeni intelligence agents were responsible for the initial arrests. By the end of October, the Yemeni authorities had captured Fahd al-Quso, the failed cameraman.¹⁸⁴ They also caught Jamal al Badawi. These busts were major breakthroughs in the case, but the distrust between the two sides only worsened. Though the Yemeni

¹⁸¹ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment, ISN:US9YM-010014DP(S)*, 5.

¹⁸² For an in-depth look at the FBI investigation, see Ali Soufan’s *The Black Banners*.

¹⁸³ America Abroad Media, “Remembering the Cole,” <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/The%20investigation%20into%20the%20Cole%20bombing.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ Wright, 371.

authorities had captured Quso and Badawi three weeks into the investigation, their American counterparts were not granted access to the suspects for three months.¹⁸⁵ This was a crucial loss of time for the Americans who realized their assignment was more than just assessing culpability for the attack but, perhaps more importantly, gathering valuable information for the prevention of future strikes.

The refusal to share information and access to suspects was detrimental, but Yemeni's intelligence officers did aid in other capacities. On November 11, locals were able to connect Khallad with the *Cole* mission, and by December 16, the FBI extrapolated on this fact to identify him as an operator working directly for bin Laden.¹⁸⁶ The Yemeni investigative force made another important contribution to the case by uncovering Nashiri's involvement in the plot. By the time of this revelation, it was already too late to arrest Nashiri who had fled to Afghanistan shortly after the bombing. After engineering the great maritime attack for al-Qaeda in Aden Harbor, Nashiri had a face-to-face meeting with Osama bin Laden in November 2000 to receive recognition and congratulations for a successful operation against the United States.¹⁸⁷

Conclusion

The morning of October 12, 2000 started off like any other for the men and women of the USS *Cole*. A refueling stop was routine for the crew, and Aden harbor was not unfamiliar territory for the American Navy. The ship was running late because of communication problems with the local harbormaster, and the unauthorized attempt by two garbage men to come aboard had made for some excitement. Believing the danger had passed, the USS *Cole* continued

¹⁸⁵ America Abroad Media, "Remembering the Cole," <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/The%20investigation%20into%20the%20Cole%20bombing.pdf>.

¹⁸⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 192.

¹⁸⁷ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 4.

business as usual, and lunch was served. But, this was no ordinary morning. A bomb tore through the side of the hull, seventeen sailors died, and an American destroyer was nearly sunk. The USS *Cole* was ultimately saved because 1) the design of the Arleigh Burke destroyer provided compartmentalization, 2) the Kevlar hull protected the ship from a catastrophic blast, 3) the system of pumps removed thousands of gallons of seawater, 4) the crew responded immediately to the threat, 5) the Navy's training system provided the sailors the skills they needed to act instinctively.

The USS *Cole* was not just a ship. To the men and women assigned to DDG-67, the USS *Cole* was a direct symbol of who they were and what they stood for. Saving their ship from a watery ending was the crew's way of proving to their unseen enemy that no matter the odds, the members of the United States Navy would never surrender. This pride extended throughout the chain-of-command, and thus, the Navy had little option but to refurbish the USS *Cole*, no matter the cost. Having proven its motto of "Determined Warriors," the USS *Cole* was to become a beacon of resiliency in the war against al-Qaeda.

How would the United States government respond? Osama bin Laden, the man behind the *Cole* attack, was ready for an American response. In his mind, Washington would be compelled to respond with force to a direct attack against its military, and bin Laden had already prepared his organization for what he considered an imminent American reprisal. Bin Laden was confident that the USS *Cole* would incite a massive retaliation from the Western superpower. Concerned about the prospect of his own death, the head of al-Qaeda sent his key lieutenants Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu-Hafs al Masri to varying safe-houses to ensure the line

of succession survived should he be assassinated.¹⁸⁸ The anticipated American reprisal for the USS *Cole* never came. Bin Laden's war would have to wait.

¹⁸⁸ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 119.

Part II



FBI special agents examine the wreckage aboard USS Cole¹

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Images – Investigators at USS Cole Bombing,” <https://www.fbi.gov/image-repository/cole-october-2000.jpg/view>.

One cannot understand the scale of the son's ambition without appreciating the father's accomplishment. Remote and powerful but humble in manner, Mohammed bin Awahd bin Laden was a legend even before Osama was born. He presented a formidable model to a young man who idolized him and hoped to equal, if not surpass, his achievements.²

-Lawrence Wright, writer for *The New Yorker*

For a child, the death of a parent shatters assumptions even more basic than the order of how life should proceed. It shatters core beliefs about the world itself. A child believes in a safe and secure world, a world in which events are predictable and orderly, a world that can be understood. When death is sudden and unexpected, the world and everything in it seem less safe and more precarious.³

-Maxine Harris, a specialist in child psychologist

The Death of the Patriarch: Mohammad bin Laden

The death of a parent can be life-altering at any age, but this type of loss can be especially traumatizing for children. Osama bin Laden experienced this unique pain as a boy when his father, Mohammad, was killed in a plane accident in 1967. The younger bin Laden responded to the death of his primary paternal role model by attempting to behave in the pious manner that he believed his father had always wanted. The loss of his father forced bin Laden to reevaluate how he saw the world and caused him to seek out another father-figure to fill the emotional void.

The Bin Ladens

A review of his family background suggests that Osama bin Mohammad bin Awad bin Laden was at best an unlikely candidate for creating an international terrorist organization. He

² Wright, 71.

³ Maxine Harris, *The Loss That is Forever: The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 21.

was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1957 as the seventeenth of more than fifty children⁴ (the seventh son) into a multibillion-dollar family.⁵ His parents were religious, and Osama was named after one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammad.⁶ His father Mohammad bin Laden was an illiterate craftsman who emigrated from Yemen into the Kingdom sometime between 1925 and 1931.⁷ Osama's mother, Alia Ghanem, was Syrian.

Mohammad bin-Awad bin Laden, who was born around 1908, moved to Ethiopia during his youth, and was involved in an accident which cost him his right eye.⁸ Undeterred by the loss of an eye and in need of a job, he relocated to Saudi Arabia in search of more lucrative work. As a poor Yemeni immigrant, Mohammad bin Laden never received much schooling, but this lack of formal education did not stop the determined bricklayer from becoming one of the richest men in the region. Despite being illiterate and living with one glass eye, Osama's father was naturally gifted in geometry and mathematics, which he allegedly calculated in his head and rarely forgot.⁹ Bin Laden utilized these skills as a builder, and he founded a modest construction company. After developing a personal relationship with the Saudi royal family, Mohammad bin Laden's company expanded rapidly with government-funded projects that ranged from road-building to renovating mosques in Mecca and Medina, the holiest cities in the Muslim world. His work building Saudi Arabia's infrastructure made the once poor Yemeni immigrant famous.

⁴ Some of the statistics on the bin Laden family are disputed. For example, the number of children fathered by Mohammad bin Laden has been reported between fifty-two and fifty-seven.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1999* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000).

⁶ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 21.

⁷ There are discrepancies as to Mohammad bin Laden's date of immigration ranging from 1925 to 1931.

⁸ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 21.

⁹ Wright, 74.

Islam allows a man to be married to four women simultaneously, as long as he can treat each of them equally and provide for their needs and those of their children. While most Muslims living in America are not polygamous, their Saudi counterparts have not abandoned this custom. Unlike the civil court system in the United States, Islamic divorce is relatively easy with little government oversight in countries like Saudi Arabia. The customary practice of a divorce requires the husband to continue financially supporting divorcees as well as any children born from that marriage. For Mohammad bin Laden, four wives were not nearly enough. The exact number of women the senior bin Laden married remains unsubstantiated, although it has been estimated that he was married at least twenty-two times.¹⁰ This explains how Osama had over fifty half brothers and sisters.

The details surrounding the marriage between Mohammad bin Laden and Osama's mother, Alia Ghanem, remain unclear. The name Alia was in honor of Ali, the most famous martyr in the Shia tradition. Thus, some analysts have speculated that Osama's maternal side of the family might have been Shi'ite instead of the Sunni sect practiced by the rest of the bin Laden family and the royal family. Another point of uncertainty was whether Mohammad and Alia were ever formally married. Omar bin Laden, Osama's fourth son, believed Alia became pregnant a second time, miscarried, and subsequently requested a divorce from Mohammad.¹¹ While these two facts may seem inconsequential at first glance, they could help illuminate a fuller understanding of Osama bin Laden and his relationship with those closest to him. One expert neatly summarized the importance of his potential illegitimate birth, "These two shadows cast on his origins (the possibility that his mother belonged to a sect that Sunni historiography

¹⁰ Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 73.

¹¹ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Jean Sasson, *Growing Up bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 40, 167.

condemns, and his parents' potentially adulterous relationship, which would have made him a bastard) probably played a role in shaping his identity as well as his desire for revenge and recognition."¹²

At the time of their union, Alia was only fourteen-years old, and she gave birth to Osama a year later in Riyadh.¹³ Although there has been some discrepancy over the location of bin Laden's birthplace, Alia and her newborn son moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, a port town on the Red Sea.¹⁴ Unlike many places in Saudi Arabia, Jeddah had an international flare because the city was used as a temporary quarantine area for foreign visitors to the Kingdom.¹⁵

The relationship between Mohammad and the much younger Alia did not last, and they separated or were divorced while Osama was still a boy.¹⁶ In accordance with a practice little known to Westerners but common in Saudi Arabia, Mohammad apparently guided Alia to remarry almost immediately after their separation to one of his employees, Mohammad al-Attas.¹⁷ Following the Islamic code of honor, the ultra-wealthy Mohammad bin Laden continued to financially support Alia and her son even after the second marriage. Although Osama lived with his new step-father, he was nonetheless considered to be a member of the bin Laden family and enjoyed the countless privileges bestowed upon his half brothers and sisters sharing his famous last name.

¹² Kepel and Milelli, 13.

¹³ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 74.

¹⁴ For example, Peter Bergen's *The Osama bin Laden I Know* believes his birthplace was in Jeddah, while Steve Coll's *The Bin Ladens* asserts that he was born in Riyadh. Regardless, both authors are in agreement that Osama spent most of his childhood in Jeddah.

¹⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), XXX.

¹⁶ Obviously, a divorce would have depended on whether or not they were actually ever married.

¹⁷ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 13.

The Crash

Mohammad bin Laden was not the type of CEO who spent his days behind a desk instead preferring to visit worksites to personally inspect his company's progress. This type of on-the-ground leadership required bin Laden to travel throughout the Kingdom, which he often did on his personal plane. Because Saudi Arabia did not possess a modern system of airports at the time, bin Laden's pilots were often forced to operate on primitive runways. On September 3, 1967, the Saudi billionaire was killed when his plane attempted a landing on a homemade airstrip.¹⁸ Jim Harrington, a retired U.S. Air Force pilot, was flying the Twin Beech airplane at the time it crashed in the Saudi desert.¹⁹ The death of one of the country's wealthiest men made national news, and Mohammad bin Laden's empire was to be divided among his surviving family. Even though he was around ten-years old when his father died in the plane crash, the impressionable Osama must have wanted to be an important part of Mohammad's legacy.

At the time of Mohammad bin Laden's death, the once-poor Yemeni immigrant from the Hadramout had amassed a conglomerate of companies. He possessed ninety of the largest Caterpillar excavators available in the Middle East at the time, and this monopoly made him the largest private contractor of its kind.²⁰ *Forbes* and *Fortune* reported that the Bin Ladens were one of the wealthiest families in the world with estimates of its net worth at \$5 billion.²¹ Birth order was strictly observed in Saudi Arabia, and Osama's older half-brothers assumed the leadership positions in the bin Laden empire. Salem, the oldest son, stepped in to run the international multi-billion-dollar family company following his father's death.

¹⁸ Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, 48.

¹⁹ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 118-120.

²⁰ John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 96.

²¹ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 87.

The bin Laden family made a concerted effort to travel to Europe in the years after the desert plane crash. These trips were designed as a way for the family to spend time together following the loss of their towering patriarch. Still relatively young at the time, Osama was not included on these family vacations for unknown reasons. This would have been a chance for him to spend time outside the Kingdom, and it was a missed opportunity for him to experience different cultures. From adolescence on, bin Laden rarely travelled outside the Islamic world refusing to live in places that did not have a Muslim majority.

Bin Laden rarely discussed the circumstances surrounding his father's death, even with those closest to him. Najwa bin Laden, Osama's first wife and first cousin, sympathetically recalled how the crash affected her future husband, "My cousin (Osama) was only ten years old, but he had greatly loved and respected his father. Osama had always been unusually restrained in his manner and in his speech, but he was so stricken by the death of his father that he became even more subdued. Through the years he spoke little of the tragic incident."²² Their son Omar concurred with his mother's contention that Osama was never the same after Mohammad's crash. He stated, "My father (Osama), who had never emotionally recovered from the loss, kept the long-dead Grandfather bin Laden on a pedestal."²³

The Impact

The death of a parent generally has an intense effect on children, particularly when, as here, the child suffered an early separation from his larger-than-life father. As explained by expert Maxine Harris, "For most the loss of a parent registers as a ten on an emotional Richter scale. The solid ground beneath one's feet no longer exists, and that which held things together

²² Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 9.

²³ Ibid., 167.

and made them solid and secure is gone.”²⁴ Osama had enormous admiration and respect for his father but the ground was fractured and unstable from early on. Even though he had divorced his mother, Osama idolized Mohammad bin Laden whom he rarely saw, and the magnetic father appeared incapable of doing wrong in the eyes of his ten-year-old son. Osama internalized the unexpected death of his father and most important male role model by trying to become the person he thought his father wanted him to be.

At the time of the plane crash, Osama would have only been about ten-years old. He studied the Koran so thoroughly that he could recite passages from memory.²⁵ This religious fervor from a young age was rooted in his perception of his father’s devotion to the faith. Osama remembered his father as a faithful Muslim, and he was anxious to follow this example. One of bin Laden’s wives would later recall, “Osama’s own father had been a devout Muslim who demanded that his sons honor the faith. None had heeded their father’s counsel more than Osama.”²⁶ This profound belief that his father represented the quintessence of Muslim living was repeated by bin Laden in public and private.

Although there are always differences among people of diverse nationalities and religions, some character traits in children are universal and transcend cultural boundaries. Regardless of whether they grow up in the United States or the Middle East, children seek their parents’ approval. In a patriarchal society like Saudi Arabia, boys are raised to emulate their fathers. This was certainly the case for bin Laden. During an interview with al-Jazeera, Osama warmly recounted a story about his father’s bid to repair the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.²⁷

²⁴ Harris, 14.

²⁵ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 17.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kepel and Milelli, 57-58.

According to his son, Mohammad bin Laden offered to perform the work at a financial loss as an act of charity. This sacrifice left a deep impression on Osama because it exemplified how his father sacrificed worldly goods and profits for his faith.

Mohammad bin Laden's trade as a construction worker, designer, and builder allowed him the opportunity to create something out of nothing. He had started out penniless and built an international empire. Molded by his tremendously successful father, Osama wanted to be worthy of his late-father's legacy. Many of Osama's brothers were content to live off their inheritance with little ambition or work ethic, while other siblings vied to take control of the expansive family business. Osama aspired to greater glory and was not content to leave his mark in the banality of the corporate board room.

Osama viewed his father as a larger than life figure, who had dedicated himself to his religion, his family, and his country. During a 1999 interview with Jamal Ismail, he stated "Because of God's graciousness to him (Mohammad bin Laden), sometimes he prayed in all three mosques [in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem] in one single day. May God have mercy on his soul. It is not a secret that he was one of the founders of the infrastructure of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."²⁸ The younger bin Laden envisioned his father as a leader in the Muslim world, and he grew up in Saudi Arabia hoping to one day carry on his father's legacy.

Conclusion

After being born into poverty in Yemen, Mohammad bin Laden moved to Saudi Arabia and built one of the largest and most profitable construction companies in the world. He became famous for his work improving Saudi Arabia's infrastructure, and his plane crash in 1967 was mourned throughout the Kingdom. The loss was felt by his family as well. The unexpected

²⁸ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 2.

death left an indelible mark on his son, Osama, and this single event impacted the young bin Laden's development into adulthood. After the crash, Osama's deep-seated and often apocryphal admiration for his father only aggrandized, and he turned to religion to be the bedrock and guiding force for his life's work. Bin Laden's complete immersion into Islam was more than a temporary salve for his grief; it was an existential, life-altering commitment to live out what he perceived to be his father's expectations.

From a young age, many of us were sent overseas to study. I left for Lebanon at the age of six or seven, and returned only after graduating from university in America. Osama was one of those who did not leave Saudi Arabia...Osama was more religious than the rest of us.²⁹

-Yeslam bin Laden, Osama's older half-brother

Every single Islamic group that has achieved a degree of international infamy, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, has been heavily influenced by Wahhabi thought.³⁰

-Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor of Islamic Law at UCLA School of Law

A Saudi Education: Wahhabism and the Kingdom

Since its inception in modern-day Saudi Arabia, Islam has spread globally becoming the world's second largest religion.³¹ In a fashion similar to its Christian predecessor, Islam splintered into a variety of schools, doctrines, and sects following the death of the prophet Mohammad in 632.³² Historically, Arabia was the home to Jews, Christians, and various polytheistic religions before the birth of Islam. Adherents of these older religions were slowly expelled from the region over time. Religious open-mindedness dissipated in the Arabian Peninsula during the rise of Wahhabism in the eighteenth century, culminating with nearly complete spiritual intolerance following the creation of the state of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

College is widely seen as an opportunity for young people to not only further their educational endeavors but to widen their horizons and discover who they want to become as

²⁹ Ibid., 20.

³⁰ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 45.

³¹ Although Islam has its roots in the Middle East, the largest Islamic country today is Indonesia with over 240 million Muslims, which is more than the total number of worshipers in all twenty-three Arab countries put together.

³² One major split in Christianity occurred between followers of what would become the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. Later, the Protestant Reformation brought about another splintering from the Catholic Church.

adults. Higher education is generally an influential time for impressionable young men and women, whose views are often shaped by both their peers and professors. As a rich young Saudi, Osama bin Laden was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend prestigious universities in Europe or the United States. He shunned these institutions for their secularism and chose instead to remain in Saudi Arabia to continue his Wahhabi-based education. This decision put him in close contact with a number of Islamic fundamentalists such as Abdullah Azzam who taught a message of intolerance and violence. These early lessons resonated with bin Laden and transformed him for the rest of his life.

The Conquerors

The teachings of Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who was born in 1703 in central Arabia and educated at the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, remain at the core of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism today.³³ Abd al-Wahhab, who proudly bore the moniker “The Teacher,” attempted to return Islam to what he considered its purest form by traveling throughout the Arabian Peninsula preaching his new dogma that came to be known as Wahhabism. His ideas were based on Hanbali doctrine, one of the four schools of Islam that had fallen out of popularity until Abd al-Wahhab revived it in the eighteenth century.³⁴ Abd al-Wahhab contested that the larger Muslim populace was no longer living as God had instructed. His solution was for Muslims to return to a lifestyle practiced in Medina during the days of the Prophet Mohammad.

According to Abd al-Wahhab, the Muslim world had become too enmeshed with the ways of the infidel, an intermingling that he believed was causing religious and social decay. He controversially argued against the traditional Sunni practice that uttering the shahada fulfilled a Muslim’s first religious duty. Instead, Abd al-Wahhab preached that the only way to attain

³³ Cleveland, 123.

³⁴ Khadduri, 37.

proper divinity was through complete devotion to the Koran and Sunna. He believed the Islamic world would return to the hegemonic status it had enjoyed during its earliest years once Muslims began acting as they had in the seventh century.

Interpreting Islamic law in its most archaic form, Abd al-Wahhab reputedly stoned a woman charged with adultery and was subsequently forced to flee from an angry mob.³⁵ On the run, he found refuge with other disgruntled Muslims who embraced his ideology. Although history is not clear regarding how he ended up in Dariyah, it is known that Abd al-Wahhab forged an alliance with the House of Saud in 1744.³⁶ From that point until modern times, Wahhabism and the Saudi royal family have been interlocked. This union was instrumental to the growth of the Wahhabi movement, and Abd al-Wahhab's teachings might never have spread without the merger.

As the Wahhabis made military gains across the Arabian Peninsula, tobacco was outlawed, buildings deemed immoral were condemned, and revered tombs were demolished, including venerated mausoleums at the birthplace of the Prophet.³⁷ As the war for control of Arabia heightened, Wahhabi atrocities increased against Muslims and non-Muslims, combatants and non-combatants alike. In 1801, Wahhabi fighters took control of the city of Karbala, massacred 5,000 Shiites, and destroyed the tomb of the Prophet's revered grandson, Husayn.³⁸ Neither forgiven nor forgotten, the atrocity has remained embedded in the heart of the Shia-Sunni conflict centuries later. Commanding a territory larger than the United States at the time, the Wahhabi army extended its empire by sacking Mecca in April 1803 and proceeded to cleanse

³⁵ Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia & the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon, 1983), 56.

³⁶ The House of Saud fought for centuries to conquer Arabia and finally succeeded in 1932.

³⁷ "Wahhabiyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999), 42.

³⁸ Robert Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold our Soul for Saudi Crude* (New York: Crown, 2003), 86.

the historic city of perceived infidels.³⁹ With this victory, the House of Saud gained short-lived supremacy over most of the land between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Even though the Ottoman Empire had been in a state of decline for some time, the dying empire still had the martial strength to quell an open rebellion in its backyard. With help from the pasha of Egypt, the Ottomans recaptured the Saudi capital in 1818 and beheaded the emir, thereby ending the insurrection and any chance for the creation of an independent Saudi state.⁴⁰

Following the First World War, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, a renowned warrior, conquered a significant portion of the Arabian Peninsula through a series of decade-long military campaigns against rival clans, eventually declaring himself King. He realized his goal of taking Mecca and Medina by 1925, victories which gained official recognition of statehood from the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and other foreign powers. These victories would not have been possible without the Wahhab-inspired, Bedouin fighters known as the Ikhwan. The new king had harnessed the strength of the Ikhwan during his effort to unify the Arabian Peninsula, but once the state was established, the Bedouin warriors refused to abandon their nomadic life of fighting and raiding. After attempts to suppress these former allies through non-violent means failed, King Abdul Aziz routed an Ikhwan force with machine guns mounted on motorcars in March 1929.⁴¹

Honoring the century-old alliance between his family and Abd al Wahhab, King Abdul Aziz established Wahhabism as the official state religion of Saudi Arabia.⁴² For years, this decision was inconsequential outside Saudi Arabia as the country remained undeveloped with little infrastructure and an uneducated population. The incipient state remained one of the

³⁹ Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 11.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 121.

⁴¹ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 15.

⁴² Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil*, 86.

poorest on the planet until the growth of the petroleum industry transformed the Middle East. The House of Saud survived off the new petroleum income until the 1960s and 1970s when exploding petroleum prices furnished an immense revenue stream. Among other investments, the Kingdom made it official policy to begin exporting its version of Islam. Financially supported by the skyrocketing petrodollars, Wahhabism, once a parochial sect of Islam, spread internationally in the early 1960s. Concerned that Tehran might begin exporting Shiism after the fall of the Shah in 1979, Saudi Arabia continued spreading Wahhabism in the 1980s as a counterweight to the Iranian revolution. Although the petroleum market fluctuated throughout the early part of the decade, the Saudi government had plenty of income to allot to these ventures from its \$119 billion in oil sales in 1981 alone.⁴³

The Saudi government has never stopped encouraging and financing the propagation of Wahhabism since this time. The most effective mean of spreading its version of Islam was through the establishment of religious schools known as madrasses. Many of these schools were strategically placed in poverty-stricken areas where children had no access to any other form of education. This tactic gave the public appearance of helping the less-fortunate, even as it allowed Wahhabi indoctrination to start at an early age. Pakistan was one of the places the Saudis targeted because it was an impoverished and politically unstable Sunni country. Geopolitics also played a factor. Pakistan was buttressed against India in the east, shared a border with Iran in the southwest, and edged China in the north. The House of Saud had ideological differences with the governments of all three of these countries, and the Saudis wanted to bolster Sunni Islam among the Pakistani people. Aided by Saudi Arabia's oil revenues, the number of madrasses in Pakistan increased from approximately nine-hundred in

⁴³ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 728.

1971 to eight thousand officially recognized schools and another twenty-five thousand unregistered ones by 1988.⁴⁴ Pakistan was just a single example of the proliferation of the madrasses, and the House of Saud has not deviated from the practice of circulating Wahhabism on a global scale.

Wahhabi Education

King Abdul Aziz's decision to make Wahhabism the official religion of Saudi Arabia ensured that this version of Islam permeated Saudi culture, most notably through mosques and the state's education system. Thus, anyone growing up in the Kingdom was virtually guaranteed to be grounded in Wahhabi doctrine and practice. Bin Laden was no exception, and he would have been influenced inside his schools and on the streets deeply impacting the way bin Laden viewed the world for the rest of his life. Perhaps most influential on bin Laden's view was Wahhabi's twin teachings that justified violence in the name of Islam and allowed individuals to pass judgment on the religious authenticity of other Muslims. Taken together, these tenets eventually became bin Laden's *carte blanche* to be both jury and executioner.

When he reached school age, bin Laden began attending a western-style prep school called al-Thaghr in Jeddah. The affluent school was a far cry from a madrass, and the government-funded school educated some of region's most influential families.⁴⁵ In Saudi Arabia, even a prominent school like al-Thaghr employed faculty who promulgated a violent brand of Islam. During this time, bin Laden's ideas were influenced by a Syrian teacher, who most likely recruited bin Laden to join the Society for the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gutman, 20.

⁴⁵ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 4-5.

⁴⁶ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 146-148.

After high school, bin Laden had the financial means to attend a university outside of Saudi Arabia. He nonetheless elected to remain in his native country to continue his academic pursuits. Thus, bin Laden, who was known as a highly impressionable young man, received almost all of his education inside the cradle of Wahhabism. He would discover a new male role model during his time at college.

College Life

Unlike some of his older half-brothers who had decided to depart the Kingdom for foreign universities, Osama bin Laden chose to stay in his native country. In fact, bin Laden was the only one of his brothers to have been entirely educated in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷ With his family's wealth and international stature, the younger bin Laden could have selected from schools around the world. His half-brothers left the Kingdom for the United States often majoring in business related fields selecting the University of Miami, the University of Southern California, Harvard University, as well as other prestigious universities in Great Britain. Hoping to meld his education with his religious curiosity, Osama bin Laden chose King Abdul Aziz University in his native Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸

After graduating high school from the all-boys Al-Thager in 1976, bin Laden enrolled at King Abdul Aziz University to study Economics and Management.⁴⁹ During his early semesters at the university, bin Laden met Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, who was a member of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike his taller and richer friend, Khalifa was from a modest background. However, his family enjoyed a special stature in the Islamic community because they were able to trace their family lineage directly to the Prophet Mohammad. Describing their

⁴⁷ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 29.

⁴⁸ King Abdul Aziz University is also called Jeddah University.

⁴⁹ Kepel and Milelli, 58.

blossoming friendship, Khalifa recalled, “In ’76 I met Osama...I was almost twenty, and he was nineteen. At that time we were religious and we were very conservative; we go to that extreme side. When I met him, he was religious already.”⁵⁰ Their paths would continue to be intertwined after college. Following graduation from King Abdul Aziz University, Khalifa left his job as a biology teacher in Medina in 1985 to join his best friend in the Afghan war against the Russians.⁵¹ Khalifa eventually married bin Laden’s half-sister and was later accused by the FBI of fund-raising for terrorist groups. He was killed in Madagascar in 2007.

Portions of the western media have misleadingly described Osama bin Laden as a wild, drunken womanizer in his youth. This could not be farther from the truth. Many young Saudi men seized the opportunity to leave their Wahhabi-dominated country for the laid-back attitudes of Europe, as well as for short respites from piety. These men travel abroad to squander tremendous amounts of money on activities expressly prohibited by Islam. While such illicit activities certainly took place among bin Laden’s peers, there has never been any proof that Osama bin Laden exhibited such behavior. To the contrary, bin Laden appeared to take pride in his sanctimony. His sister-in-law Carmen bin Ladin has stated, “Years later, I was amazed to read in the Western press that Osama had been a playboy as a teenager in Beirut. I think if it were true, I would have heard about it...As far as I know, Osama was always devout. His family revered him for his piety.”⁵² This trope of bin Laden as a playboy has never been substantiated, and the rumor might have been part of a smear campaign or poor reporting. Contrary to these reports, bin Laden was focused on married life and cultivating his persona as a pious Muslim.

⁵⁰ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 16.

⁵¹ Wright, 427.

⁵² Carmen Bin Ladin and Ruth Marshall, *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), 71-72.

Saudis typically marry younger than their American counterparts, who have increasingly waited until after graduating college or starting their careers to settle down. Not surprisingly, bin Laden did not follow the American path. In 1974, he married his first cousin Najwa when bin Laden was seventeen-years old, and she was only fifteen.⁵³ Although there is a stigma in the United States against such consanguineous unions, marriages between first cousins remain a common practice in some Middle Eastern countries. These families prefer such marriages because it keeps inheritance issues to a minimum. At the bin Laden wedding ceremony, there was no music or dancing in accordance with the groom's fundamentalist beliefs. The couple had their first child, a son, while bin Laden was still in school.

The Professors

The development of bin Laden's views was heavily influenced by two professors at King Abdul Aziz University. The first was Mohammad Qutb, who offered weekly lectures that bin Laden attended with great frequency.⁵⁴ Qutb's brother, Sayyid, was a famous writer who had been killed by the Egyptian government in 1966 for his revolutionary rhetoric. To ensure Sayyid's martyrdom was never forgotten, Mohammad preached his brother's message to the younger generation at King Abdul Aziz University.

The Qutbs' credence that the world was divided between the Dar-al-Islam, the land ruled by Islam, and Dar-al-Harb, the rest of the world, resonated with bin Laden's parochial view.⁵⁵ According to his classmate Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden first became familiar with strategies for conducting jihad against the Dar-al-Harb after reading Sayyid Qutb's most famous work,

⁵³ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 12-13.

⁵⁴ Wright, 91.

⁵⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Ilm, 1990s), 118.

Milestones, and studying the ideas of Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya in college.⁵⁶ Later in life, bin Laden often referenced the teachings of Qutb and Ibn Taymiyya as justification for his actions. One of Mohammad Qutb's trademark lectures reminded the audience that Sayyid had given the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs, an act that bin Laden came to believe all dedicated Muslims should be willing to duplicate.

While at King Abdul Aziz University, Osama bin Laden found his mentor and father-figure in Dr. Abdullah Azzam. The friendship between the Palestinian exile and the Saudi millionaire shaped both of their lives, and the organization known as al-Qaeda eventually evolved from this close relationship. Azzam was renowned for his inspirational speeches, which captivated audiences with rhetoric about, "restoring Islamic glory through violence."⁵⁷ These provocative lectures left an indelible mark on bin Laden, who followed Azzam for much of the next decade. As discussed in further detail in a later chapter, Azzam was instrumental in molding the impressionable young Saudi into a proponent of violent Islam.

While at college, bin Laden was surrounded by influential members of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the 1960s and 1970s, underground groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were entrenched in universities throughout the Middle East in order to avoid the spotlight of government intelligence agencies. Many of these groups were illegal and thus hid their activities against an academic backdrop. While bin Laden was at King Abdul Aziz University, a few of his professors acted as natural recruiters for a number of secretive groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Sayyid Qutb had played an integral part in creating the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood before facing capital punishment from the Egyptian

⁵⁶ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 204.

⁵⁷ Aboul-Enein, Youssef, "Ayman al-Zawahiri: The Ideologue of Modern Islamic Militancy," Maxwell Air Force Base, ALA: USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air University, 2004: 5
<http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LSP67656>.

government, and his brother Mohammad and Abdullah Azzam remained active members in the organization during their time at the Saudi university.⁵⁸

Those closest to bin Laden during his college years remember him as being active in the Muslim Brotherhood. Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and friend of bin Laden, recalled,

Osama was just like many of us who become part of the [Muslim] Brotherhood movement in Saudi Arabia. The only difference which set him apart from me and others, he was more religious. More religious, more literal, more fundamentalist. For example, he would not listen to music. He would not shake hands with a woman. He would not smoke. He would not watch television, unless it is news. He wouldn't play cards. He would not put a picture on the wall. But more than that, there was also a harsh or radical side in his life.⁵⁹

Even though there is no conclusive evidence of his membership, many individuals including Khashoggi believe bin Laden joined the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood at some point during his high school or college career. It seems reasonable that there would not be any public documentation of a highly secretive group's membership, and there is little doubt that bin Laden's beliefs and practices of intolerance aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although bin Laden spent a number of years enrolled at King Abdul Aziz University, he probably never received a diploma. His friend, Jamal Khalifa, remembered bin Laden failing to complete his coursework, and therefore never receiving a university degree.⁶⁰ Similarly, Najwa bin Laden recalled her husband spending three or four years at the university but contented that he left school still in need of a few semesters worth of academic credits.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, bin Laden's records have disappeared. Michael Scheuer, a CIA veteran who was in charge of the bin

⁵⁸ "Defence of the Muslim Lands; the First Obligation after Imam," *Relioscope*, 5 Sept 2007 http://www.relioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/azzam_defence_2_intro.htm.

⁵⁹ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 21.

⁶⁰ Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 211.

⁶¹ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 29.

Laden Unit in the 1990s, was unable to locate bin Laden's transcripts, grades, or a list of the courses he attended.⁶²

Conclusion

Since its marriage of convenience with the House of Saud in the eighteenth century, Wahhabism has oscillated throughout Saudi Arabia until King Abdul Aziz made it the official state religion. Like a number of fundamentalist figures from the past, Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his ideology have remained an integral part of modern politics in the Middle East. The discovery of petroleum in Saudi Arabia allowed this marginalized movement to resurrect from its state of dormancy, and the House of Saud has invested billions of dollars to export this version of Islam by founding madrasses and charities across the globe from Jalalabad to Jakarta.

In colleges and universities around the world, the values and ideals of young men and women are heavily influenced by their peers and professors. This was true in the case of Osama bin Laden who arrived at the university already steeped in fundamentalist ideology. Before becoming the world's most wanted man, bin Laden was an impressionable, young Muslim searching for an identity and determined to channel his narrow religious views into a world-changing cause. At King Abdullah Aziz University, bin Laden gained ideological inspiration from the Qutb brothers, surrounded himself with members of the Society for the Muslim Brotherhood, and discovered a mentor in Abdullah Azzam. Once he founded his own fundamentalist organization, bin Laden hoped to create an Islamic state similar to the one Wahhab had carved out of Arabia two centuries earlier.

⁶² Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 33.

Defensive Jihad: This is expelling the Kuffar [infidels] from our land, and it is Fard Ayn, a compulsory duty upon all. It is the most important of all the compulsory duties and arises in the following conditions: if the Kuffar enter a land of the Muslims.⁶³

-Abdullah Azzam, *Defense of Muslim Lands*

If the enemy enters the lands of Islam, he must surely be repelled as soon as possible for all Islamic lands are one umma. There must be a general call to arms, without requiring permission from the father nor any other opposition.⁶⁴

-Ahmad bin ‘Abd al-Salam bin Taymiyya

The First Superpower Invasion: The Soviet Incursion of Afghanistan

1979 was a year of transformative change throughout the Middle East. The Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled Iran since the interwar period, crumbled under the pressure of its own people. The Shah’s forced abdication indelibly altered regional politics. The United States, which had built its Cold War policies in the Middle East on the Twin Pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia, lost one of its closest allies in the region with the fall of the Shah. With the dissolution of the Pahlavi dynasty, Iran came to be ruled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who replaced the Shah’s more secular governance with Islamic law. The rise of a Shia state concerned many Sunni-led countries, which grew increasingly alarmed by the perception of unpredictability in Iran’s new government.

Bin Laden’s Saudi Arabia could not escape the revolutionary atmosphere of 1979. November 20, which began as a celebration for the dawning of the fifteenth century in the Islamic calendar, turned into a hollow affair after militants led by Juhaiman al-Utaiba held

⁶³ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 27.

⁶⁴ Raymond Ibrahim, Ayman Zawahiri, and Osama bin Laden, *The al-Qaeda Reader* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 93.

Mecca's Grand Mosque hostage.⁶⁵ The group demanded an end to the House of Saud and called on the global Muslim population to return to the ways of the Prophet. Saudi troops failed to dislodge the entrenched defenders from one of Islam's holiest sanctuaries, and the siege was ultimately broken by French Special Forces.

A college student since 1976, Osama bin Laden was attempting to earn his degree at King Abdul Aziz University while the Iranian revolution and Grand Mosque siege were unfolding around him. It is often difficult to point out one transformative date or event for a particular individual. However, for bin Laden, Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979 was life-changing. The Russian offensive into the predominately Muslim state of Afghanistan cannot be over emphasized for its impact on the Muslim world. For bin Laden, the invasion provided him with a new purpose in life.

The Invasion

Afghanistan has rarely been a land of peace or political stability because of its geographic location between the perennial powers of Iran, India, China, and Russia. Instead, it has historically been the place where foreign empires go to die. Centuries after Alexander the Great could not subdue the Afghan tribesmen, Great Britain and Russia used the rough countryside as their personal chessboard in the struggle known as the Great Game. The British also fought a series of tribal insurgencies against Afghan natives that came to be called the Anglo-Afghan wars. Violence continued to plague the country even when imperial powers have left Afghanistan to its own devices, and the country remained mired in civil war for much of the twentieth century.

⁶⁵ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71.

In 1973, a military coup was supposed to usher in a new Afghan republic and an age of peace. However, a Soviet-backed counter coup returned the country to political upheaval five years later. The ensuing civil war washed across the border into Russian territory causing the Red Army to invade Afghanistan in order to protect its borders, quell the uprising, and guarantee that the unstable country remained under Moscow's influence.

Led by the United States, the larger international community protested the Afghan invasion as an act of Russian belligerence. On January 14, 1980, members of the United Nations General Assembly passed a tepid resolution with a vote of 104 to 18, which condemned "the recent armed intervention in Afghanistan."⁶⁶ Even though Afghanistan constituted a Muslim state, the Middle East was initially divided in its denunciation of the Russian invasion primarily because Moscow remained a major supporter of governments throughout the region. During the U.N. vote, Algeria and Syria abstained, Libya was absent, South Yemen voted with the minority, and the non-voting PLO representative vocally defended the Russian incursion. When it came time for the Organization of the Islamic Conference to discuss Afghanistan on January 27, a similar reluctance permeated the room as the PLO member abstained, the Libyan representative utilized his speaking time to berate America, and the delegation from South Yemen and Syria boycotted the conference altogether.⁶⁷ Although these Middle East governments were reluctant to condemn Moscow's actions, the invasion ignited anger and resentment in the streets and cafes of the Islamic world.

The incursion was viewed with a similar unease by the West, which scrutinized the offensive as the U.S.S.R.'s most recent demonstration of naked aggression. The United States was especially concerned as policymakers observed the incident through the prism of Cold War

⁶⁶ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

lenses. The Afghan invasion put Soviet forces closer to the Persian Gulf at a time when the White House was committed to preventing Moscow from gaining a foothold near the massive petroleum reserves in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Decision-makers in Washington feared what would happen if Moscow could gain control of the oil routes operating out of the Persian Gulf. During the State of the Union in 1980, President Jimmy Carter stated, “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”⁶⁸ Although Ronald Reagan defeated Carter in the election of 1980, the Carter doctrine remained at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy.

This willingness to challenge Moscow, both in and out of the Middle East, motivated the White House to begin assisting the Afghan insurgency force, known as the mujahedeen. President Ronald Reagan is often inaccurately credited for being the first to send aid to the Afghan rebels. While Reagan would eventually open up the floodgates to the group he called “courageous freedom fighters,” it was actually the Carter administration that originally sent aid six months before the Soviets initially crossed the Oxus River into Afghan territory.⁶⁹ In a tit-for-tat, the U.S. effort was partially motivated as revenge for the Kremlin’s support to North Vietnam during the war in southeast Asia. American assistance in Afghanistan swelled throughout the 1980s, and this support was vital in forcing the eventual Russian retreat.

⁶⁸ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1982, 1995), 492.

⁶⁹ Gutman, 19-20.

During their occupation, the Russian military suppressed the Afghan population through heavy-handed tactics, and Moscow quickly lost any chance of claiming their offensive was humanitarian in nature. These atrocities have been described as,

The deeds of the Soviets were unspeakable. They raped women in the name of emancipating them. In defense of national security, they machine-gunned illiterate peasants who couldn't have found Moscow on a map. They burned people alive and drowned them in excrement. They razed villages, slaughtered livestock, and destroyed harvests. They even scattered mines disguised as toys to lure people to their maiming.⁷⁰

Once the breadth of the Russian scorched-earth atrocities became public news, Middle Eastern governments began calling for volunteers to aid the Afghan resistance.

Bin Laden Goes to War

While a number of Middle Eastern countries had formed military alliances with Moscow during the Cold War, Saudi Arabia had always rebuffed Russian political advances. The House of Saud has continuously viewed itself as the protectorate of the global Islamic family, and the Afghan invasion only bolstered the Saudis' distaste for the Kremlin. Although it would not deploy its military to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia elected to finance the resistance while encouraging its citizens to join the fight. The government subsidized flights for eager young men influenced by years of Wahhabi doctrine to head for the Pakistani front. Before the war was over, Saudi Arabia had contributed over \$3 billion in financial support and sent more than 5,000 volunteers to the rebellion.⁷¹ One of the most important enlistees turned out to be a college student from King Abdul Aziz University.

During his Saudi education, Osama bin Laden had been taught that Islamic lands must always remain under the control of Muslim rulers. According to *The Reliance of the Traveller*,

⁷⁰ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 26.

⁷¹ Aaron Mannes, *Profiles in Terror: The Guide to Middle East Terrorist Organizations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 18.

an Islamic law manual endorsed by the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo, jihad is, “obligatory for everyone able to perform it, male or female, old or young when the enemy has surrounded the Muslims on every side, having entered our territory, even if the land consists of ruins, wilderness, or mountains, for non-Muslim forces entering Muslim lands is a weighty matter that cannot be ignored, but must be met with effort and struggle to repel them by every possible means.”⁷² The Russian invasion was a direct challenge to this tenet, and bin Laden felt passionately about the Afghan cause. Putting his education on hold, he left King Abdul Aziz University to join the war effort. During an interview conducted in November 1996, bin Laden alleged that his initial trip to Afghanistan, “came a few days after the entry of the Russians in 1399 AH (1979).”⁷³ Most experts assert bin Laden exaggerated how quickly he headed to the battle front. The young Saudi continued traveling back and forth to Afghanistan throughout the early 1980s.

Osama bin Laden did not start out in the trenches taking fire, but instead helped the mujahedeen cause with logistical support through his personal influence and lucrative family empire. Early on, the young Saudi spent most of his time overseeing the transportation of heavy construction vehicles donated by the Bin Laden group.⁷⁴ This much-needed equipment was first flown into Pakistan, and then covertly transported across the border into Afghanistan. During the Russian occupation, Pakistan supported the Afghan cause by acting as a conduit for moving money and weapons provided by the United States and Saudi Arabia into the hands of resistance forces. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, known as ISI, handled these duties as well as

⁷² Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, trans. by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1991, 2015), 601.

⁷³ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 32.

⁷⁴ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam’s War Against America* (New York: Random, 2002, 2003), 98-99.

offered specialized military training to the mujahedeen. When he was not working on logistical operations, bin Laden oversaw the cutting of new roads, the building of hospitals, and the construction of storage depots in the Afghan countryside.⁷⁵

The well-connected former college student also spent a significant amount of time during the war raising financial capital from wealthy Persian Gulf donors who were looking to make contributions to the Afghan campaign. Their donations were inspired by the religious belief that, “He who provides the equipment for a soldier in jihad has himself performed jihad.”⁷⁶ The financial support network originating in the Middle East and ending up in Afghanistan became known as the “Golden Chain.” The charismatic bin Laden excelled at this role by taking advantage of his family’s close friendship with the House of Saud coupled with the regional legacy of his father, Mohammed.⁷⁷ According to his mentor Abdullah Azzam, the prolific bin Laden raised between five and ten million dollars for the mujahedeen in 1984 alone.⁷⁸

Conspiracy theorists have argued that bin Laden was on the CIA payroll during his time working along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The 9/11 Commission refuted this claim, and there has not been any evidence, direct or circumstantial, to suggest otherwise. Other conspiratorial accounts allege that bin Laden was operating in conjunction with Prince Turki, the head of Saudi intelligence.⁷⁹ This assertion seems more plausible considering the bin Laden’s decade long connections to the House of Saud. However, these conspiracy theories remain unproven, and there is no proof bin Laden worked for the American or Saudi governments.

⁷⁵ Cooley, 98.

⁷⁶ Misri, 600.

⁷⁷ The House of Saud awarded the bin Laden construction company the multi-billion dollar bid to renovate the holy sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina in 1983.

⁷⁸ Wright, 117.

⁷⁹ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 50.

Planting the seeds for the organization that became al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden established a guesthouse in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1984 called Beit al-Ansar to accommodate Muslims en route to the Afghan battle front.⁸⁰ According to Abu Muhammad al-Suri who was present at the time of its operation, the Service Office was a large boarding complex which cost bin Laden \$25,000 per month and was generally filled with young Arabs on their way to Afghanistan.⁸¹ The creation of the Service Office allowed bin Laden to meet and build bonds with hundreds of individuals who shared his belief that all Muslims should be fighting to protect Islamic lands. The Service Office was also an opportunity to begin registering these fighters into a database for future wars.

Bin Laden became more daring in his efforts to aid the resistance movement even as the war mired into a bloody stagnation. Intent on turning the course of the war and simultaneously forging a name for himself, the Saudi began crossing the mountain passes from Pakistan into Afghanistan with weapons, vehicles, and food.⁸² His construction experience from his younger days in Saudi Arabia proved a great asset, and bin Laden was instrumental in building several fortified entrenchments inside Afghan territory. He helped construct a cavernous compound at Tora Bora and tried to fortify the defenses at another outpost called Jaji. After years of working on construction projects as well as transporting arms and supplies, bin Laden became intent on joining the resistance at the tactical level. He believed that religion and war intersected and quoted the Prophet Mohammad on multiple occasions, “To spend one hour in the battle line in

⁸⁰ Literally translated “House of the Supporters” is a reference to the Prophet Mohammad’s followers who helped him flee from Mecca to Medina.

⁸¹ Kepel and Milelli, 41, 272.

⁸² Although accounts differ, bin Laden is believed to have spent some time working for the family business in the office and out in the field. Some accounts, like that of his wife Najwa, state that bin Laden preferred to be on the work site and loved driving the heavy construction machinery.

the cause of Allah is better than sixty years of night prayers.”⁸³ At some point, bin Laden was close enough to the front that he was wounded. General Hamid Gul, who ran Pakistan’s Interservices Intelligence Directorate during the Afghan war, recalled, “Although Bin Laden was wounded on at least two occasions his main contribution to the war against the Soviets was as an engineer.”⁸⁴ In spite of his fervor, the extent of his success on the actual battlefield remains a topic of debate.

On April 17, 1987, bin Laden and fifty Arab volunteers held off two hundred Soviet troops, including Russian Special Forces known as Spetsnaz.⁸⁵ This week-long encounter became known as the Battle of Jaji. Various accounts of the engagement have described bin Laden on a wide spectrum from fearless to frightened, inspirational to cowardly. Journalist Abdel Bari Atwan reported that bin Laden was under heavy bombardment on over forty occasions, was hospitalized more than once, and was almost killed by a chemical weapons attack.⁸⁶ Author Lawrence Wright offered a contrasting view, contending that bin Laden played a minor role in the actual fighting and had little effect on the outcome of the skirmish.⁸⁷ Bin Laden’s actual performance mattered little. The Battle of Jaji established bin Laden as a willing and credible defender of the faithful, regardless of how he actually performed in combat. The other Arab defenders at Jaji recognized that bin Laden was an ultra-wealthy individual who did not need to be in the muddy Afghan trenches. This mythical account about a prince willing to

⁸³ Gutman, 14.

⁸⁴ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, 105.

⁸⁵ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 162.

⁸⁶ Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al-Qaeda* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2008), 57.

⁸⁷ Wright, 136-138.

fight as a pauper began circulating throughout the Muslim world. Bin Laden would manipulate this apocryphal reputation for future recruitment of money and manpower.

The Russian invasion caused the paths of Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Osama bin Laden to cross. All three men had gone to Afghanistan to support the resistance effort. Bin Laden was already acquainted with Azzam from their time together at King Abdul Aziz University, and the two worked together to route supplies to the mujahedeen across the mountain passes. During a bin Laden lecture at a hospital in 1987, the Saudi was introduced to Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the man who later became al-Qaeda's second-in-command.⁸⁸ From 1987 to 1990, Zawahiri acted as a field surgeon throughout the region.⁸⁹ Dr. Abdullah Azzam and Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri would prove to be two of most influential individuals on Osama bin Laden's life.

The Russian Retreat

The battle-tested bin Laden gained confidence from his experience in Afghanistan. This self-assurance grew so inflated that he developed a distorted perspective of how the war had actually been won. In a December 1998 interview, bin Laden bragged, "We believe that those who waged jihad in Afghanistan did more than their duty. They found out that with meager resources – a few RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades), a few antitank mines, and a few Kalashnikovs – the myth of the mightiest military known to mankind was annihilated; the greatest military machine was annihilated, and with it the myth of the so-called superpowers."⁹⁰ This simplistic view excluded the most significant factors that actually contributed to the Soviet retreat.

⁸⁸ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 163.

⁸⁹ Aboul-Enein, "Ayman al-Zawahiri," 7.

⁹⁰ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 261.

Time and time again, the Saudi publicly boasted about his role and that of his Arab counterparts in the Afghan conflict. Looking to the future, bin Laden launched a global media campaign to promote the Battle of Jaji.⁹¹ Bin Laden believed that he and his fighters had played a pivotal role in defeating the Russians, even though their contribution was only a minor part in the broader context of the conflict. During most of the war, it was the battle-hardened native Afghans, and not their Muslim allies from the Middle East, who were responsible for inflicting the most damage to the Red Army. On the whole, the Arab volunteers, or Arab mujahedeen, were not seasoned fighters, and they ultimately made a greater contribution financially than militarily. Bin Laden did not distinguish between the two, and he came to believe that a small contingent of Muslim fighters could accomplish anything, which in his mind included bringing down one of the major Cold War combatants.

The lessons which bin Laden drew from the Afghan experience were seriously flawed. The Arab-Afghan fighters had received immense help from foreign nations like Saudi Arabia and the United States, a point which went unacknowledged in bin Laden's public accounts. Without massive assistance from Saudi coffers and American military hardware, the outcome in Afghanistan would have been very different.⁹² For example, the United States provided the resistance with FIM 92-Stinger missiles, a surface-to-air weapon given to Afghan forces to counteract the Russians advantage of armored gunship helicopters called MI-24s, MI-25s, or Hind-Ds. The two-hundred-seventy Soviet aircraft brought down by the mujahedeen changed the way the war was fought, but battlefield successes like this were only possible because

⁹¹ Bin Laden's use of the media continued despite the international bounty on his head.

⁹² For a comprehensive look at the complex history of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, see Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*.

American support for the war grew from \$35 million in 1982 to \$600 million in 1987.⁹³ By the end of the war, the mujahedeen had received a staggering \$6 billion in arms and aid.⁹⁴ The Afghan war provided the Arab fighters an opportunity to gain battlefield experience, but the group's contributions to the war's success were not significant. By bin Laden's own estimate, fewer than five-hundred non-Afghan Arabs were killed during the entirety of the Afghan conflict.⁹⁵ If the Arab fighters had made a larger contribution in the field, this number would have been dramatically higher.

Aggrandizing his own role in the Afghan victory and underestimating the covert support the rebellion had received from the international community, bin Laden was undeterred in his message that he had played a central role in crippling one of the Cold War superpowers. In his own words from October 2004, the al-Qaeda leader boasted, "we have gained experience in guerilla and attritional warfare in our jihad against that great and wicked superpower, Russia, which we, alongside the mujahidin, fought for ten years until, bankrupt, it was forced to withdraw (out of Afghanistan in 1989) – all praise be to Allah."⁹⁶ For Osama bin Laden, the Soviet Union had been toppled by the Muslims who bled the Russians in the hills and valleys of Afghanistan. He credited Islam, and not the United States or Saudi Arabia, with the ultimate demise of the U.S.S.R.

Conclusion

The Afghan war of the 1980s provided Osama bin Laden with the opportunity to hone his calling. During this time, the Saudi millionaire utilized his father's famous name, his family

⁹³ Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 50.

⁹⁴ Gutman, 10.

⁹⁵ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 65.

⁹⁶ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 217.

fortune, and his personal ambition to aid in Afghanistan's defense. He formed critical connections with an extensive network of philanthropic donors, who would financially support his efforts in the years to come. The Soviet invasion allowed bin Laden to forge ties with some of the best guerilla fighters in the world and put him into contact with other disillusioned Muslims. In Afghanistan, bin Laden also expanded his working relationship with Abdullah Azzam, and he became acquainted with his eventual ally, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan provided a safe-haven for bin Laden to establish training camps for the next generation of fighters. From the Afghan experience, bin Laden gained confidence in himself as a leader, and although he had left King Abdul Aziz University prematurely, he had received a valuable education in warfare.

Bin Laden's former associates describe him as deeply impressionable, always in need of mentors, men who knew more about Islam and the modern world than he did.⁹⁷

-Ahmed Rashid, authority on al-Qaeda and the Taliban

Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues.⁹⁸

-Abdullah Azzam's personal motto

The Mentor: Abdullah Azzam

After the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden became a desired subject matter for journalists and pundits alike. In the rush to fill the literary void, many of these publications were substandard works that ignored significant components of bin Laden's life. One of the most glaring omissions lost in many narratives was the crucial role Abdullah Azzam had on the ideological foundation of Osama bin Laden. The Palestinian-born Azzam clearly had a profound impact on bin Laden that history would be wise to recognize. Although it is well accepted that Osama bin Laden was the head of the underground organization, al-Qaeda, it is lesser known that he was not the lone architect in the formation of this group. Without Azzam, bin Laden's path might have been very different.

Abdullah Azzam

While a student at King Abdul Aziz University in the late 1970s, bin Laden was heavily influenced by the teachings of Dr. Abdullah Azzam. Born in Hartiyeh, Palestine, Azzam was educated at Khadorri College before receiving a degree in Sharia law in Damascus, Syria.⁹⁹ Azzam, who was a precocious child interested in reading and academic success, joined the

⁹⁷ Esposito, 11.

⁹⁸ Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, 55-56.

⁹⁹ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 29.

Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-1950s after being channeled to the organization by an elderly teacher in his town.¹⁰⁰ The Muslim Brotherhood transformed Azzam's thinking, just as it did for Qutb and Zawahiri.

After Israel's victory in the 1967 war, Azzam relocated to Jordan. For Azzam, the Israeli conquest of territory previously held by Muslim countries created a deep, life-long hatred of the Jewish state and its Western supporters. This influenced his ideas on jihad, and it was during this period that Azzam began undertaking guerrilla operations against Israel. He eventually abandoned the insurgency to join the faculty at the University of Jordan in Amman, where the fiery professor taught Islamic law. Considered too radical by the Jordanians, he was eventually forced to relocate to King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia because the Kingdom was the only country that would tolerate his stances. With a resume boasting a doctorate in Islamic law, Azzam grew close to fellow exile and faculty member, Mohammad Qutb. Sayyid's brother might have been responsible for recruiting Azzam to join him in Jeddah. Regardless, both men were pivotal in the ideological tutelage of bin Laden.

Azzam continued contributing to the Islamic fundamentalist movement after leaving King Abdul Aziz University. Some Middle Eastern scholars have speculated that Azzam created the pro-Palestinian group Hamas, although it is generally accepted that Shaykh Ahmad Yasin founded the organization in 1973.¹⁰¹ Around 1980, bin Laden's mentor relocated to Pakistan from Saudi Arabia after the Muslim World League hired Azzam to head its educational section.¹⁰² Azzam, who never forgot his Palestinian roots, dedicated much of his time

¹⁰⁰ Kepel and Milelli, 82.

¹⁰¹ Malcolm Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War: A History to 1995* (New York: Longman, 1996), 475.

¹⁰² Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), 279.

expounding on the importance of jihad for protecting Muslim lands and spreading Islam to the Dar-al-Harb. He often discussed the obligatory nature of a defensive jihad, which he defined,

is expelling the Kuffar (unbeliever) from our land, and it is Fard Ayn, a compulsory duty upon all. It is the most important of all the compulsory duties and arises in the following conditions: 1) If the Kuffar enter a land of the Muslims. 2) If the foes meet in battle and they begin to approach each other. 3) If the Imam calls a person or a people to march forward then they must march. 4) If the Kuffar capture and imprison a group of Muslims.¹⁰³

The urgency of expelling non-Muslims from traditionally Muslim territory was always important for Azzam because of his personal experience in Palestine, and it was this conviction which led him to Pakistan to support the Afghan cause in the 1980s. Drawing on his prior experience in the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, Azzam helped his former pupil, who was also working in Pakistan, construct the theoretical parameters of al-Qaeda. The student-teacher reunion did not last. After a series of failed assassination attempts on his life, Azzam and two of his sons were killed in a car bombing in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1989.¹⁰⁴ He was forty-nine years old at the time of his death.

Azzam's Writing

Abdullah Azzam wrote on various topics affecting the Middle East. Azzam's most influential works, which were supported by his doctorate in Islamic law, included *Join the Caravan* and *Defense of the Muslim Lands*. In his writings, Azzam often referenced the historic fatwas of Ibn Taymiyya and more contemporary thinkers such as Hasan al-Banna or Sayyid Qutb. In *Defense of the Muslim Lands*, Azzam's primary thesis contended that jihad was the duty of every Muslim in the global community and that any individual refusing to embrace this calling was living in a state of sin. Lecturing his fellow Muslims on the perils of ignoring their

¹⁰³ "Defence of the Muslim Lands."

¹⁰⁴ Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (NY: Continuum, 2003), 52.

religious obligations, he wrote, “One of the most important lost obligations is the forgotten obligation of fighting (jihad).”¹⁰⁵ Although his writings were never as broadly popular as Qutb’s, Azzam left his own legacy that continued to inspire others well beyond his death.

Like many of the fundamentalists who had come before him, Abdullah Azzam wanted Muslims to return to the early traditions of Islam, most notably through the revival of the caliphate. Embracing the motto, “Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues,” Azzam had no trepidations about using violence as a means to accomplish his goal of restoring the caliph. Azzam’s compulsion towards this goal was not lost on his Saudi apprentice. According to Benjamin and Simon, “Azzam became a mentor for bin Laden. The Saudi’s belief in the reestablishment of a caliphate through an immediate jihad and his disdain for secular Arab nationalism were undoubtedly fostered by this relationship.”¹⁰⁶ Even though they were separated by decades, the restoration of the fallen caliphate was a common goal for al-Banna, Qutb, Azzam, and bin Laden.

Religious authority was one of the most important dynamics in the Azzam-bin Laden relationship. Azzam’s doctorate earned from al-Azhar University, one of Egypt’s oldest academic institutions, held tremendous weight with Sunnis in the Muslim world. His faith-based education allowed the Palestinian exile the ability to speak authoritatively on religious matters. With a business background, bin Laden was always haunted by a lack of credibility to address the complexities of Islamic thought and theology. Following Azzam’s death, bin Laden was forced to find religious legitimacy from other sources. Bin Laden was hardly the only one influenced by Azzam’s teachings, and others have often cited Azzam directly as a religious authority.

¹⁰⁵ “Defence of the Muslim Lands”

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin and Simon, 100.

Al-Qaeda's Roots

Without the guidance of Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda might have never taken root. Bin Laden is often inaccurately credited as being the sole founder of this fundamentalist organization, but the birth of al-Qaeda was actually a collaborative effort. Azzam created Maktab al-Khadamat, also known as the “Office of Services” or “Service Bureau,” in Peshawar to provide aid to the Afghan cause in 1984.¹⁰⁷ He enlisted his former pupil, bin Laden, to be his operating partner and financial supporter. In many ways, this union made sense from a purely business perspective. Azzam, who had made a name for himself fighting the Israelis and later the Soviets, provided legitimacy to the organization through his reputation as a warrior and highly-educated religious scholar. In the early 1980s, bin Laden was still forging his path as a leader, but he had valuable management experience and access to capital.

The Service Bureau, which housed Muslim recruits eager to cross the Pakistani border, had a hierarchical command structure comprised of specialized committees on military affairs, administration duties, training requirements, and scheduling into Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸ The future structure of al-Qaeda closely modeled the one bin Laden had previously co-founded with Azzam in Peshawar. However, after bin Laden took sole command, his group did not appropriate humanitarian components like other organizations such as the Service Bureau and the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to paying \$300,000 per year to support the Service Bureau, bin Laden also produced and financed Azzam's monthly magazine *Al-Jihad*, which began printing in 1984 and published 70,000 copies per month.¹⁰⁹ The success of Azzam's publication taught bin Laden about the importance of marketing as a vehicle for disseminating ideology.

¹⁰⁷ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 155.

¹⁰⁸ Kepel and Milelli, 41.

¹⁰⁹ Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 54-55.

Azzam and bin Laden were proud of their efforts in Afghanistan, and they brainstormed ways to guarantee that their organization could remain relevant at the conclusion of the Soviet occupation. Thus, the pair founded al-Qaeda, translated as “a base” or “foundation,” around 1988 to act as a headquarters for mobilizing future wars and to maintain contact with the network of Afghan veterans. According to bin Laden’s wife, the name was originally al-Qaeda al-Askariya, or “the military base,” but it was later shortened to simply al-Qaeda.¹¹⁰ Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who interviewed bin Laden in the 1980s, remembered the Saudi millionaire explaining the concept of al-Qaeda during a phone call. Khashoggi recalled, “He said that Al-Qaeda was an organization to record the names of the mujahideen and all their contact details: a database, which is one of the things that qaeda means in Arabic. So wherever jihad needed fighting, in the Philippines or central Asia or anywhere in the world, you could get in touch with fighters quickly.”¹¹¹ Under the firm belief that hostility against Islamic countries would occur in perpetuity, bin Laden and his associates were preparing for future conflicts, even before the one they were fighting in Afghanistan had fully concluded.

Following Moscow’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, bin Laden remained intimately involved with al-Qaeda even after returning to Saudi Arabia. Realizing the value of maintaining a ready fighting force in his immediate vicinity, bin Laden reportedly relocated over four thousand mujahedeen to Mecca and Medina.¹¹² The Saudi government grew concerned about this influx of former soldiers. According to bin Laden’s son, the House of Saud sent troops to his father’s farm outside Jeddah to arrest one hundred Afghan veterans who had been flown into

¹¹⁰ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 78.

¹¹¹ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 148.

¹¹² Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, 123.

the Kingdom with bin Laden's assistance.¹¹³ The veterans were later liberated peacefully after bin Laden personally petitioned the royal family for their release. For the al-Qaeda leader, the government raid against his compound was an early injustice by the House of Saud, but he would consider it inconsequential in comparison to the Saudi government's later offense of housing foreign troops in the holy land of Mecca and Medina.

Bin Laden basked in his global notoriety, especially on occasions where he thought the attention would help his organization grow. He was proud of his relationship with Azzam, and bin Laden went on record describing their work. Speaking in the third person, bin Laden stated, "He established alongside Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Azzam – May God bless his soul – the office for mujahidin services in Peshawar; he also established along with Sheikh Azzam the Sidda camp for training of Arab mujahidin who came for jihad in Afghanistan."¹¹⁴ This quote is fascinating because bin Laden specifically mentioned that the training camp was created for Arabs. The al-Qaeda leaders gained authorization from their Afghan allies to institute the first training camp solely for Arabs in 1984, but the issue of an all-Arab fighting force would eventually drive a wedge between the Saudi and Azzam.¹¹⁵

Azzam contended that the Arab fighters should not be segregated into units based on nationality but should instead be interspersed with their Afghan counterparts. Growing increasingly confident, bin Laden dissented against his mentor arguing that the Arabs should fight as a homogenous group. This was probably not one of bin Laden's best ideas because many of the Arab mujahedeen had no background in combat before their arrival into the Afghan theater. In this case, Azzam was correct that it was in the Arabs' best interest to learn by fighting

¹¹³ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 83-84.

¹¹⁴ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 32.

¹¹⁵ Kepel and Milelli, 93-94.

alongside the more seasoned Afghan combatants. One point that Azzam and bin Laden could agree on was the need for training camps to provide schools of war for the inexperienced Arab visitors to train in battlefield tactics and techniques.

The mentor-student relationship between Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden had a deep impact on the Saudi millionaire. Summarizing Azzam's significance, bin Laden later explained, "When the Sheikh started out, the atmosphere among the Islamists and sheikhs was limited, location-specific, and regional, each dealing with their own particular locale, but he inspired the Islamic movement and motivated Muslims to the broader jihad."¹¹⁶ Bin Laden expanded Azzam's vision for fighting Islam's enemies outside the Middle East. To say that Abdullah Azzam's primary contribution to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism was the tutoring of Osama bin Laden would be underestimating his pivotal role in the movement. A prolific writer and inspirational teacher, Azzam's words remain prevalent throughout the Arab world. Azzam taught that it was the responsibility of Muslims everywhere to attack Islam's external enemies until all occupied Islamic lands were freed, a message that continues to resonate.

Azzam's Death

The assassination of Abdullah Azzam and his two sons in 1989 has remained shrouded in uncertainty, as the perpetrators have never claimed responsibility or been identified. Because of the ambiguous nature of the bombing, a number of conspiracies have circulated about who was responsible for the car bombing. The United States, Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), al-Zawahiri, and bin Laden have all been accused. Defending his innocence, bin Laden publicly stated,

The Jews were the ones who were complaining most about the Sheikh's (Azzam) movement, and who were constantly targeting him. It is therefore believed that Israel, in

¹¹⁶ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 77.

collusion with some of its Arab agents, killed the Sheikh. As for this accusation against me, it was fabricated by the Americans, the Jews, and some of their agents. It doesn't even merit a response. Those who witnessed events know of the close relationship between Sheikh Azzam and myself.¹¹⁷

Government authorities showed limited interest in investigating the circumstances surrounding Azzam's death. Because of this, the public will probably never know the true facts behind the assassination. One thing is certain; bin Laden benefited exponentially from the death of his mentor. Outmaneuvering Azzam's son-in-law, the Saudi protégé wrestled control of the recruiting and support networks for the Office of Services. This was a defining moment for bin Laden. Even before creating al-Qaeda, he had money, manpower, and weapons at his disposal. Just as importantly, the Saudi millionaire had begun cultivating his own relationships with Islamic organizations and individuals willing to financially support his underground activities. Between 1979 and 1989, an estimated \$600 million flowed into the Service Bureau from wealthy Gulf contributors.¹¹⁸ The death of Abdullah Azzam's two sons in the car bombing also allowed for bin Laden to emerge from his mentor's shadow and rise to prominence. The Azzams' deaths allowed bin Laden to assume control of an established and powerful network.

Conclusion

Osama bin Laden's ideology reflected many of Abdullah Azzam's most core beliefs. The two men agreed that the external enemy was dangerous and needed to be dealt with before the internal enemy could be defeated. Both men vigorously advocated for the removal by force of all foreign invaders from lands they deemed to belong to Islam. Each of them sought a safe haven or base country from which to launch their global war. In their speeches and writings, they challenged the global Muslim population to join in their modern-day crusade while

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Dreyfuss, 279.

denigrating those who refused to pick up a rifle. And ultimately, both of them were killed pursuing their fundamentalist goals.

Abdullah Azzam spent the entirety of his adult life teaching, preaching, and working for his cause. He was quoted as saying, “I feel that I am nine years old, seven and a half years in Afghan Jihad, one and a half years in Jihad in Palestine and the rest of the years have no value.”¹¹⁹ Unlike Osama bin Laden, Azzam was educated in Islamic law and had the requisite credentials to instruct on complicated religious issues. Azzam’s strong commitment to the movement left an indelible mark on bin Laden. Speaking with the utmost reverence for Azzam, bin Laden admonished, “Shaykh Abdallah Azzam, may God have mercy on his soul, is a man worth a nation. After his assassination, Muslim women proved unable to give birth to a man like him.”¹²⁰ In turn, bin Laden hoped that one day aspiring fundamentalists would laud his contributions to the cause as they had Azzam’s.

¹¹⁹ “Defence of the Muslim Lands.”

¹²⁰ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, 109.

And in this, the greatest battle, it is necessary for us all, both individuals and groups and organizations, that we unite together for the sake of jihad against the Crusaders and Jews, and their judgmental agents in our lands, and that we do not accept any compromise with them, nor any plan they offer that gives them legitimacy and justifies their actions. We must challenge them and antagonize them, and incite their hatred, and gather the nation together to fight against them.¹²¹

-Ayman al-Zawahiri, written statement from February 5, 2005

The establishment of a Muslim state in the heart of the Islamic world is not an easy or close target. However, it is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory.¹²²

-Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*

The Partner: Ayman al-Zawahiri

Osama bin Laden's ideological foundation was affected by both historically significant events affecting the Muslim world and the teachings of Islamic fundamentalist icons. His belief system was driven by his personal contact with, and the deep influence of, two well-educated individuals, Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹²³ From the time of their introduction at King Abdul Aziz University and continuing until his final days, Abdullah Azzam challenged bin Laden to expand his efforts in the defense of Islam. Just as important in the transition of the millionaire from idealist to practitioner, bin Laden's subsequent take-over of the Service Bureau following the assassination of Abdullah Azzam legitimized the Saudi's power and provided him the infrastructure necessary for waging a war. Azzam had left him an international network, but

¹²¹ Ayman Al Zawahiri and Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri* (Old Tappan, NJ: TLG Publications, 2006), 243.

¹²² Ibid., 201-202.

¹²³ Ayman al-Zawahiri served as the second-in-command of al-Qaeda until the death of Osama bin Laden. Following bin Laden's assassination in 2011, Zawahiri became the leader of al-Qaeda. His current whereabouts are unknown.

it was an Egyptian physician who provided bin Laden the impetus to escalate his missions. Even though their official alliance was not a long standing one, Ayman al-Zawahiri had a lasting impact on the world's most wanted man.

From Medical School to Prison

Born in 1951 to a devout Muslim family in an upper-class suburb of Cairo, Ayman al-Zawahiri's family placed a tremendous emphasis on his education.¹²⁴ Greatness was expected from Zawahiri. His extended family members were recognized for their accomplishments in the field of medicine, the classrooms of academia, and the halls of governance. Similar to bin Laden's upbringing, Zawahiri's friends and family attest to his good behavior and strong work ethic. Despite being remembered as a moderate in his younger days, Zawahiri became involved in regional politics even as a youth and joined the Muslim Brotherhood when he was only fourteen.¹²⁵ Following the Israeli victory in 1967, he discovered his first passion, which ironically was serving the hurt and injured. After graduating in 1974 with highest honors and gaining a Master's degree in surgery in 1978 from the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University, Zawahiri earned a doctorate in surgery with distinction from a school in Peshawar, Pakistan.¹²⁶

During a military parade in October 1981 celebrating his country's success in the October War, the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat was ambushed and assassinated. The attackers sprayed machinegun bullets wildly into the assembled notables in the grandstands, and numerous bystanders were hit along with Sadat. During a broadcast to the world, the leader of the plot

¹²⁴ The year of al-Zawahiri's birth has been disputed. For instance, John Esposito believes the year to be 1953 in *Unholy War*. This work will utilize 1951 since it is the date provided by Zawahiri's biographer and former cellmate, Montasser al-Zayyat.

¹²⁵ Esposito, 18.

¹²⁶ Montasser Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Laden's Right-Hand Man*, trans. by Ahmed Fekry (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), 18.

announced, “My name is Khalid Islambouli, I have slain Pharaoh, and I do not fear death.”¹²⁷

The conspirators hoped that the Sadat’s death would inspire a nationwide uprising against the government. This larger goal never came to fruition. Ironically, Hosni Mubarak, who served as President of Egypt from the 1981 until 2011, responded to these groups with a heavier hand than Sadat had ever dared. The revolution never gained much traction, mostly because of poor planning and a misconceived notion of how the general public would react to death of their president.

The revolutionaries were inspired by the young army Lieutenant Khalid Islambouli who had requested assistance from other domestic groups including one called al Jihad.¹²⁸ As a prominent member of al Jihad at the time, Zawahiri was accused of supporting the operation and jailed by the Egyptian government, even though the prosecutors were never able to prove conclusively that the doctor was involved in Sadat’s death. Islambouli’s assassination plan had come together quickly, and the plotters had not given much thought to the requirements needed to ensure their efforts would ignite a nation-wide revolution. While Zawahiri shared aspirations of toppling the secular Egyptian government, he most likely would not have provided the full support of his fundamentalist group to an ill-conceived scheme that had little foresight and appeared destined to fail from the start.

Reviewing Zawahiri’s public statements suggest that the Egyptian physician learned from the mistakes of the Sadat assassination, causing him to preach the value of patience and preparation. On numerous occasions, he has written his analysis of why Muslim uprisings have failed. In almost all of these circumstances, Zawahiri accurately concluded that poor leadership

¹²⁷ Benjamin and Simon, 83.

¹²⁸ Laqueur, *No End to War*, 37.

and planning were the contributing factors in the efforts' failures. These virtues were described in S.K. Malik's doctrine for Islamic war as,

Firstly, all decisions pertaining to war must be taken after cool, deliberate, thorough and detailed deliberations and consultations. Secondly, the prerogative of the final decision rests with the commander. Thirdly, once taken, the decision must be upheld with single-minded attention and devotion. When everything "human" has gone into the process of decision making, trust must be reposed in God and all fears, doubts, and reservations thrown over-board.¹²⁹

These tenets were fundamental management practices in bin Laden and Zawahiri's organizations.

Although the prosecution failed to connect him to Sadat's assassination, Zawahiri was convicted of illegal weapons trafficking and received a three-year prison sentence which he had almost completed by the time his trial ended.¹³⁰ While in jail, Montasser al-Zayyat, a fellow agitator, shared a cell and befriended Zawahiri. As discussed in his book *The Road to al-Qaeda*, Zayyat believed the doctor became radicalized as a result of his repeated beatings and overall suffering at the hands of the prison guards.

During his pre-trial detention and remaining sentence, Zawahiri was able to interact with other incarcerated dissidents and became acquainted with fellow Sunnis who shared his convictions. The Egyptian government had unwittingly placed these revolutionaries in an environment that became an incubator for the sharing of ideas. The authorities had not calculated the danger of placing so many political prisoners into one crowded facility, and the brutal experience provided Zawahiri the chance to learn from other more experienced fighters. His subsequent trip to Afghanistan provided the ideal outlet for the passion nurtured during his incarceration.

¹²⁹ S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War* (Delhi, India: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1992), 64.

¹³⁰ Wright, 67.

The Afghan Connection

As with bin Laden, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was also a critical moment in history for Ayman al-Zawahiri. Following his release from prison, Zawahiri practiced medicine in Egypt and Saudi Arabia before turning to the Afghan front. By his own admission, he spent seven months in Afghanistan as early as 1980 and took short trips to the region in 1981, 1984, and 1986.¹³¹ Zawahiri found a calling as a field surgeon serving the Arab and Afghan mujahedeen, an experience which put him in contact with Abdullah Azzam.¹³² His time in Afghanistan and Pakistan had a transformative effect on the Egyptian doctor. His former cellmate in Egypt, Zayyat recalled,

I met Zawahiri in the Tora Prison, where we stayed in the same cell for three years. He was the picture of humbleness and politeness...Zawahiri changed so much when he went to Peshawar. There, he was influenced by others in the atmosphere that was characterized by hard-line policies. He formed a new group in 1987 called Tanzeem al-Jihad (Jihad Organization), a year later he changed it to its current name, Islamic Jihad.¹³³

In 1987 or 1988, Osama bin Laden was introduced to the leadership of Egypt's Jihad group.

This was the genesis of the relationship between bin Laden and Zawahiri, who later integrated his force into al-Qaeda in 1998.¹³⁴ Prior to this merger, Abu Hafs al-Misri served as bin Laden's second-in-command in the early days of al-Qaeda, a role Zawahiri would eventually inherit.

According to Osama's son Omar, Zawahiri met bin Laden through Abdullah Azzam.¹³⁵ Omar bin Laden blamed the Egyptian doctor for influencing his father toward a more violent path of extremism. Some scholars, such as Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, argue that

¹³¹ Zawahiri and Mansfield, 34-35.

¹³² Esposito, 13.

¹³³ Zayyat and Abu-Rabi, 85.

¹³⁴ United States of America v. Usama bin Laden, indictment S (9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS), 6.

¹³⁵ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 130, 212.

Zawahiri worked to sabotage the partnership between bin Laden and Azzam. According to their account, Zawahiri wanted control of bin Laden's growing influence, access to the Saudi's assets, and so he poisoned the relationship by making allegations that Azzam was an American spy.¹³⁶ If Zawahiri really had been trying to create a rift between bin Laden and Azzam, it is possible that Zawahiri could have played a part in the car bombing that killed Azzam in 1989.

Following the Afghan war, Zawahiri returned to Egypt hoping to incite regime change in his native country. Many, including his former cellmate Montasser al-Zayyat, contend that he had been forced to leave his homeland because of a failed assassination attempt that horrified the nation. The intended target was Egyptian Prime Minister Atif Sidqi, but the attack against his motorcade went awry, and a young girl named Shayma was tragically killed.¹³⁷ Zawahiri's organization lost most of its domestic support after the death of the child, and he was forced to flee Egypt for Sudan because of the public backlash. Recalling the incident, Zawahiri stated, "I deeply regret her death and am willing to pay blood money. This girl was as old as my own daughter...The unintended death of this innocent child pained us all, but we were helpless and we had to fight the government, which was against God's Shariah and supported God's enemies."¹³⁸ Sadly, this would not be the last time Zawahiri was accused of killing a child.

The bond between bin Laden and Zawahiri developed during their time in Sudan. Both men had been forced under pressure to seek sanctuary outside their respective homelands. Zawahiri, who was still heading Islamic Jihad at the time, was in Sudan even before bin Laden relocated to Khartoum. Their moves to the impoverished African nation made sense as the country's recent civil war had ushered in a weak government which tolerated fundamentalist

¹³⁶ Kepel and Milelli, 155.

¹³⁷ Zayyat and Abu-Rabi, 65.

¹³⁸ Al-Zawahiri and Mansfield, 102-103.

groups seeking refuge within its borders. The change of scenery did little to extinguish the Egyptian doctor's unwillingness to demonstrate mercy. After Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad executed two boys as alleged spies, the Sudanese government grew weary of their Egyptian guests and began deporting members of the organization.¹³⁹ Once again, Zawahiri was forced to flee.

Zawahiri would eventually join forces with bin Laden in Afghanistan, but he did not move there directly from Sudan. Instead, he attempted to immigrate to Chechnya in 1996. His goal was to establish an independent branch of Islamic Jihad that could assist the Chechens in the war effort against the Russian forces deployed by Moscow to prevent the creation of an independent Islamic state. Russian authorities captured Zawahiri in Dagestan before he could reach Chechnya, but he was released after a month because his false passport never revealed his true provenance.¹⁴⁰ History might have unfolded differently had the Russians been able to identify and detain the Egyptian doctor. A year later, Zawahiri was believed to have been involved in the 1997 attack at Luxor which killed fifty-eight tourists and four Egyptians.¹⁴¹ Luxor, a city renowned for its ancient buildings and treasured artifacts, was targeted to horrify foreigners from visiting the country. For his alleged contributions to the attack, the Egyptian government sentenced Zawahiri to death in absentia. As the bull's-eye on his back grew ever larger, Zawahiri next found sanctuary with his fellow exile and future partner in the mountains of Afghanistan.

The relationship between Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri was solidified publicly in a 1998 declaration issued by The World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and

¹³⁹ Gutman, 86.

¹⁴⁰ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 382.

¹⁴¹ Atwan, 78.

Crusaders. In this short treatise from February 23rd, the World Islamic Front concluded their statement with five prominent signatories and their affiliations,

Sheikh Osama bin-Muhammed bin Laden
Ayman al-Zawahiri, amir of the Jihad Group in Egypt
Abu-Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad Taha, Egyptian Islamic Group
Sheikh Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan
Fazlur Rahman, amir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh¹⁴²

The announcement was picked up and published by *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, an Arabic-based newspaper published in London. Using the publicity to reiterate his ire, bin Laden's invective against the continued presence of American soldiers in his native land of Saudi Arabia resonated widely, as did his charge that the United States was culpable for the Jewish control of Jerusalem. At the dénouement, the newly formed group proclaimed,

On this basis, and in accordance with God's will, we pronounce to all Muslims the following judgment: To kill the American and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty incumbent upon every Muslim in all countries, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken, and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of God Almighty.¹⁴³

Perhaps bin Laden had hoped that there was strength in numbers, but more likely he asserted multiple signatories would lend credence to his decree. However, this infamous fatwa never received the recognition bin Laden sought from respected clerics of the ulema. Nevertheless, the fatwa demonstrated bin Laden's conviction that American lives would be endangered as long as its military continued to operate out of Saudi Arabia or the larger Middle East.

As the relationship between bin Laden and Zawahiri solidified, so too did the Egyptian doctor's influence over the future aims of al-Qaeda. From his post as second-in-command, Zawahiri became al-Qaeda's ideological leader through his proliferation of fundamentalist

¹⁴² Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 195-196.

¹⁴³ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 61.

propaganda. In 2001, Zawahiri published his most famous work, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*. Aware of the encircling American nets, the Egyptian doctor admitted in his writing that his future was uncertain. Perhaps because he did not expect to escape the American retaliation after 9/11, Zawahiri disclosed a significant amount of personal information as well as insight concerning the activities of al-Qaeda. While *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* does not read like a terrorist instruction manual, the work clarifies al-Qaeda's strategy and goals.

Zawahiri was committed to bin Laden's quest to reestablish the caliphate, a goal at the crux of al-Qaeda's ideology. He likewise did not believe this would be possible without eliminating America's imperialistic presence from the Middle East. After calling for an international battle against the United States, Zawahiri explained in *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, "This would be followed by the earth-shattering event, which the west trembles at the mere thought of it, which is the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Egypt. If God wills it, such a state in Egypt, with all its weight in the heart of the Islamic world, could lead the Islamic world in a jihad against the West."¹⁴⁴

As with any collaborative effort, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri did not always concur on the direction that the modern Islamic fundamentalist movement should take. The pair agreed on a number of major tenets, but each man remained committed to his own agenda. Early on, Zawahiri was primarily concerned with the overthrow of the Egyptian government. He wanted to fight the near enemy first, create a base from which to advance, and then begin expanding in other directions. Originally, Zawahiri wanted this launching ground to be in his Egyptian homeland, but when this proved impossible, he relaxed his criteria to include any secure Muslim land. He wrote, "We consider that the fight against apostate regimes in

¹⁴⁴ Al-Zawahiri and Mansfield, 113.

Muslim countries must come before other fights, because they are apostates and the fight against apostates must take precedence over the fight against unbelievers; this is also true because they are closer to Muslims.”¹⁴⁵

Unlike his Egyptian partner, bin Laden, who had been convinced by Azzam to fear the far enemy more than the near enemy, championed the position that the Western powers were to be eradicated first. His goal was to force the United States out of the Middle East which would isolate Washington’s closest Muslim allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Without U.S. support, bin Laden hoped the apostate governments in the region would be unable to remain in power. Bin Laden felt the far enemy needed to be punished for its constant colonial action in Islamic lands, which would in turn open up the region for revolutionary change.

If bin Laden and Zawahiri were introduced in the late-1980s, then why did it take until 1998 for them to officially band together? The answer is multifaceted. First, both bin Laden and Zawahiri each believed their goals were the most crucial, even against fellow jihadists, and both were unwilling to abandon their leadership position to become subordinate to each other. Secondly, by the time of their official partnership, both men had been expelled from their homelands and had narrowly escaped various encounters with assassins and government forces. Zawahiri, who was desperately in need of safe base, was able to find protection with bin Laden and his associates who had already established a secure foothold in Afghanistan.

In recent years, experts have debated the nature of the alliance between the Egyptian doctor and the Saudi millionaire. One point of contention has been that Zawahiri was motivated to join the ranks of bin Laden exclusively out of financial exhaustion. Just as they had been to Abdullah Azzam, bin Laden’s lucrative resources must have been attractive to Zawahiri in the

¹⁴⁵ Zawahiri as quoted in Kepel and Milelli, 178.

early years. While living in Sudan, the wealthy Saudi provided fiscal support to Zawahiri's faction of Egyptian Islamic Jihad.¹⁴⁶ However, there is no evidence that Zawahiri viewed bin Laden only as a financial backer. Ayman al-Zawahiri had failed in his quest to usher in an Islamic state in his homeland of Egypt. By allying with bin Laden, he became a co-leader of a burgeoning global organization that was financially sound and becoming more active by the year. Of course, Zawahiri had to adopt bin Laden's prioritizing of the far enemy over the near enemy.

Conclusion

Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri shared similar life experiences, backgrounds, and ideas. They eventually developed a symbiotic partnership. Both men were raised in prominent Middle Eastern families. Each was well educated. Although the pair became the two most wanted men in the world, they were considered by family and friends to be shy, withdrawn, religiously devout, and introverted. Each man believed deeply that Islam was under attack from secular governments and the invading imperialistic outside world. Both wanted to rescue Islam. In their eyes, the Afghan invasion by the Soviet Union had been a crime against Muslims everywhere. Both men expressed outrage with their native countries, had been exiled from them, and were hunted by their former governments as criminals.

From an ideological point of view, bin Laden and the older Zawahiri were ideally-suited partners. Bin Laden provided valuable assets such as financial resources, charismatic leadership skills, and organizational abilities. The Egyptian doctor had never been able to master these on his own, but Zawahiri instead offered decades of military experience fighting in the name of Allah. Like Abdullah Azzam, Zawahiri's determined style influenced the Saudi.

¹⁴⁶ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 381.

The establishment of a Muslim state in the heart of the Islamic world is not an easy or close target. However, it is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory. Do not precipitate collision and be patient about victory.¹⁴⁷

-Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophets Banner*

So I say that, in general, our concern is that our umma unites either under the Words of the Book of God or His Prophet, and that this nation should establish the righteous caliphate of our umma, which has been prophesized by our Prophet in his authentic hadith: that the righteous caliph will return with the permission of God.¹⁴⁸

-Osama bin Laden, audiotape called *Resist the New Rome*

The New Islamic Empire: Resurrecting the Caliphate

For centuries, the caliph ruled over the global Muslim population. This powerful position, which had been created to fill the void left by the death of the Prophet Mohammad, gave one man the power of both king and pope. The tradition of the caliph lasted into the twentieth century when the Turkish President Mustafa Kemal abolished its existence, a move that would remain shrouded in controversy. The resurrection of the caliphate was one of the primary goals for Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda followers. They hoped to create a new Muslim-ruled state governed by a modern-day caliph who would usher in another golden age of Sunni Islam.

The Caliph

Although the concept of separation of church and state has become institutionalized in the United States and much of Europe, this is hardly a universal custom, and most countries in the Middle East have no history with this tradition. After conquering Mecca and Medina, the

¹⁴⁷ Zawahiri and Mansfield, 201-202.

¹⁴⁸ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 121.

Prophet Mohammad inserted himself into political decisions ranging from diplomacy and war-making to collecting taxes and acting as a judge. Thus, Mohammad served as head of state and leader of Islam at the same time. Following his death in 632, the early Muslims faced a crisis because Mohammad had never established a plan for succession nor had he articulated a process for electing a leader after he was gone. Ultimately, Muslim leaders resolved the dilemma by choosing a representative known as a caliph, which means “successor” or “viceroy,” to carry on the dual-roles of the Prophet as spiritual head and ruler of the growing Islamic state.¹⁴⁹

Although the caliph came to be recognized as the new leader of Islam, he did not possess powers identical to those wielded by the Prophet Mohammad. The caliph was not directly relaying God’s message to humankind as Mohammad had done during his time on earth.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, the caliph could only interpret and administer the laws already put in place by the Prophet but could not make new laws.¹⁵¹ Abu Bakr became the inaugural head of the caliphate, a position scholar Bernard Lewis described as, “the first and by far the greatest and most important sovereign institution in Islamic history.”¹⁵²

According to Sunni tradition, the first four successors came to be known as the “rightly guided” caliphs.¹⁵³ After the death of the Prophet, these early years were turbulent times for Islam under the caliph’s rule, and the Muslim population struggled without the leadership of their founder. Stability was a problem because three out of the first four caliphs were murdered. Umar was stabbed by a Christian slave while his successors, Uthman and Ali, were killed in acts

¹⁴⁹ Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 84-85.

¹⁵⁰ Unlike the Bible, which is God’s word divinely inspired but written through men, the Koran is considered by Muslims to be the actual words of Allah as recited verbatim from Mohammad.

¹⁵¹ Khadduri, 10-12.

¹⁵² Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 44.

¹⁵³ The “rightly guided” caliphs include Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

of regicide by Muslim assassins convinced they were freeing the Islamic community from unrighteous rulers.¹⁵⁴ Even though there were periods where the caliph's reign disappeared, the tradition of the caliphate nonetheless persisted from the time of the Prophet's death through to the twentieth century.

Islam has never been a centralized institution with a hierarchical delegation of clergy. Thus, there was no need to separate church from state because each individual Muslim maintains individual accountability. The ulema, which literally translated means "the learned," have traditionally been responsible for interpreting the Koran and the actions of the Prophet into Islamic rules called the Shariah or Shariah law. These principles provide direction for governing Muslims' daily lives. There is not one established school for training the ulema. In addition to religion teachers, the ulema can include, "scholars who compiled the Shariah, the judges who applied it in the Islamic courts, and the legal experts who advised the judges were considered part of the ulama establishment."¹⁵⁵ Thus, the ulema is a broad and semi-diversified body.

Ataturk's Legacy

Although there are many who blame the West for ending the caliphate, it was a Turkish Muslim who was responsible for ending the century-old tradition. Following the dissection of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, Mustafa Kemal, a former army officer, led a successful rebellion for Turkish independence against Greek and allied forces. Kemal, who became known as Ataturk or Father Turk, was rewarded for his role in winning the Turkish war of independence by being elected the nation's inaugural president. With support from the national assembly, Kemal impacted the tradition of Islamic theocracy forever in March 1924 by deposing Caliph Abdul Mejid and abolishing the caliphate. Setting aside nearly thirteen

¹⁵⁴ Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1967, 2003), 126.

¹⁵⁵ Cleveland, 28.

centuries of Islamic rule, this attempt to create a secular Turkish government was viewed by some as the ultimate act of betrayal.¹⁵⁶ Ataturk also banned religious courts in favor of a secular judiciary, gave equal rights to women, and institutionalized other cultural changes such as the banning of the fez.

The opposition to Ataturk's decision to end the caliphate was immediate and has continued to modern day. An Islamic conference was held in Cairo in 1926 which declared the need for a caliph but never appointed one, and subsequent meetings in Mecca in 1926 and Jerusalem in 1931 also proved fruitless.¹⁵⁷ For Hasan al-Banna, the removal of the caliph was unforgivable, and he founded the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood in response. Al-Banna feared his native Egypt would follow a similar, secular path like that of Turkey. He aspired to establish an Islamic state in Egypt under a new caliphate. For al-Banna, a theocratic Egyptian state could have been a platform for global influence. Al-Banna did not live long enough to see this occur, but his goals were adopted by al-Qaeda which similarly aspired, "To establish truth, get rid of evil, and establish an Islamic nation."¹⁵⁸

The Afghan Caliphate

In the minds of the upper echelon of al-Qaeda, Afghanistan offered the most opportune location for a modern revival of the caliphate.¹⁵⁹ This was in part because Afghanistan was a predominately Muslim country which lacked a strong central government. It remains a tribal land comprised of numerous ethnic groups to this day. Unfortunately for the Afghan people, the

¹⁵⁶ There is debate over Ataturk's personal views on religion. The claim has been made that he was an agnostic. Regardless of whether he was a practicing Muslim or agnostic, Islamic fundamentalists deem his removal of the caliphate as one of the most treasonous acts ever committed against their faith.

¹⁵⁷ Khadduri, 290-291.

¹⁵⁸ Wright, 162.

¹⁵⁹ The political, geographical, and strategic importance of Afghanistan has been long underestimated. Starting with the struggle between Great Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century, the players of the Great Game may have changed, but Afghanistan remains important in modern Middle Eastern affairs.

Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s did not end the death and despair of the impoverished nation. In the ensuing power vacuum, a gory civil war commenced as quarreling warlords ravaged the countryside. The Taliban force grew in prominence by promising to halt the fighting, which by this time, had devolved to include ethnic cleansing. Their movement was reinforced with soldiers from the hundreds of Saudi-financed madrasses lining the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Following the Russian retreat from Afghanistan, the White House lost interest in a country that was viewed as nothing more than a devastated backwater. Republican President George H.W. Bush initiated significant cuts to international aid for Afghanistan, and his Democratic successor Bill Clinton continued these cost-saving policies. American development and grant assistance for Afghanistan dropped from \$60 million in 1992, to \$20 million in 1993, bottoming out at \$2 million in 1994.¹⁶⁰ Bruce Riedel, who served on the National Security Council (NSC) during the Bush administration, was unable to recall a single meeting at the senior level held to discuss the problems materializing out of Afghanistan in 1991 or 1992.¹⁶¹ With the Cold War over, the fate of Afghanistan no longer mattered to American policymakers who failed to appreciate the strategic vacuum.

While the United States ignored Afghanistan, bin Laden and his al-Qaeda forces tried to fill the void by making major contributions to the Taliban war effort. First, bin Laden began financing the Taliban by utilizing his fundraising expertise and drawing upon his personal fortune. His contributions funded the final Taliban drive during their conquest of the Afghan capital. American intelligence reports indicate that the Saudi millionaire was raising \$30 million

¹⁶⁰ Gutman, 55.

¹⁶¹ Bruce Riedel, *The Search for al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 46.

annually from which he earmarked \$10-20 million per year for Taliban support.¹⁶² Bin Laden had been fiscally supporting military camps for decades, and the Afghan civil war was an opportunity to deploy his own troops into combat. The Arab fighters, who had played a minor role during the Russian invasion in the 1980s, began contributing significantly to the war effort of the 1990s.

For members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Afghanistan provided the perfect place to establish a caliphate. Just as the Prophet had spread his religion out of Arabia, the members of these groups hoped that Afghanistan would be the new nucleus from which the caliphate would advance Islam. Arriving in Afghanistan as a guest of the Taliban government, Osama bin Laden announced, “They are committed to support the religion approved by God, and that country remains as the Muslims have known it, a stronghold of Islam, and its people are amongst the most protective of the religion approved by God, and the keenest to fulfill His laws and to establish an Islamic state.”¹⁶³ Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden both harbored aspirations for a return to the caliphate. Nonetheless, bin Laden remained unconvinced that the world was ready for the immediate return of the caliphate. Instead, he viewed al-Qaeda as taking the lead in preparing the way for this endeavor. Bin Laden and his followers hoped their actions would jolt the international Muslim community to unify in order to stop the downward spiral Islam had been experiencing since the 1920s.

Conclusion

The abolishment of the caliphate in Turkey in 1924 was a traumatic historical event for many Muslims. Even though the caliph fell over eighty years ago, fundamentalists like bin Laden considered its restoration as central in their quest to return Islam to its true path. For those

¹⁶² Gutman, 205.

¹⁶³ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 41-42.

sharing this view, the dissolution of the caliphate was the historical marker which sent Islam into a tailspin. In addition to holding secularists like Ataturk responsible for this perceived crime against the faith, bin Laden blamed the West for preventing the return of a caliph.

[T]hey (the Americans) also have the effect of serving the Jews' petty state and diverting attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there. Nothing shows this more clearly than their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest Arab state in the region, and their attempts to fragment all the states of the region, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets, whose unity and weakness guarantees Israel's survival and perpetuates the brutal crusader occupation of the peninsula.¹⁶⁴

-World Islamic Front, February 23, 1998

As a result of this, in all its different forms and guises, the Jews have taken control of your economy, thereby taking control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life, making you their servants and achieving their aims at your expense – precisely what Benjamin Franklin warned you against.¹⁶⁵

-Osama bin Laden in a 2002 letter to the American public

Righting a Wrong: Ending the State of Israel

A conflict existed between the followers of Judaism and Islam even before the state of Israel declared independence in 1948.¹⁶⁶ Although many Americans erroneously believe this divergence has existed for several centuries, the clash is essentially a modern phenomenon. From 1949 to 1973, a constant state of hostilities existed between Israel and its neighboring Muslim nations, and these combatants fought four significant wars during this era. With American support, Israel became the hegemonic power in the Middle East.

Osama bin Laden, like most Arabs, was influenced by the creation of the Israeli state and its military supremacy over the region. This hatred originated from his father, who was staunchly against Israel's existence. The individuals with whom Osama bin Laden spent much

¹⁶⁴ Bin Laden as quoted in Kepel and Milelli, 54.

¹⁶⁵ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 203.

¹⁶⁶ In turn, Christianity has also historically conflicted with Judaism and Islam in the Middle East.

of his time, such as Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri, reinforced the desire to fight Tel Aviv. Yet, bin Laden did not deploy al-Qaeda against Israel. Although he publicly spoke out against Israel, bin Laden decided to focus on his fight against the United States before dealing with one of the “near enemies.” Once the West had abandoned its ally, bin Laden would redirect his goals to the destruction of Israel.

The Wars

Since his childhood, Osama bin Laden was raised to regard Israel with hatred. His father, Mohammad bin Laden, was living in Saudi Arabia at the time that Israel declared independence in 1948. The senior bin Laden disagreed with Israel’s existence because he, like many others in the Middle East, felt the lands of Palestine belonged to the Arabs. According to lore, Mohammad bin Laden wanted to be involved in the war against Israel. “One day, as the story goes, he demanded that his company’s engineers convert two hundred bulldozers into tanks for the purpose of attacking Israel. Told that the task was impossible, he decided instead to produce as many sons as possible and convert them into fighters. But out of all the bin Laden sons, Osama became the only fighter.”¹⁶⁷

As discussed previously, Osama idolized his father and took to heart his teachings, especially after Mohammad bin Laden was killed in a plane crash while trying to land on a rustic runway. Following this accident in 1967, the younger bin Laden was always searching for ways to personify the qualities he believed his father embodied. This helps explain why bin Laden was considered religiously devout even as a child. As he grew older and began hearing stories about his father’s stance on Israel, bin Laden would have wanted to emulate Mohammad’s politics.

¹⁶⁷ Esposito, 4.

Despite its relatively small geographical area and modest population, Israel has traditionally fared well in battle against its Muslim adversaries, particularly given the overwhelming numbers against them. In fact, the poor performance of Arab armies against the Western-style Israeli military has long been a source of anger and disgrace. This military tradition began during the country's earliest days when its citizens repelled Arab invasions during its war for independence in 1948.

Whether out of ignorance or for political gain, bin Laden had a pattern of misquoting or simply misunderstanding historical interpretation. On countless occasions, he blamed the United States as being the genesis behind the state of Israel. While Washington has been close with Tel Aviv in recent decades, the al-Qaeda leader often attributed too much credit to American contributions during Israel's early years. For example, bin Laden seemed unaware or unwilling to accept that the Soviet Union worked behind the scenes at the United Nations in 1948 to acquire a majority vote and grant de jure recognition, while the more cautious President Truman provided only partial de facto recognition of Israeli statehood.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the United States carefully maintained a partial arms embargo on the new state, while the U.S.S.R. by contrast immediately began arming and supplying Israel through Czechoslovakia. By the mid-1950s, Moscow had tired of courting Israel and modified its Middle East policy by focusing on Arab capitals. When Israel began relying on the North American superpower for patronage, the U.S.S.R. sought another partner in the region and discovered a willing player in Egypt.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 95.

¹⁶⁹ Peter Zwick, *Soviet Foreign Relations: Process and Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 318.

During the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, Israel dealt its Arab neighbors one of the most lopsided military defeats in history.¹⁷⁰ This humiliating loss occurred despite an overwhelming statistical superiority for the Muslim coalition which possessed 2,700 tanks, 800 combat aircraft, and 217 ships versus Israel's modest 800 tanks, 190 planes, and 37 ships.¹⁷¹ The outnumbered and outgunned Israelis overcame their apparent inferiority on paper through a devastating surprise attack that crippled their enemy's air capabilities. During less than a week of fighting, the Israeli force inflicted a twenty-five to one casualty rate, captured thousands of prisoners of war, and grabbed 42,000 square miles of new territory.¹⁷² Israel expanded its total land area by three times after occupying the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.¹⁷³ The speed, efficiency, and lethality of the war left an indelible mark on the psyche of the region. Egypt was a prime example of this. President Gamal Abd al-Nasser was supposed to have been the white knight for the region, and pan-Arabism was going to be the sword he would use to vanquish the problems plaguing the Middle East. However, the war with Israel deflated Nasser, and Egypt lost 85% of its total military hardware worth \$2 billion.¹⁷⁴ The preemptive attack by the Israeli military combined with the poor performance by its rivals escalated regional hatred to a new level.

In 1973, the continuous state of war with Israel led to a new Arab alliance spearheaded by Egypt and Syria. These nations sought revenge for the 1967 war, and each nation hoped to

¹⁷⁰ The 1967 Arab-Israeli War is also known as the Six Days War and the June War. The majority of the Arab alliance was comprised of forces from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Other Arab countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia also contributed military personnel to fight against Israel.

¹⁷¹ Goldschmidt and Davidson, 332.

¹⁷² Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2003), 305, 307.

¹⁷³ Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 274.

¹⁷⁴ Oren, *Six Days of War*, 305.

reclaim their lost territory.¹⁷⁵ Mimicking the Israeli strategy from the previous war, Egypt preemptively attacked Israel during the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. This surprise invasion managed some early successes, but a series of counter-offensives by the Israeli Defense Force turned the tide. Even though statistical analysis reinforced Israel as the victor, both sides claimed publicly to have possessed the upper hand at the conclusion of the war. Yet, there was little doubt that had the U.S. and U.S.S.R. not stopped the war, the encircled Egyptian army would have been completely annihilated. Suffering the brunt of the conflict, Egypt and Syria lost 2,000 tanks, 450 aircraft, and 11,200 soldiers compared to Israeli losses of 800 tanks, 100 aircraft, and 2,500 fatalities.¹⁷⁶ Some Muslims felt vindicated by the war, but the fact remained that the anti-Israeli alliance had failed to reclaim most of the lands lost to Israel during the 1967 war.

The Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973 affected Osama bin Laden, who would have been an impressionable adolescent at the time of these conflicts. During an interview in November 1996, bin Laden recognized 1973 as the beginning of his calling to protect Islam.¹⁷⁷ In another interview with al-Jazeera's Taysir Alluni from October 2001, bin Laden blamed the Israeli success during the 1973 war on President Nixon's resupply of Tel Aviv.¹⁷⁸ From this perspective, the United States was indirectly responsible for defeating the Muslim coalition, a disturbing narrative which was widely accepted on the streets of Saudi Arabia. As a teenager during the 1973 war, bin Laden would have been influenced by this anti-American sentiment.

¹⁷⁵ The 1973 Arab-Israeli War is also known as the October War, the Yom Kippur War, and the Ramadan War.

¹⁷⁶ Cleveland, 376.

¹⁷⁷ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 31-32.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 126.

The Palestinian Question

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the Middle East was divided between European powers, and the region known as Palestine was placed under Great Britain's protection. Conflict arose between the Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of Palestine, and the area eventually erupted in civil strife. Unwilling to support either side during the struggle, London withdrew the last British soldiers on June 30, 1948.¹⁷⁹ In the aftermath of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust, many western countries were sympathetic to the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. Since that time, the region has seen frequent bloodshed. The Palestinians who refused to relocate after the creation of the state of Israel were discriminated against by the new government. Through its conquest during the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the number of Palestinians living inside Israeli borders expanded once Tel Aviv took control of formerly Muslim lands. By the end of the war in June 1967, 1.2 million Palestinians lived inside Israeli borders while the Jewish population stood at less than three million.¹⁸⁰

Like many in the Arab world, Osama bin Laden believed that Palestine must be liberated from Jewish control. In what is assumed to be his first public speech against the United States, bin Laden spoke out in a Saudi mosque in 1990 blaming America for bringing millions of Jewish immigrants from Russia to Israel.¹⁸¹ Bin Laden often misrepresented historical events, and his discussion of the emigration process did not happen in the manner he described. A careful examination of bin Laden's animosity towards the Palestine dilemma indicates that his abhorrence of Israel deepened in his later years.

¹⁷⁹ Yapp, 137.

¹⁸⁰ Oren, *Six Days of War*, 307.

¹⁸¹ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 110.

The Secret Jewish Empire

Osama bin Laden grew up during a time when Muslim countries had lost multiple wars with Israel. During his collegiate experience at King Abdul Aziz University, he would have been exposed to the anti-Jewish rhetoric of his Palestinian idol, Abdullah Azzam. The fundamentalist writings of Sayyid Qutb would have reinforced this attitude. This hatred towards the state of Israel was also espoused by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had spoken out against the Jewish state for decades. Like many in the Middle East, Zawahiri viewed Israel, America, and the West as a unified imperial partnership conspiring against Islam and Muslim-led nations. For example, the Egyptian doctor once stated, “In addition, we must acknowledge that the west, led by the United States, which is under the influence of the Jews, does not know the language of ethics, morality, and legitimate rights.”¹⁸²

Like Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden also spoke about a secret Zionist movement allegedly bent on control of the Middle East. The Saudi suspected the endgame was the extermination of Islam, and he felt the United States operated as Tel Aviv’s puppet. In 1998, bin Laden stated, “Since the time that Iraq became a force to be reckoned with in the region, becoming the greatest Arab power to threaten Jewish and Israeli security, America has been digging up issues...It is clear today that any attack on any Islamic country is initiated by the true aggressor: Israel...The Jews have succeeded in obligating American and British Christians to strike Iraq.”¹⁸³ In this statement, bin Laden blamed the 1991 American intervention against Iraq as a plot to ensure Israel remained the regional hegemony. Ignoring historical facts once again, the Saudi failed to acknowledge that the Reagan Administration had supported Saddam Hussein’s military during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

¹⁸² Al-Zawahiri and Mansfield, 199.

¹⁸³ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 275.

One of the more popular conspiracy theories in the Middle East that has endured over time is that the American press is controlled by Israel. During numerous interviews, bin Laden declared that Jewish lobbyists had covertly infiltrated all areas of the United States, manipulating the government and media to advance Jewish interests. In a 2001 al-Qaeda recruiting video, bin Laden contested, “We speak of the American government, but it is in reality an Israeli government, because if we look into the most sensitive departments of the government, whether it is the Pentagon or the State Department or the CIA, you find that it is the Jews who have the first word inside the American government. Consequently, they use America to execute their plans throughout the world.”¹⁸⁴ It can be argued that the Jewish-American lobbies have been effective in shaping U.S. foreign policies in the Middle East to some degree. The 6.4 million American Jews have produced a stronger lobby than the 3.5 million Arab-Americans, and this is a strong reason that Washington’s aid to Israel remains extraordinary by every measure.¹⁸⁵ This imbalance has contributed to the well-accepted conspiracy theories embraced by the Arab world.

The United States has traditionally been inflexible on its policies concerning the acquisition of nuclear weapons, but there were several shades of grey after Israel became the first nuclear power in the Middle East. Osama bin Laden railed against the perceived hypocrisy behind the U.S. policy against Muslim nations acquiring nuclear weapons while acquiescing to Israel’s nuclear armament. Bin Laden’s views often isolated him as a political untouchable, but his intransigent stance against Israel’s nuclear armament would have been applauded by individuals and governments alike throughout the region. But unlike governments which seek state control of nuclear weapons, bin Laden believed a non-state actor should also strive to obtain

¹⁸⁴ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 291.

¹⁸⁵ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 217.

the bomb in order to protect Islam. In 1998, he stated, “I would say that acquiring (CBRN)¹⁸⁶ weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. To seek to possess the weapons that could counter those of the infidels is a religious duty...It would be a sin for Muslims not to try to possess the weapons that would prevent the infidels from inflicting harm on Muslims. But how we would use these weapons if we possess them is up to us.”¹⁸⁷

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about the end of the Cold War, but it caused an escalation of black market arms sales which leaked out of the former U.S.S.R. Bin Laden had aspirations to acquire a nuclear weapon, but one of al-Qaeda’s earliest attempts failed miserably. In late 1993 or early 1994, al-Qaeda operatives purchased a cylinder of what they believed was uranium for \$1.5 million.¹⁸⁸ Much to the chagrin of buyers, the container was filled instead with red mercury.

Al-Qaeda’s purchase of fake nuclear material was a lucky break for Israel and the West. While many governments desire a nuclear weapon as a deterrent to aggressive neighbors, bin Laden had no interest in the bomb for defensive purposes. If bin Laden had been able to acquire a weapon from the black market, he would have attempted to use the nuclear device for a terrorist attack that could well have reached unprecedented levels of destruction.

Al-Qaeda and Israel

Bin Laden realized that his fundamentalist movement required support from the Muslim world to supply recruits, organizational support, and financial capital. Even though al-Qaeda was not planning large-scale missions against Israel, he used the anti-Israeli sentiment to ensure his group remained relevant. For many in the Middle East, Israel provided a reason to join the

¹⁸⁶ CBRN stands for Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear.

¹⁸⁷ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, 72.

¹⁸⁸ Soufan, 42-45.

fight or donate to the cause. An experienced recruiter, bin Laden would touch on shared Arab grievances, even though he was focused primarily on the war against the United States. Al-Qaeda would attempt to win over the hearts and minds with graphic statements such as,

Come let me tell you what is meant by “Greater Israel” and what disasters beset the region. What is happening to our people in Palestine is merely a model that the Zionist-American alliance wishes to impose upon the rest of the region: the killing of men, women and children, prisons, terrorism, the demolition of homes, the razing of farms, the destruction of factories. People live in perpetual fear and paralyzing terror, awaiting death at any moment from a missile or shell that will destroy their homes, kill their sisters, and bury their babies alive.¹⁸⁹

Al-Qaeda ranks have only been enlarged by maintaining a strong and vocal stance against Israel, as many Muslims in the Middle East are indoctrinated from the family kitchen table. Although he often alluded to Israel in his rhetoric, the existence of the state of Israel was never an initial object of bin Laden’s wrath. The Saudi merely wanted to hijack traditional Arab grievances to gain financial assistance and recruit followers from the Islamic base. In the case of Israel, bin Laden’s words spoke louder than his actions. There was no denying that he had a deep-seated hatred for the Jews, but he never organized any major al-Qaeda attacks against the state of Israel. In the decade before 9/11, his focus was almost exclusively on the United States.

Although bin Laden would have proudly gone to war with Israel, he came to the conclusion that the only way to ultimately defeat Israel was by first defeating its primary supporter, the United States. His son Omar remembers his father’s plan focused on initially weakening America economically, so that Washington could no longer afford to continue supplying Tel Aviv with weapons.¹⁹⁰ Bin Laden would continue to loudly inveigh against Israel

¹⁸⁹ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 277.

¹⁹⁰ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 177.

as a way to market his organization, but the al-Qaeda leader was first and foremost focused on fighting Washington.

Conclusion

The U.S. and the West have often failed to fully appreciate the effects of their policies regarding Israel on greater Middle East relations. Creating a regional superpower by providing Israel with advanced weaponry and permitting it to attain nuclear weapons has only fed Arab fears and conspiracy theories about the Jewish-American plans to take over the Middle East. This narrative clearly left a mark on the bin Laden family which, like many Muslims, resented all U.S. foreign policy supporting Israel.

Osama's father, Mohammad, was remembered as a great national hero and Arab patriot in Saudi Arabia. Like many in the Muslim world, Osama was taught directly from his dad and certainly through his father's example, to loathe his Jewish neighbors. The Arab-Israeli wars occurred at an influential period in bin Laden's life, and he was raised during a time when many people in the Middle East held anti-American views. Attending the conservative Islamic and pro-Arab King Abdul Aziz University and spending time with Abdullah Azzam would have only deepened these anti-Jewish feelings. In turn, bin Laden used the Israeli conflict as a motivational tool to solicit donations and increase recruiting for al-Qaeda. Bin Laden hoped to one day take his war to Israel, but that war had to wait until he had first removed the United States from the Middle East.

When the forces of the aggressive Crusader-Jewish alliance decided during the Gulf War – in connivance with the regime – to occupy the country in the name of liberating Kuwait, you justified this with an arbitrary juridical decree excusing this terrible act, which insulted the pride of our umma and sullied its honor, as well as polluting its holy places.¹⁹¹

-Osama bin Laden, “The Betrayal of Palestine” from December 1994

And here is his son King Fahd, trying to fool Muslims with the second trick in order to squander our remaining holy sites. He lied to the ulema who sanctioned the Americans’ entry and he lied to the Islamic world’s ulema and leaders at the [World Muslim] League’s conference in holy Mecca in the wake of the Islamic world’s condemnation of the crusader forces’ entry into the land of the two holy mosques on the pretext of defending it. He told them that the matter was simple and that the U.S. and coalition troops would leave in a few months. And here we are approaching the seventh year since their arrival and the regime is still unable to move them out.¹⁹²

-Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans” from August 1996

The Second Superpower Invasion: Removing the US from the Middle East

On August 2, 1990, the armed forces of Iraq prompted an international crisis by invading their relatively defenseless neighbor, Kuwait. When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein refused to retreat from the oil-rich nation, the United States led an international coalition comprised of more than 600,000 soldiers from fifty-four countries to expel the aggressor state.¹⁹³ Prior to the arrival of Western troops into Islam’s holiest land, the principles of Osama bin Laden were already well established. Yet, the events surrounding the use of American military personnel and the continued presence of its soldiers in Saudi Arabia after the liberation of Kuwait solidified his

¹⁹¹ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 7.

¹⁹² Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, 127.

¹⁹³ Peter Mansfield, 336.

ideology and extinguished any hope of rectifying bin Laden's rocky relationship with the House of Saud.

Iraq, Iran, and Kuwait

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait occurred at a time when America was only beginning to transition away from Cold War politics, and the global community was still adjusting to the recent demise of the Soviet Union. After having been locked in a struggle for much of the second half of the twentieth century, the United States had entered a new era of supremacy by outlasting their Soviet counterpart. This unofficial title as the sole remaining superpower allowed the White House to make diplomatic and military decisions without constantly weighing Russian repercussion. During the 1980s, American foreign policy focused on staying in the shadows during the conflicts in the Middle East. When the United States did attempt to influence politics in the region, Washington generally acted through regional proxies like Israel so that Moscow would have no excuse for entering the petroleum-rich lands.

During his first term, President Ronald Reagan soured on direct intervention in the Middle East after two-hundred and forty-one Marines on a peace-keeping mission were killed in Beirut, Lebanon by a truck bomb in 1983. The barrack bombing caused the President to abandon the humanitarian effort in Lebanon, and he refused to introduce new forces into the conflict. The Reagan team continued to monitor the region through its second term, but the administration was reluctant to put American boots on the ground.

In January 1989, the George H.W. Bush administration assumed power and began instituting a new course for the Middle East. After losing its long-time ally Iran following the 1979 revolution, the White House decided to strengthen ties with Iraq, a country that had already been receiving American military assistance for much of the 1980s. Less than a year into the

presidency, the Bush administration issued National Security Directive 26 in October 1989 which offered “economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior” and hoped “to increase our (American) influence with Iraq.”¹⁹⁴ The Bush White House soon found out how difficult influencing policy in the Middle East can be.

Iraq’s quest for Kuwait did not begin in 1990. Like most international conflicts, the quarrel had deep roots. The two Arab nations had a checkered past stemming from Kuwait’s earliest days as an independent state. Beginning in the early 1950s, Iraqi officials argued that because Kuwait had traditionally been part of Iraq, the tiny state should be returned to Baghdad’s control. Decades later, Saddam Hussein used this grievance to legitimize his invasion of Kuwait. Following a feeble request to Great Britain that Kuwait be re-incorporated in 1954, Iraqi leadership attempted to block statehood for its wealthy neighbor in 1961 and only renounced its claim in exchange for an interest free loan of \$80 million dollars to be repaid over the next twenty-five years.¹⁹⁵ Seven years after the effort to prevent Kuwait from self-government, Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq in a 1968 coup led by the Bathist Party, a group with roots in the Pan-Arab movement.¹⁹⁶ Hussein essentially ruled the country from the number two position behind President al-Bakr until he officially took power in 1979.

On the heels of the bitter Iran-Iraq War, President Saddam Hussein laden by an enormous war debt upset the balance of power in the Gulf region with his sweep into Kuwait.¹⁹⁷ A decade before inciting the international incident in Kuwait, Hussein feared the effects the Iranian

¹⁹⁴ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90.

¹⁹⁵ Liesl Graz, *The Turbulent Gulf: People, Politics and Power* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1992), 95-96.

¹⁹⁶ Gause, 20.

¹⁹⁷ The bloody Iran-Iraq War began with Iraqi aggression on September 17, 1980 and lasted until both sides were utterly exhausted in 1988. The conflict ultimately ended with United Nations Security Council Resolution 598.

revolution of 1979 might have on the Iraqi Shiite population. Rather than wait, he attacked the source. Hussein's belief that a war with Iraq's historic enemy could be quick, decisive, and prosperous was partially influenced by poor intelligence he received from former Iranian military officers and government officials who had fled upon the fall of the Shah.¹⁹⁸ The Iraqi leader acted under the assumption that Iran was in a weakened state from the revolution and could quickly be subdued. He also had territorial objectives. On September 22, 1980, Iraqi air and ground forces attacked southwest Iran to capture strategic points at the head of the Persian Gulf and to strike a blow against the newly-formed revolutionary government.¹⁹⁹ However, external threats tend to unite populations while strengthening nationalism, and the subsequent invasion unified a heretofore divided Iran, thus strengthening the revolution Saddam Hussein had hoped to unravel.

Policymakers in Washington were also concerned about the spread of Iran's Islamic revolution in the Middle East. Angered by Iran's taking of American hostages from the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, the United States entered into an alliance with the Iraqi strongman. The U.S. removed Iraq from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and provided hundreds of millions of dollars of American grain subsidies. In addition, the Reagan administration provided satellite intelligence and allowed the purchase of illegal weapons, such as centrifuges capable of enriching uranium and chemical mixtures used in making bombs, by the Iraqi military.²⁰⁰

Ironically, Kuwait had provided Iraq with billions of dollars of aid during the bloody eight-year Iraq-Iran stalemate, a debt Saddam Hussein had no intention of repaying. For the

¹⁹⁸ Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 183.

¹⁹⁹ Stephen Bourque, *Jayhawk! The VII Corps in the Persian Gulf War* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2002), 20.

²⁰⁰ U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Random House, 1992), 13-14.

Iraqi dictator, the conclusion of his war with Iran brought devastating results. Baghdad's attempt at stopping the Iranian revolution had failed miserably, Iraq's economy was exhausted, and its people were emotionally drained from nearly a decade of war. Hussein's lone bright spot revolved around his continued control over the country's military and police forces, which enforced domestic obedience at gunpoint. Still, Hussein needed economic relief for his country, and he needed it quickly.

A few weeks before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein's foreign minister Tariq Aziz declared in a letter on July 16th to the Arab League that Kuwait's refusal to settle border disputes or cancel Iraq's \$80 billion debt along with its continued production of oil above OPEC quotas were the equivalent of military aggression.²⁰¹ Foreign Minister Aziz's letter was not designed to open a dialogue with the Kuwaiti government, as the invasion was already a foregone conclusion. Under the additional pretense that Kuwait had been "artificially" removed from Iraq by Great Britain nearly half a century earlier, Saddam Hussein decided to reclaim "Iraq's 19th province" through force.²⁰²

As forty-two Iraqi divisions mounted on the Iraq-Kuwait border, the House of Saud hosted discussions between the Crown prince of Kuwait and Saddam Hussein's representatives in a final attempt to avert war but the talks proved fruitless.²⁰³ The conference was held in Jeddah, the Saudi city in which Osama bin Laden spent much of his life. The negotiations were destined to fail because the Iraqi leader had instructed his delegates to deliver their message and

²⁰¹ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 14.

²⁰² Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 563.

²⁰³ Al-Zawahiri and Mansfield, 335, 338.

immediately walk away from the table.²⁰⁴ Once the doomed negotiations had ended, Iraqi ground forces moved into attack formations and quickly overwhelmed the less-than-formidable Kuwaiti military. Led by the battle-tested Tawakalna Mechanized Division as well as the Hammurabi and Medina Armored Divisions, the Iraqi force besieged the overmatched Kuwaiti defense force. Publicly, Hussein continued to justify the hostile incursion as his national duty to repatriate Iraq's 19th province, but the reality was that oil-rich Kuwait was an appealing revenue source in the wake of a trillion-dollar war debt accrued during the years of fighting Iran. Baghdad was additionally enticed by the estimated \$95 billion which Kuwait's banks were reported to possess.²⁰⁵

For Osama bin Laden, history was repeating itself. Fresh off his struggle against the Soviet Union, the Saudi witnessed another Muslim country being overrun by what he considered an apostate neighbor. Bin Laden had publicly accused Saddam Hussein of being hungry for land in the Gulf, and he had gone so far as to pen a letter of concern to the Saudi Deputy Minister of the Interior predicting the Kuwaiti invasion.²⁰⁶ From bin Laden's point of view, Saddam Hussein's land-grabbing presented a new emergency that required his combat-ready mujahedeen to face another invader of Muslim lands, this time against a leader he considered an apostate. Bin Laden envisioned himself reprising his savior-like role that he had cultivated helping liberate Afghanistan in the 1980s. The fact that the new conflict appeared to be spilling over into his native Saudi Arabia only made the war in Kuwait more personal for the self-styled Afghan hero.

Even though Saddam Hussein had already preemptively invaded neighboring Iran and had been brazenly bullying Kuwait, the international community seemed bewildered when Iraq

²⁰⁴ *U.S. News and World Report*, 25-26.

²⁰⁵ Graz, 101.

²⁰⁶ Atwan, 45.

initiated a second invasion. The Bush White House, which at the time leading up to the invasion had been working through economic and diplomatic channels to improve relations with Iraq, had misinterpreted the intelligence reports concerning the probability of an attack and was initially caught off guard by the fighting in the Persian Gulf.²⁰⁷ This misjudgment was in no small part because of inaccurate data from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defense (DOD). The Department of State also failed to fully grasp the situation, and the Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, had been personally reassured by the Iraqi President that hostilities against Kuwait were highly unlikely.

The Americans were not the only ones stunned by the invasion. In January 1989, General Norman Schwarzkopf visited King Hussein of Jordan and was informed that Egypt, Jordan, and the other members of the Arab alliance would keep Saddam Hussein from returning to his belligerent ways. King Hussein attempted to calm his American guest by saying, “Don’t worry about the Iraqis. They are war weary and have no aggressive intentions towards their Arab brothers.”²⁰⁸ Until the actual invasion, other Middle East leaders also erroneously believed they could control Hussein and prevent war by personally appealing to Baghdad. On the eve of invasion, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak flew to the Iraqi capital to meet one-on-one with Saddam Hussein with the goal of maintaining regional peace. Mubarak left Baghdad convinced that Hussein was bluffing, and the Egyptian President flew directly to Kuwait to reassure the Sabah family that negotiations were progressing favorably.²⁰⁹

Like President Mubarak, the House of Saud also mistakenly believed the clouds of war would simply blow over. Optimistic that Arab diplomats could solve Arab problems, King Fahd

²⁰⁷ Gordon and Trainor, 5-6, 9.

²⁰⁸ Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 322.

²⁰⁹ The House of Sabah has ruled Kuwait since the early eighteenth century.

declined an offer from Washington on August 2nd to have American F-15s deploy immediately to the Kingdom.²¹⁰ Facing a well-equipped but limited Saudi defensive force, the experienced Iraqi military could have easily continued its land-grab by simply heading south across the vulnerable Kuwaiti-Saudi border. Despite Saudi Arabia's \$300 billion military expenditures from 1965-1990, there is little doubt that Iraqi troops could have driven deep into the heart of the Kingdom.²¹¹ With the Kuwaiti oil production now in Iraqi hands, the petroleum dependent United States had a mutual interest in preventing the giant Ghawar and Shaybah oil fields in Saudi Arabia from falling under Baghdad's control.

Looking at the situation from a Saudi point of view, conventional wisdom might suggest the best approach for dealing with a hostile Iraq would have been to call for military reinforcements. That is not what happened. Deeply concerned over Saddam Hussein's ability to corner the global petroleum market with an invasion of Saudi Arabia, the United States government set out to persuade the House of Saud of their need for an American intervention. At a meeting in the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell gave a presentation featuring satellite imagery of the Iraq invasion force to the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Although his King remained hesitant to invite Westerners to assist them, Bandar became convinced upon viewing the American reconnaissance photographs that the "Iraq problem" was not going to dissipate. The Bush administration had accomplished its first goal of shocking Prince Bandar with irrefutable evidence, but another delegation was still needed to convince the Saudi king to accept US assistance. This would not be an easy sell.

²¹⁰ Gause, 104.

²¹¹ Pollack, 432.

On August 6th, Cheney, Powell, Schwarzkopf, and other American representatives convened in Jeddah to provide a series of short presentations to King Fahd and his entourage of Saudi princes to persuade them of the likelihood of an Iraqi incursion into the Kingdom.²¹² According to Richard Clarke, who was part of the American delegation, the other Saudi princes were not as convinced as Bandar about the need to open their country to foreign defenders. These dissenting princes voiced concerns that non-Muslims on Saudi soil violated the Koran, and they argued that the Americans would never leave the land of Mohammad once invited in. After a heated debate in Arabic in front of their American guests, Bandar, along with the persuasive pictures from American satellites, finally convinced the King to accept help. In a move which would alter Middle Eastern politics and infuriate hardline fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden, King Fahd invited the United States Armed Forces into the land of the Prophet Mohammad. He even offered to finance the cost of the expeditionary force.²¹³

Before the House of Saud granted final approval for the arrival of foreign troops, Secretary of Defense Cheney assured the Saudis that American forces would not stay one minute longer than they were needed to resolve the conflict.²¹⁴ This promise was never kept. However, the American pledge to provide an immediate combat force was delivered with the speed and precision of a professional military which had been long prepared to fight Cold War rivals. The Americans were capable of generating considerably more combat power than Saddam Hussein's forces, but the Pentagon first needed to deliver its troops to the field. Three days after the King agreed to American assistance, U.S. Air Force F-15C fighters were buzzing the Saudi-Kuwaiti border and the 82nd Airborne Division began arriving on Saudi soil. These fast-moving

²¹² Gordon and Trainor, 51-52.

²¹³ Cooley, 207.

²¹⁴ *U.S. News and World Report*, 85.

American forces, which were later joined by coalition soldiers from Morocco, Egypt, and other Muslim states, marked the beginning of a multi-national, defensive operation known as Operation Desert Shield.

Even with the remarkable tempo the American force demonstrated in establishing a military front, Saudi Arabia was hardly safe from Iraqi aggression in the early days of the build-up. Aware of how easily the Iraqi armor could have rolled over their defensive perimeters, members of the 82nd Airborne at Dharaan cleverly nicknamed themselves the “Iraqi speed bumps.”²¹⁵ Had Saddam Hussein decided to push into Saudi Arabia before the American troops were in place, the Iraqi force probably would have overwhelmed the Saudis, thereby coercing the coalition into a cataclysmic Plan B. By the time the 24th Infantry Division arrived, a heavy mechanized division, the United States had sufficient combat power to repel an Iraqi thrust. When the American armor was finally in place, the looming threat was reduced considerably. The decision of whether to advance or hold has led to the undoing of kings and generals since the beginning of warfare, and Saddam Hussein’s misjudgment to allow the United States to gain a foothold in Saudi Arabia eventually proved disastrous for him. By October 1990, President George H.W. Bush and his advisors doubled the number of American troops to 500,000 as it became apparent that an offensive force would be necessary to dislodge the Iraqis from Kuwait.²¹⁶ Hopeful that the end of the standoff would lead to a quick exit of all non-Muslim soldiers, the House of Saud was relieved to hear plans of an offensive into Kuwait codenamed Operation Desert Storm.

For the most part, the United States forces strived to leave as small an imprint on Saudi soil as possible out of respect for their Saudi hosts. General Norman Schwarzkopf, who had

²¹⁵ Schwarzkopf, 359.

²¹⁶ Gause, 108.

learned the importance of respecting national customs and sensibilities during his tenure in Vietnam, outlawed the importation of alcohol and pornography by his soldiers. But given the sheer size of the expedition and their mission of protecting a massive border, it was impossible to avoid leaving an American footprint in the Saudi sand. Indeed, the mere presence of the Americans angered many Muslims who were offended that non-Muslims were living in proximity of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Another factor adding to the sensitive political atmosphere was the inability to judge the actions of America's closest ally in the region, Israel. Washington requested on numerous occasions that Tel Aviv stay out of the alliance in order to appease the Muslim members of the coalition. In hopes of splintering the alliance, Saddam Hussein ordered SCUD missiles be fired at Israeli cities from mobile launching units in the desert of Western Iraq. Desperate to keep Israel from entering the conflict, the United States sent Patriot missiles intended to shoot down the SCUDs and ordered Special Forces to hunt down the "shoot and scoot" Iraqi vehicles.

While the United States was successful in preventing Israel from entering the war, the build-up of forces consisting of foreigners, non-Muslims, and women soldiers was humiliating to the Saudi-born bin Laden. With dreams of an all-Islamic army to vanquish Iraq, bin Laden emphatically argued, "You don't need Americans. You don't need any other non-Muslim troops. We will be enough. And I will even convince the Afghanis to come and join us instead of the Americans."²¹⁷ Statements like these demonstrated that bin Laden was overconfident, if not delusional, in his personal contribution to the cause and the inflated role of his Arab fighters in ending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. He believed that his small contingent of mujahedeen could once again prevail in repelling an aggressive invasion of Muslim lands.

²¹⁷ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 124.

Hardly a military tactician, bin Laden seemed oblivious to the fact that the mountains and caves of Afghanistan were much better suited for guerilla warfare than the open desert, and he overlooked the fact that his force did not possess any tanks, heavy-fighting vehicles, or air cover. Bin Laden's apocryphal plan would have almost certainly have been decimated by the thirty-five Iraqi divisions and half-a-million troops.

Bin Laden's Prediction

Bin Laden's attitude toward Saddam Hussein was also shaped during this period. Bin Laden advocated that Muslims should be governed by leaders who enforced Shariah law, hardly the aspiration of Hussein's Bathist party. Rather than unifying the Islamic world, Iraq fomented trouble against other Muslim countries. These were unforgivable offenses for bin Laden. In 2002, George W. Bush's administration began claiming that bin Laden had colluded with Saddam Hussein in planning the September 11th attacks. The fact was the al-Qaeda leader despised Hussein, whom he considered an apostate akin to an infidel, and he never would have allied with the Iraqi President to carry out his vendetta against the United States.

Once an Iraqi invasion into the Kingdom seemed a possibility, bin Laden desperately wanted the chance to defend his native soil. Having fought for Islam for much of his adult life, bin Laden felt that although he had fulfilled his personal duty to jihad in Afghanistan, the situation in Kuwait presented a new outlet for his fervor. One can imagine how personal the imminent invasion of his native country was for bin Laden, particularly since he had warned of the dangers posed by Iraq before the Kuwaiti affair. "I said many times in my speeches at the mosques, warning that Saddam will enter the Gulf," said the Saudi dissident. "No one believed me."²¹⁸ He immediately began campaigning for his cause.

²¹⁸ Wright, 176-177.

Bin Laden wrote a letter to King Fahd offering the assistance of the Arab Afghan mujahedeen to defend the Kingdom should the Iraqi force decide to head south. When his offer was rebuffed, he used his famous last name and status as a recent Afghan war hero to meet with any Saudi official who would listen. Bin Laden approached the Minister of the Interior and the King's full brother, Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, to gain royal permission from the House of Saud to begin mustering his freedom fighters.²¹⁹ His offers of assistance were never accepted.

Exasperated that the Saudi monarchy refused his offer in lieu of a coalition force led by the West, bin Laden never forgave the House of Saud for allowing a Christian army into the land of the Prophet. Moreover, this anger only smoldered as coalition forces, which included Jewish-American and women soldiers, remained embedded in Saudi Arabia after the conclusion of hostilities. Of the 540,000 US troops involved in the conflict, nearly 20,000 remained in the Kingdom after the liberation of Kuwait.²²⁰

The Americans Stay

There is a Muslim belief stemming from the time of the Prophet Mohammad that no two religions shall ever share the land of the Two Holy Mosques.²²¹ According to the hadith, this was one of the last statements that the Prophet apparently made on his deathbed. The Two Holy Mosques to which he refers are the holiest sites in Islam, which are located in the cities of Mecca and Medina. This belief has been interpreted differently by Islamic scholars throughout history and has caused much uncertainty over the issue of non-Muslims in Saudi Arabia. The Prophet's statements are even more confusing because there were Jews and Christians living throughout

²¹⁹ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 82.

²²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 133.

²²¹ As explained by Raymond Ibrahim on page 292 in *The Al Qaeda Reader*, "This injunction is based on an authoritative hadith (found in both Bukhari and Muslim), where Mohammad said: 'There shall not be two religions together in the Arabian Peninsula.'"

the region during Mohammad's lifetime, and he spoke often and clearly about treating the followers of these monotheistic faiths with dignity and respect. Starting in 641, Caliph Umar began the slow process of cleansing Muslim soil of non-Muslims by removing Jews and Christians from the Hijaz, and this holy area of Saudi Arabia has in essence excluded non-Muslims ever since.²²² In contrast to the violent treatment that Jews and Muslims received at the hands of Christians in Europe, Umar's expulsion proceeded gradually over time and was relatively bloodless.

The debate over the legitimacy of the hadith became even more controversial in the days leading up to Operation Desert Shield. With a foreboding threat looming on the border, it became clear the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces could not impede Iraq on its own. And it was believed at the time that there was not another Middle Eastern military which was ready, willing, or capable of responding expeditiously to the conflict. From a military standpoint, the House of Saud needed the United States. From a religious-political standpoint, how could the "Protectors of Islam" invite an infidel army into the very place the Prophet had allegedly proclaimed off limits to non-Muslims? The answer lies in the complex relationship between the Saudi royal family and the religious establishment.

In a strange marriage, the House of Saud and the ulema have been tied together for better or for worse. The ulema initially refused to recognize the legitimacy of the American troops in Saudi Arabia, but subsequently released a tepid endorsement under pressure. On August 13, 1990, it stated, "The board of senior ulema has been aware of the great massing of troops on the Kingdom's border and of the aggression of Iraq on a neighboring country. . . . This has prompted

²²² Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, XXX, XXXI.

the rulers of the Kingdom...to ask Arab and non-Arab countries to deter the expected danger.”²²³

The statement admonished all Muslims “to take every means to deter aggression and the incursion of evil...So the board thus supports all measures taken by the ruler.”²²⁴ In order to address the growing animosity against the foreigners, the House of Saud hosted an international conference in Mecca a month later which additionally condoned the presence of the non-Muslim visitors.²²⁵

What Mohammad meant when he stated that no two religions should share the land of the Two Holy Mosques, or if the Prophet ever uttered this phrase, has been a point of great contention among Islamic scholars. It became a particularly precarious position for the House of Saud to adhere to in the second half of the twentieth century when the country relied on non-Muslims to develop its modern infrastructure. One example would be the handling of foreign military advisors. Although not highly publicized out of fear of public backlash, Saudi Arabia by the mid-1980s had approximately 30,000 Americans, 4,000-5,000 French, 2,000-3,000 British, and 10,000 Pakistanis supporting the Saudi military of 50,000 troops.²²⁶ For Osama bin Laden, however, the Prophet’s words were clear and uncompromising; under no circumstances whatsoever should non-Muslims be allowed in the Kingdom. He would later grumble, “Now, infidels walk everywhere on the land where Muhammad, God’s peace and blessing be upon him, was born, and where the Koran was revealed to him through Gabriel, peace be upon him. This happens while our scholars and Ulemas, who are the heirs to the prophets, are in jail...These Ulemas are jailed while infidels, be they Jews or Christians, are free to go wherever they want in

²²³ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 131.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

²²⁵ Graz, 153.

²²⁶ Pollack, 428.

these countries.”²²⁷ Looking to control bin Laden, the Saudi government stripped the former war hero of his passport, but he escaped to Sudan in 1991 with the help of a royal family member.²²⁸

Decrying the decision to allow American and other foreign troops into Saudi Arabia to fight Iraq, bin Laden began openly denouncing the House of Saud as corrupt and in violation of the way of the Prophet. Reaching new levels of unfettered defiance, he also excoriated the religious establishment by criticizing the ulema for colluding with the royal family. Bin Laden was hardly alone in his anger over the religious edict authorizing the foreign troops, and other fundamentalists also lobbied for change. When the House of Saud began cracking down on the segments of the population the government considered dangerous, bin Laden founded the Advice and Reform Committee (ARC) in 1994 in London as a dissident mouthpiece located safely outside the Kingdom.²²⁹

Having escaped to Khartoum, bin Laden remained irate that King Fahd had not kept his promise of removing coalition forces immediately after the defeat of the Iraqi military. Operation Desert Storm, which became an offensive out of Operation Desert Shield, successfully liberated Kuwait and destroyed significant portions of the Iraqi military and infrastructure. Even though Saddam Hussein and his Bathist party had exhausted their nation through almost a decade of fighting in Iran and Kuwait, the American-led alliance failed to remove the dictator and his repressive regime remained in power once Kuwait was liberated. Because the war was stopped too soon, Hussein retained considerable combat power which he used to quell U.S. encouraged internal rebellions by the Kurds and Shias.

²²⁷ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 51.

²²⁸ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 57.

²²⁹ United States v. bin Laden, 20-21.

Despite spending billions on defense, the House of Saud had always planned on protection from the West to maintain its security against any existential threats. King Abdul Aziz had brought in British and American military officers for training purposes and to develop a defensive strategy as early as the 1950s and 1960s.²³⁰ The royal family might have been comfortable with American boots on the ground before the tension with Iraq escalated, although it would have preferred that these troops remained in the shadows and out of the limelight. Politically, the House of Saud could not officially invite infidels into the land of the Prophet because of the potential backlash from its conservative, Wahhabi-educated populace. But after the Kuwaiti invasion, the monarchy had a legitimate reason to retain American forces in case Iraq renewed its hostilities. Plans for permanent military bases inside Saudi Arabia had been prepared even before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. There was no denying that Saudi Arabia and the United States have had a longstanding relationship of arms sales and treaties, or that ready supply of Saudi petroleum has been pivotal to the growth of the American and Western economies. With Iraqi tanks pointed at Riyadh, however, the House of Saud could no longer hide its strategy of relying on American military might.

In the wake of the Operation Desert Storm, the United States government was not in a political position to disengage from the Middle East. Within weeks of President George H.W. Bush's call for a cease-fire with Iraq's forces, Shiites living in southern Iraq and Kurds living in the northwest began rebelling against the remaining Bathist rule. Both of these groups had experienced Saddam Hussein's brutality since his rise to power. For the Kurds, the government repression of 1991 was an extension of a confrontation from 1987-1988 during which time

²³⁰ Pollack, 426.

100,000 Kurdish men, women, and children were the victims of systematic ethnic cleansing.²³¹ The Kurds and Iraqi Shiites had been led to believe that they would receive immediate military assistance from the United States after Operation Desert Storm, and these groups remained undeterred in their rebellions even though Saddam Hussein still possessed 300,000 troops, 2,000 tanks, and gunship helicopters at the conclusion of the war.²³² After a month and a half of observing Baghdad while its troops crushed these internal revolts, the United States and its allies finally instigated Operation Provide Comfort to prevent another Iraqi genocide.

To protect the Kurds from Baghdad's reach, the coalition established a no-fly zone in northern Iraq as part of Operation Provide Comfort. This operation eventually transformed into Operation Northern Watch as allied governments refused to leave Saddam Hussein to act without consequence. The Kurdish people were not the only ones in need of military defense. The Shiites, who were densely populated in the southern half of Iraq, found shelter under coalition protection as part of Operation Southern Watch. This was another humanitarian necessity, as Hussein is estimated to have killed over 300,000 Shiites during his quelling of the Shia rebellion in 1991.²³³ The Saudi government allowed more than 5,000 American Air Force personnel to remain in the Kingdom to enforce Operation Southern Watch.²³⁴ The war had opened gaping unresolved issues in the region, and the United States government kept forces in the Middle East to deploy rapidly should conflict erupt again.

Saddam Hussein's stubborn reluctance to adhere to post-war UN resolutions continued throughout the 1990s. The United Nations Security Council tried to force Hussein into

²³¹ Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell" America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 172.

²³² *Ibid.*, 237, 239.

²³³ Franks, *American Soldier*, 197.

²³⁴ Gause, 128.

compliance by imposing sanctions against Iraq for its refusal to eliminate its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Under orders from Baghdad, Iraqi officials were not to comply with UN inspectors through tactics such as faking official documents, claiming weapons had already been destroyed, or by refusing inspectors access to certain areas. Besides flouting the UN, Saddam Hussein began playing a dangerous game with the United States in which Iraq would provoke Washington to the brink of war before deescalating. Iraq once again threatened Kuwait by mobilizing forces on its border forcing the White House to consider undertaking another offensive ground war. Iraqi ground and air forces challenged the coalition no-fly zone on numerous occasions and were rebuffed through air and missile strikes. Tensions worsened when evidence suggested that Saddam Hussein was behind an assassination attempt on George H. W. Bush after the forty-first president had left office. The United States responded to this incident by blowing up Iraqi intelligence facilities with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Rather than marking an end to the American involvement in Iraq, Operation Desert Storm was simply another chapter. Saddam Hussein had proven through his war with Iran and invasion of Kuwait to be a disruptive force in the region, and the United States remained in Saudi Arabia to manage his unpredictability. For the United States, regional stability around the world's largest petroleum fields was the goal. Neither the Saudis nor Americans appeared to have an exit strategy for the U.S. Armed Forces to withdraw so long as Hussein remained in power in Baghdad.

Bin Laden, who was already demoralized by the House of Saud's decision to house American troops, was equally upset by Saddam Hussein's continued control of Iraq. He considered Hussein an apostate ruler, unworthy of leading Muslims. However, bin Laden's anger reached new levels when Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's promise to King Fahd to

remove all American troops at the conclusion of the war was never fulfilled. Bin Laden refused to accept this, and with delusions of grandeur, he decided it was his responsibility to drive the United States out of the Middle East.

Conclusion

Osama bin Laden's ideology can be traced to his younger days and was solidified, by his own admittance, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, the House of Saud's decision to invite the Christian-dominated nation of the United States to wage a war on behalf of Islam was deeply personal for bin Laden. The fact that the American military remained entrenched in the region only added fire to his already hostile stance towards the infidel occupiers. Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm created an untenable rift between bin Laden and the Saudi government, but he also discovered a new adversary from the war. Bin Laden concluded that the United States was an enemy of Islam.

Bin Laden believed at the most basic level that the current hegemony possessed by the West was coming to a close. More specifically, he asserted that America's status as the lone superpower was waning. Through the unorthodox trials and tribulations of his al-Qaeda followers, he maintained that Islam would once again be returned to glory. In a letter written by Hasan al-Banna in 1946, the leader of the Muslim Brothers had confidently proclaimed that one strong push by the defenders of the faith would topple the unjust, tyrannical, and weak West.²³⁵ These sentiments exemplified bin Laden's battle-cry against the United States. For the Saudi dissident, the final straw advocated by al-Banna was a tangible event. He would seek ways to bring down the first domino in America's ultimate demise. To initiate Washington's inevitable

²³⁵ Laqueur, *No End to War*, 32.

fall, bin Laden believed his fighters would need to start by striking at the perceived enforcer of its foreign policies - the United States armed forces.

Regarding the criticisms of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, the first one is their subordination to the US. So, our main problem is the US government while the Saudi regime is but a branch or agent of the US. By being loyal to the US regime, the Saudi regime has committed an act against Islam. And this, based on the ruling of Shari'a, casts the regime outside the religious community. Subsequently, the regime has stopped ruling people according to what God revealed, praise and glory be to Him, not to mention many other contradictory acts. When this main foundation was violated, other corrupt acts followed in every aspect of the country, the economic, the social, government services and so on.²³⁶

-Osama bin Laden from an interview with CNN

All the Arab presidents and kings betrayed the Muslim nation. It is better to seek out death, than to wait for it.²³⁷

-Osama bin Laden from a two-hour long al-Qaeda videotape

Eliminating the Apostate Governments: The House of Saud

Born into one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the Middle East, Osama bin Laden did not appear to fit the stereotypical profile of an international terrorist. Looking for financial resources or finding a job were never problems that he faced. While growing up, the boundaries of his homeland were never in jeopardy unlike those of the disaffected young men in the Palestinian territories. In contrast to some of the other countries in the region like Turkey which were led by overtly secular governments, the leadership in Saudi Arabia was always comprised entirely of Muslims. With the prominent Wahhabi influence, bin Laden, along with the rest of the Saudi population, was encouraged to practice a puritanical version of Islam. Why did this quiet and affluent Saudi turn against his own government?

²³⁶ Kepel and Milelli, 51.

²³⁷ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 291.

The Bin Ladens and the House of Saud

Like many Middle Eastern nations, Saudi Arabia was very much a twentieth century creation. The modern state was founded through a series of military conquests by King Abdul Aziz which culminated with the country's establishment in 1932. When the House of Saud took power at that time, the new ruling family was not concerned with creating the infrastructure required for advanced statehood. Moreover, King Abdul Aziz lacked the financial capabilities to create an educated middle class, build transportation systems, or influence the country's economic growth. The lack of a banking system was another factor which impeded modernization. During Saudi Arabia's early years, the national treasury was reportedly a series of chests which traveled alongside the King. These obstacles plagued Saudi Arabia until Abdul Aziz's death in 1953.²³⁸

Within Saudi Arabia's cultural traditions, personal relationships are essential. The bin Laden company never would have flourished without the blessing of the royal family. In Saudi Arabia, no government projects can be acquired without the approval of this elite group. After all, it was the close personal relationship between Mohammad, the Yemeni-born patriarch of the bin Laden family, and the first Saudi king that ensured the bin Laden family's rise to prominence. After King Abdul Aziz became confined to a wheelchair in his later years, the aging Saudi ruler commissioned Mohammad bin Laden to create a ramp for his car to be driven to his bedroom on the second floor of his palace. Impressed by the precision and innovation of

²³⁸ Since King Abdul Aziz's death, all of Saudi Arabia's subsequent leaders have been one of his sons. Following the abdication of Saud and the assassination of his predecessor Faisal, their younger half-brother, Khaled, assumed the throne in 1975. During the 1970s and 1980s, unprecedented amounts of petro-dollars flowed into the Gulf States allowing the relatively heretofore undeveloped nations to spend lavishly on modernizing the infrastructures of their countries. King Khaled, and his successor Fahd, were not shy about spending the oil revenue as though the country's black gold supply would never run out.

the final work, Abdul Aziz awarded the bin Laden construction company contracts throughout the Kingdom.

From this encounter with the monarch, Mohammad bin Laden was able to build a business empire based on the construction needs of King Abdul Aziz's son and heir, Saud, who launched a nation-wide development program to modernize the Kingdom.²³⁹ By building roads, airports, and renovating holy sites, the bin Laden company and family name became prominent throughout the Middle East. For over half a century, the bin Ladens became trusted contractors for the House of Saud, and this relationship matured over time becoming personal friends. According to Osama bin Laden, King Faisal, who replaced Saud, wept for many days following the death of bin Laden's father.²⁴⁰

Even after Mohammad's death in 1967, the new patriarch of the bin Laden family, Salem, continued to cultivate ties with the royal family. To ensure that this special relationship continued to flourish, Salem bin Laden assigned his brothers to solicit relationships with specific members of the House of Saud. The next generation of bin Ladens was keenly aware that their power within the Kingdom rested directly with the ruling family.

This symbiotic relationship remained exceptionally lucrative for the bin Laden clan, until Osama bin Laden's actions began jeopardizing its future. Even in his younger days, the pious bin Laden recognized that certain members of the House of Saud were not acting according to strict Wahhabi doctrine. With the steady rise of oil prices and the oil embargo of 1973, astronomical amounts of money began flowing into the Kingdom.²⁴¹ Rumors abounded that younger members of the royal family utilized the national treasury as a personal bank account.

²³⁹ Lacey, *The Kingdom*, 466.

²⁴⁰ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 9.

²⁴¹ The Oil Embargo of 1973, which was economic retaliation against the United States for its assistance to Israel in 1973, demonstrated to the world the real power of petroleum-rich nations.

Even more distressing for bin Laden, the petroleum revenue was allowing many royals to partake in sinful acts.²⁴² Bin Laden was contemptuous that the men who were supposed to be paragons of piety in leading the global Muslim family were acting in such an immoral fashion.

As the rulers over the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, the House of Saud was viewed by millions of Muslims as the protectors of the Prophet Mohammad's legacy. This was seen as a solemn and venerated responsibility. Bin Laden was disgusted by the depravity connected with certain individuals in the royal family, but he was also deeply angered by the House of Saud's lack of leadership in the Middle East and the global Islamic community. The al-Qaeda co-founder believed the Saudi government was allowing the worst of parts of Western culture to seep into his native country, and he felt the once devout Saudi population of his country was being exposed to materialism, secularism, and profanity.

Unable to contain his anger, bin Laden began speaking out publicly against the Saudi monarchy, an act that was rarely tolerated even if initiated by a prominent member of society. As previously discussed, one of bin Laden's original grievances with the House of Saud was its handling of the conflicts occurring inside Yemen. He opposed the position of the Saudi government as an unacceptable stance by the organization responsible for protecting Islam. In an open letter to King Fahd, bin Laden stated,

Hence, the recent events in Yemen that ripped the final mask with which you feigned to the people and led them astray. Your political and military support for the Yemeni Communists turned to be the mortal blow that broke your political backbone and the razor that shaved away your creditability on the Islamic front. The events in Yemen trapped you in a dilemma. It showed that your support for the Afghani mujahiddin was not for the sake of Islam but for the protection of western interests that were threatened by any Soviet gains in the battles there. Otherwise, the Afghani Communist Party is no different than its counterpart in Yemen. Likewise, the Yemeni Muslim is just the same as the Afghani Muslim. The dilemma is: How do you explain your support for Muslims

²⁴² For more details, see Robert Baer's *Sleeping with the Devil*.

against the communists in Afghanistan while championing the cause of the communists in Yemen against the Muslims?²⁴³

Although he enjoyed an elevated status as a war hero, bin Laden was treading on dangerous ground by openly criticizing his government, an action not taken lightly inside the Kingdom. To amplify his message to a wide audience, bin Laden recorded his speeches, which were then distributed through a variety of media. Here is a later example of his rhetoric condemning the House of Saud,

The Saudi regime has committed very serious acts of disobedience – worse than the sins and offenses that are contrary to Islam, worse than oppressing slaves, depriving them of their rights and insulting their dignity, intelligence, and feelings, worse than squandering the general wealth of the nation. Millions of people suffer every day from poverty and deprivation, while millions of riyals flow into the bank accounts of the royals who wield executive power. . . . It has gotten to the point where the regime has gone so far as to be clearly beyond the pale of Islam, allying itself with infidel America and aiding it against Muslims, and making itself an equal to God by legislating on what is or is not permissible without consulting God.²⁴⁴

Inflammatory public remarks got bin Laden quarantined by the government from 1989-1991, and Saudi security officials confiscated his passport in an attempt to prevent his communication with other likeminded groups.²⁴⁵ There was some irony in this punishment since bin Laden hardly needed to leave the Kingdom to associate with some of the world's most uncompromising Islamic fundamentalists.

Bin Laden's public dissidence caused grave concern within the House of Saud which worried that he might escalate his message into action. With this in mind, the authorities imprisoned a number of his personal employees, along with the one hundred former Afghan

²⁴³ Osama bin Laden, "Open Letter to King Fahd On the Occasion of the Recent Cabinet Reshuffle, July 11, 1995," AFGP-2002-000103-HT-NVTC, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, "Harmony Program" <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

²⁴⁴ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 247-248.

²⁴⁵ Cooley, 98-99.

fighters whom bin Laden had invited to live on his family farm.²⁴⁶ The incident enraged bin Laden. Well connected with the royals, he managed to negotiate the release of his workers, but bin Laden now understood that it was no longer safe for him to remain in the Kingdom. Under the guise of visiting an Islamic gathering in Pakistan, bin Laden, who was still without a passport, escaped from Saudi Arabia in April of 1991 with assistance from a nonconformist member of the royal family.²⁴⁷ He used this freedom to make the short move with his family and followers across the Red Sea to Sudan, where he was initially welcomed with open arms. As his contempt for the Saudi Royal family deepened, Osama bin Laden settled in Khartoum in 1991 hoping to assist the Islamic revolution already underway.

Fighting the Royal Family from Sudan

A calculated planner, bin Laden did not randomly choose Sudan as his next base of operations. He was realistic about the danger of using incendiary language and tactics against the powerful royal family. Bin Laden had a pre-existing relationship with Sudan's Hassan al Turabi, whose National Islamic Front had successfully captured much of the countryside including the capital city of Khartoum. Always the strategic schemer, relocating to Sudan was bin Laden's emergency plan while still living in Saudi Arabia. Even before bin Laden took up residence in Africa, al-Qaeda harbored a serious presence in Sudan comprised of safe-houses, businesses, training camps, and over a thousand fighters.²⁴⁸

As tensions grew between bin Laden and the Saudi government, Sudan provided the Saudi exile a sanctuary from his homeland. While investing personal capital into Sudanese farms, factories, and banks, bin Laden, in an effort to ingratiate himself with the fragile

²⁴⁶ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 83-84.

²⁴⁷ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 57.

²⁴⁸ Gutman, 84.

government and local population, modernized Port Sudan. He tried to further stimulate economic growth by constructing a new highway from Khartoum to the renovated port.²⁴⁹ The Saudi millionaire established a conglomerate of business ventures which he ran from Khartoum including a trucking company, a tannery, a bakery, a honey and sweet-producing company, a furniture-making business, an import-export trading company, and a heavy construction company.²⁵⁰ There remains no conclusive evidence of how profitable these ventures were, but many experts believe these investments in Sudan lost bin Laden millions of dollars.²⁵¹

As protectors of Mecca and Medina, the House of Saud was duty-bound to act as the moral compass for the global community of believers. Originally, Osama bin Laden asserted that it was his spiritual calling to expose the lack of piety among the royal family. However, he felt compelled to greater action in the early 1990s when a deeper problem arose. His major grievance was the continued presence of American forces inside the Kingdom, which he argued violated the teachings of the Prophet. When bin Laden still refused to tone down his rhetoric against the royal family, the famous Saudi was stripped of his citizenship and his domestic assets were frozen.²⁵² Bin Laden remained undeterred and the retribution by the House of Saud only served to stoke the flames of his disdain.

Precisely how much money bin Laden lost during this financial freeze is unknown, but it was estimated to be in the millions of dollars. There were reports that this substantial loss of capital created a major hindrance to bin Laden's international business activities. Preparing for the worst, bin Laden told journalist Abdel Bari Atwan that he had already transferred \$300

²⁴⁹ Kenneth Katzman, *Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors, 2001*, RL31119, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, September 10, 2001.

²⁵⁰ Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 177.

²⁵¹ Prior to 9/11, the US intelligence community could not agree on the financial worth of Osama bin Laden. In some cases, the agencies differed by hundreds of millions of dollars.

²⁵² Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 150.

million out of the Kingdom as a preventative measure in case the Saudi government attempted to close down his accounts.²⁵³ Sa'd al-Faqih, an exiled Saudi medical doctor and outspoken critic of the royal family, reported to *Frontline* in 1999 that the accounts frozen by the Saudis contained between \$250-300 million, and that bin Laden forfeited another \$250-300 million when he was forced to leave Sudan in 1996.²⁵⁴ On April 7, 1994, King Fahd publicly decreed the revocation of bin Laden's citizenship because his behavior "contradicts the Kingdom's interests and risks harming its relation with fraternal countries" as well as for his "refusal to obey instructions issued to him."²⁵⁵

In July 1994, bin Laden retaliated against the actions of King Fahd and the Saudi government by forming the subversive Advice and Reform Committee (ARC). He began alleging that the royals were, "departing. . .from the requirements of 'no god but God' and its necessities which are the difference between unbelief and faith."²⁵⁶ Accusing the House of Saud of neglecting Shariah law, bin Laden used the Advice and Reform Committee as a pulpit to advocate for reform within the Saudi royal family. The ARC was headquartered in London in order to hinder surveillance and potential interference from Middle East governments as well as to make the organization look more credible as an independent forum. In reality, the innocuous sounding ARC was hardly unbiased, and it received direct instruction from bin Laden.

Bin Laden's decision to form the ARC originated from a number of perceived injustices, not the least of which was the royal family's crackdown and detainment of domestic dissenters. This uptick in attention toward individuals or groups considered dangerous to the state was

²⁵³ Atwan, 165.

²⁵⁴ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 35.

²⁵⁵ Cooley, 101.

²⁵⁶ Gause, 140.

markedly different than the usual lip-service the royal family paid to eradicating internal threats. By the early 1990s, the House of Saud felt sufficiently threatened by the growing discontent throughout the country that it began to jail outspoken opponents and dismantle cells believed capable of violence. The ARC provided a safe offshore mouthpiece for bin Laden to publicly condemn the Saudi royal family and their choice to favor man-made laws over Allah's.

There were accounts that bin Laden's anger began to wane during his exile in Khartoum. According to this narrative, although bin Laden remained upset about the American-led coalition in Saudi Arabia and the continuing presence of foreign troops on the holiest ground, he nevertheless was beginning to refocus his attention on his family and numerous business enterprises. This assessment of bin Laden's state of mind during this period was likely incorrect. While investing in local industry and upgrading Sudan's infrastructure, bin Laden also reportedly spent \$2 million on what might have amounted to twenty guerilla camps for training and indoctrinating the next legion of fighters.²⁵⁷ Often fastidious in his decision-making and spending, bin Laden would not have invested in the camps without a plan for utilizing the troops. He would not have to wait long for an opportunity. Upon the outbreak of the first Chechen war, bin Laden immediately began pumping men, weapons, and materials to the Muslim cause.

It should also be remembered that al-Qaeda's first attack on US soldiers in Yemen would have coincided with his time in Sudan. One of the great strengths of al-Qaeda has always been its practice of casing a target before executing a mission. For the American embassy bombings in Africa, bin Laden's troops might have started their reconnaissance of the embassy compounds during his period in Khartoum. The Sudanese experience provided bin Laden with a different

²⁵⁷ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 132, 137.

view out his front door, but his time in East Africa did little to abate the al-Qaeda leader away from his militancy.

At least once during his time in Sudan, bin Laden was the target of an assassination plot. Throughout the latter part of his life, men who might have worshiped in temples, churches, and mosques were all dispatched to kill the Saudi millionaire. The nationality of the hit team in Sudan remains a mystery as no individual, group, or state ever claimed responsibility.²⁵⁸

According to accounts by his son, Osama bin Laden came to accept the results of an investigation conducted by the Sudanese government which concluded that Saudi Arabia had been responsible for sending the four-person hit squad.²⁵⁹ As might be expected, this incident only exacerbated bin Laden's hatred for those ruling his former homeland. Call it skill, intuition, or just plain luck, but bin Laden's uncanny ability to elude assassination after assassination only enhanced his legendary reputation.

In what would be a recurring theme in his life, Osama bin Laden once again wore out his welcome. In June 1995, members of the Egyptian Islamic Group attempted to assassinate the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during a state trip to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.²⁶⁰ The hit narrowly missed the mark. It was soon discovered that bin Laden had assisted and even housed the perpetrators in Sudan, and as a result, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Khartoum in April 1996 for its refusal to hand over the suspects.²⁶¹ Unsatisfied with the speed of the international community's response to his near fatal attack, President Mubarak threatened

²⁵⁸ No government or agency has taken credit for the assassination attempt in Sudan. There are a number of unfounded conspiracy theories that the assailants were sent by the United States, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and even the Sudanese government.

²⁵⁹ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 126.

²⁶⁰ Abu-Yasir Rif'ai Ahmad Taha, the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Group, was one of the signers of the World Islamic Front's declaration of war on February 23, 1996.

²⁶¹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 62.

unilateral action in the form of an invasion against Egypt's southern neighbor. Bin Laden, who was implicated in the assassination attempt, determined that it was clearly in his best interest to disappear off the grid once again. Seeking a safe haven, he escaped from Sudan and relocated with his family to Afghanistan.

As evidenced by their actions, the House of Saud must have become aware of the danger bin Laden posed by the early 1990s. The Saudis wanted to avoid any international embarrassment which could have emanated from having a famous citizen working to undermine Riyadh. The Saudis turned to the bin Laden family to act as unofficial moderators. According to bin Laden, "They sent me my mother, my uncle, and my brothers in almost nine visits to Khartoum asking me to stop and return to Arabia and apologize to King Fahd."²⁶² The House of Saud has rarely shied away from throwing money at a problem, and there were accounts that the bin Laden family was offered lucrative construction contracts and two billion riyals (\$535 million) to rein in their dissident son.²⁶³ During bin Laden's time in the late 1990s in Afghanistan, King Fahd made one final effort to enter into a dialogue by sending bin Laden's mother Alia to convince him to return to Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁴ Fearing it was a trap, he stubbornly refused. Not everyone has a price, and bin Laden's inability to be bribed or bullied should have demonstrated to the Saudis the extent to which he regarded his cause.

The Saudi regime clearly had grave concerns about bin Laden as evidenced by its willingness to revoke his passport, freeze his considerable assets, officially renounce his citizenship, and possibly attempted to assassinate him. Unlike the intelligence community of the United States which was willfully ignorant of bin Laden's goals until the latter half of the 1990s,

²⁶² Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 158.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 254.

the Saudis had first-hand knowledge of the severity of the threat posed by the al-Qaeda leader in the first half of the decade. Yet, the House of Saud reacted with understated restraint in an effort to protect its image. It is important to remember that in the early 1990s, bin Laden's harshest harangues were leveled against his own government, not the United States. In 1996, the government of Sudan, which faced criticism for harboring bin Laden and was under international pressure for its role in supporting terrorism, offered to return bin Laden to Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁵ The House of Saud declined.

There is debate about whether Sudan also offered to turn bin Laden over to American officials at the time, and whether the U.S. had any role in bin Laden settling next in Afghanistan remains unclear. Richard Clarke, who was working in counterterrorism at the time, stated that Washington would have taken bin Laden into custody had Sudan offered such a deal. Adding no further clarity, *The 9/11 Commission Report* vaguely mentioned that the United States was aware of the secret talks between Khartoum and Riyadh, but the report does not delve into whether the U.S. participated in the process. According to the hearing on the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States in 2004, Sudanese officials alleged that their offer to extradite bin Laden to the United States was rebuffed by Washington.²⁶⁶ However, the commission was unable to substantiate these claims. Just before bin Laden moved from Sudan to Afghanistan, journalist Roy Gutman reported that the Sudanese Minister of State for Defense met with an unnamed CIA official who requested Sudan expel bin Laden to anywhere except Somalia.²⁶⁷ When neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia took advantage of what could have

²⁶⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 63.

²⁶⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

²⁶⁷ Gutman, 87.

been a history-changing moment to eliminate the emerging threat, bin Laden slipped through the cracks and escaped justice.

The al-Qaeda leader made the most of his freedom returning to Afghanistan in May 1996. It had been five years since Kuwait had been liberated, and bin Laden had grown tired of waiting for the United States to leave the Middle East of its own accord. His fight against the House of Saud and its corruption would have to wait. In August 1996, bin Laden declared war on the United States.

Conclusion

Joining the fight against the Russians in Afghanistan was the natural outgrowth of bin Laden's deep immersion in Wahabbism, and an effort that received the full support of the House of Saud. But the experience only ignited bin Laden's fanaticism, which he eventually turned on the royal family itself. After returning from the Afghan front, bin Laden believed it was his duty as a righteous Muslim to call out the House of Saud for its immoral behavior and its failure to lead the Islamic world. Bin Laden escaped to Sudan rather than risk the repercussions of challenging the Saudi government while living in Jeddah, and he continued his campaign against the House of Saud from across the Red Sea. At some point in the early 1990s, the Saudi government came to the realization that he was more subversive from abroad than he was at home. However, the House of Saud did not want to bear the ramifications or the political complexities of forcibly subduing a member of an untouchable family.

The continued presence of American military forces inside the Kingdom was viewed by bin Laden as a growing cancer and personal insult to all Muslims. From his perspective, the United States was only partially to blame for this indignation. His own government, which bin Laden already viewed as morally bankrupt, was responsible for allowing foreign forces to enter

and remain embedded in the land of Mecca and Medina. Tolerating their presence pierced his deeply felt religious beliefs to their core, and he considered this a blot on the purity of all Islam.

PART III



The massive hole was covered as the USS Cole returns to the United States¹

¹ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 16.

[T]he latest and most serious of which – the greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Mohammad – is the occupation of Saudi Arabia.²

-Osama bin Laden, declaration of war from August 23, 1996

Killing the Americans and their allies, civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can carry it out in any country where it proves possible, in order to liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sanctuary [Mecca] from their grip, and to the point that all their armies leave all Muslim territory, defeated and unable to threaten Muslims.³

-World Islamic Front Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, February 23, 1998

Escalation: Osama bin Laden's Strategy and Attacks

When the conclusion of the Afghan campaign against the Russians was within sight, Osama bin Laden created al-Qaeda in the late 1980s as a way of preparing for the next war. At the time, he could not have envisioned that the United States, the world's sole surviving superpower from the Cold War, would become his greatest adversary. The war in Afghanistan had changed bin Laden, and he planned on dedicating the rest of his life to protecting Muslim lands.

The American-led build-up of coalition forces in 1990-1991 introduced hundreds of thousands of non-Muslims into the Middle East. Based on a quote attributed to the Prophet Mohammad on his deathbed, bin Laden believed the American troops, who had remained stationed in Saudi Arabia after the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq had ended, were breaking God's law. According to his interpretations of the Koran and Islamic traditions, he could justify the use of violence in order to defend Muslim territory. The al-Qaeda war against the United States started off slowly in 1992, but the group escalated its lethality with each deadly attack culminating with the cataclysmic destruction of 9/11.

² Bin Laden and Lawrence, 25.

³ Kepel and Milelli, 55.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic Warfare

As the undisputed leader of a hierarchical military organization, Osama bin Laden tightly controlled the methodology for how his group would approach warfare. Perhaps unsurprisingly, bin Laden established al-Qaeda's vision and strategy based on his personal interpretation of the Koran and on the example of the Prophet Mohammad who had survived a series of military campaigns in Arabia the early seventh century. Islam is an all-encompassing way of life, and the al-Qaeda leader would have been remiss in his religious obligations if he had not fought according to Muslim traditions. As set forth in the Taliban war manual by Pakistani officer S.K Malik, "The Quranic philosophy of war is infinitely supreme and effective. It strikes a perfect balance between war and policy. It penetrates deep down to systemise and regulate all issues involved in the initiation, planning, conduct and control of war."⁴

At its most basic level, Islam teaches that humankind has been and will remain in a state of anarchy until Islam is accepted by everyone. According to this belief, the world is essentially divided between Dar-al-Islam, the territory of Islam, and Dar-al-Harb, the territory of war. Some Muslims believe they must fight to remove the state of instability found in Dar-al-Harb to return the earth to its natural status of peace and order. Based on Koranic tradition, this fight, which is supposed to be for the benefit of all people, remains unfulfilled until the entire world submits to Islam. The only exception to this rule is that non-Muslim monotheists can live under the Dar-al-Islam, but they must submit to Islamic rule and agree to second-class citizenship.⁵

Jihad, a word often used incorrectly, became the vehicle for converting the Dar-al-Harb into Dar-al-Islam. The term jihad can refer to a spiritual struggle within oneself, or it can refer to

⁴ Malik, 1.

⁵ Khadduri, 64, 75.

the physical struggle that is often synonymous with war.⁶ The Taliban manual defines jihad as, “a continuous and never-ending struggle waged on all fronts including political, economic, social, psychological, domestic, moral and spiritual to attain the object of policy. It aims at attaining the overall mission assigned to the Islamic state, and military strategy is one of the means available to it to do so. It is waged at individual as well as collective level; and at the internal as well as external front.”⁷ The phrase “overall mission assigned to the Islamic state” is a reference to the ultimate goal of converting the Dar-al-Harb to the Dar-al-Islam.

The Koran contains a number of specific passages promising special rewards in the afterlife to individuals who undertake jihad on behalf of Islam. For example, the Koran states, “And if ye shall be slain or die on the path of God, then pardon from God and mercy is better than all your amassing; For if ye die or be slain, verily unto God shall ye be gathered.”⁸ This nearness to God denotes an exclusive position in heaven. Depending on whether the conflict is offensive or defensive in nature, jihad can be either a communal obligation or a personal obligation, which many interpret as a religious duty of all Muslims.⁹ For those who believe this, all Muslims are required to fight when the Dar-al-Islam comes under threat from non-Muslims.

Not only did the Prophet Mohammad model how Muslims should live their daily lives, he also exemplified how they should fight. Mohammad’s initial message of conversion was rejected by many in Arabia, and he was expelled with his followers from the city of Mecca in 622 during an exodus that came to be known as the hijrah or flight.¹⁰ From Medina, Mohammad entered into a series of alliances with local tribes, and he became a military commander after war

⁶ Misri, 599.

⁷ Malik, 54.

⁸ The Koran, 3:156-159.

⁹ Misri, 32-34.

¹⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 145, 149-150.

broke out against the inhabitants of his former city. During this conflict with Mecca, the Prophet and his Muslim forces suffered a defeat at the battle of Uhud in March 625 before finally conquering Mecca in January 630.¹¹

Osama bin Laden coordinated al-Qaeda's political and military actions based on the Islamic principles of warfare and the examples of the Prophet. Like many Muslims, bin Laden viewed the world in binary terms of Dar-al-Islam and Dar-al-Harb. His goals included expanding the Dar-al-Islam through the establishment of a caliphate, but he also felt passionately that any invasion into the Dar-al-Islam required a collective or communal jihad to expel the non-Muslim force. From the viewpoint of al-Qaeda members, the conflict between Dar-al-Islam and Dar-al-Harb would continue in perpetuity until the world had submitted to Islam. Because al-Qaeda's ultimate aspiration for the dissolution of the Dar-al-Harb would endure for generations or longer, bin Laden did not have to think in the short-term and could therefore strategize for an extended war. Bin Laden often reminded his al-Qaeda fighters of the Koranic tradition that all Muslims who died fighting for Islam would be rewarded in heaven.

Bin Laden drew inspiration from the Prophet Mohammad by reflecting S.K. Malik's advice that, "The military campaigns undertaken or initiated by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) are 'institutions' for learning the Quranic art of war. Time has only enhanced, not dimmed, their practical value for our training and mental and spiritual development."¹² Islam's founder had created a movement that eventually expanded across continents, but before that, Mohammad had encountered unexpected misfortune during the hijrah and the Battle of Uhud. Still, scholars maintain that the Prophet remained steadfast in his devotion to Allah and his quest of spreading Islam, ultimately overcoming his flight from Mecca to Medina and the battlefield loss at Uhud.

¹¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 21-29, 65-66.

¹² Malik, 145.

Mohammad's perseverance during these hardships resonated with bin Laden, who would experience his own setbacks during his war with the United States. Bin Laden imbued in his organization a similar resilience and a willingness to adapt while admonishing his followers to always remain faithful to Islam.

The Long War Begins

The conclusion of the Cold War did not usher in the epoch of peace that some academics had prognosticated, and it did not take long for the al-Qaeda leadership to encounter new enemies. In the eyes of this group, one of the deepest problems facing modern Islam was the intrusion of non-Muslims, imperial powers into what they considered to be traditionally Islamic lands, also known as Dar-al-Islam. For bin Laden, the most egregious offense was the authorization, and continued presence, of Western troops in the Middle East. After Operation Desert Storm successfully pushed the Iraqi troops out of Kuwait in February 1991, bin Laden hoped the United States would start withdrawing from its bases located throughout the Kingdom. Attacking the Americans in Saudi Arabia in 1991 or 1992 might have provided Washington with a pretext for remaining in country, precisely the opposite of what bin Laden desired. Instead, he waited to see how long the Saudis would tolerate foreign military forces, and the al-Qaeda leader selected Yemen as the place to target the U.S. military instead.

In December 1992, al-Qaeda bombed two hotels in Aden, Yemen hosting approximately one-hundred American military personnel en route to the humanitarian operation in war-torn Somalia.¹³ The attack failed to kill any American soldiers, but it was considered a success by al-Qaeda because the United States stopped housing soldiers in Yemen. Because of its relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, the United States had little incentive to

¹³ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1992*.

continue deploying personnel to Yemen. During its investigation of the attack, the Department of State uncovered bin Laden's financial support for the bombing mission, but US officials would remain ignorant of the depth of bin Laden's nefarious activities for a number of years.¹⁴ Even the CIA's Counterterrorist Center classified bin Laden as merely a financial supporter of terror until 1997.

Al-Qaeda's early attacks against the United States have been largely ignored in books and articles on the topic. Yet, examining the implications of bin Laden's first missions provide the insight necessary for understanding his larger war. Bin Laden and his organization initiated their conflict against the United States by attacking military personnel in the Middle East. It would not have been difficult for al-Qaeda to have targeted American civilians living in Yemen or other countries in the region including Saudi Arabia, but that was not the message bin Laden wanted to send. He was not concerned with the small contingent of Americans living and working throughout the region. It was the presence of the United States military that he abhorred.

For bin Laden, the Pentagon's decision to stop using Aden as a stop-over point for Somalia was a major victory. From the al-Qaeda perspective, the attack had not even killed any Americans, and yet Washington appeared as though it was already in a full retreat. Bin Laden claimed victory in Yemen and America's withdrawal provided his followers proof that their mission to remove the United States from the Middle East was not in vain. During a 1998 interview, bin Laden took full credit for the attack stating,

The United States wanted to set up a military base for U.S. soldiers in Yemen so that it could send fresh troops to Somalia. The Arab mujahedin related to the Afghan jihad carried out two bomb explosions in Yemen to warn the United States, causing damage to some Americans staying in those hotels. The United States received our warning and

¹⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 108-109.

gave up the idea of setting up military bases in Yemen. This was the first al Qaeda victory scored against the Crusaders.¹⁵

In what would become a reoccurring theme during his interviews and speeches, bin Laden often emphasized the great cowardice of the United States. He would cite the American retreat in Yemen as a prime example. It is difficult to discern if bin Laden believed his own rhetoric that Americans were not fighters, or if he was simply looking for a message to inspire his men. Either way, the decision by the Department of Defense to stop deploying troops to Yemen after the hotel bombing reinforced bin Laden's belief that violence was a highly effective tool for forcing the United States out of the Middle East. Bin Laden never forgot the perceived lesson that Americans had a low tolerance for casualties, an impression shared by others, and he based his early strategy around the concept that Washington would withdraw whenever faced with bloodshed.

The US military personnel housed in the Yemeni hotels were headed to Somalia, and bin Laden chose this East African nation as the next place to kill Americans. Washington's relief effort in Somalia centered on easing the suffering caused from a devastating famine, the effects of which were compounded by a brutal civil war. The introduction of US forces into the Horn of Africa did not impede the fighting between local warlords, who did not hesitate to target the Americans on the ground or in the air. Unfortunately, the American experience has been primarily remembered for an incident in early October of 1993 in which two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down during a raid to capture Mohammad Farah Aideed, a powerful warlord. A number of American servicemen were killed during the ensuing Battle of Mogadishu

¹⁵ Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, 147.

while Somali casualties were estimated to range from 500 to 1,500.¹⁶ The Battle of Mogadishu played a significant factor in the White House's decision to pull out of the war plagued country.

Questions remain concerning al-Qaeda's actual participation during the United States humanitarian intervention in Somalia. According to some experts, al-Qaeda operatives trained the Somalis on the tactical measures required for bringing down aerial threats with Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs). In Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down*, the author described the trainers as "fundamentalist Islamic soldiers, smuggled in from Sudan, who had experience fighting Russian helicopters in Afghanistan."¹⁷ This description would certainly fit members of al-Qaeda, which was headquartered in Sudan at the time of the incident. Accounts suggest that bin Laden sent Abu Talha, a specialist in mortars, and Mohamed Odeh, who had a talent for explosives, to train the Somali forces on ways to kill the western invaders.¹⁸

The overall role that al-Qaeda played in the Battle of Mogadishu as trainers or combatants remains unknown, but this did not dissuade bin Laden from attempting to share in the victory. With more flare than fact, he would later boast of the Black Hawk Down incident by stating,

My associates killed the Americans in collaboration with Farah Aidid. . . . You will be astonished that Farah Aidid had only 300 soldiers while I had sent 250 mujahideen. We got moral support from local Muslims. In one explosion, 100 Americans were killed, then 18 more were killed in fighting. One day our men shot down an American helicopter. The pilot got out. We caught him, tied his legs, and dragged him through the streets. After that, 28,000 U.S. soldiers fled Somalia.¹⁹

¹⁶ Richard W. Stewart, *The United States in Somalia, 1992-1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2002), 23.

¹⁷ Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 110.

¹⁸ Jane Corbin, *Al-Qaeda: In Search of the Terror Network That Threatens the World* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 42-43.

¹⁹ Gutman, 96.

Although bin Laden clearly embellished his organization's contributions in Somalia, the al-Qaeda leader theorized that the American withdrawal was yet another indicator that the American superpower was in fact a paper tiger. On February 14, 2003, bin Laden offered this analysis, "Then, after the Second Gulf War, America put her armies into Somalia and killed 13,000 Muslims there, and there is no strength or power save in God. But then the lions of Islam, the Afghan Arabs and their brothers leapt on them and rubbed their arrogance in the mud, killing many of them, destroying their tanks and downing their planes. So America and her allies fled in the dark of night."²⁰ Once again, bin Laden's story was short on accuracy, but it reveals how his thinking skewed everything to fit his narrative no matter how bereft of facts and evidence. Regardless of al-Qaeda's contributions to the effort, the American forces, which had arrived in August of 1992 to help the starving Somali masses, were largely withdrawn by the Clinton administration in March 1994.²¹ The American deaths seemed to weigh particularly heavy on President Clinton, who became reluctant to put American boots on the ground as a result of the affair.

By 1994, Osama bin Laden had witnessed two attacks against American troops that had resulted in two withdrawals of U.S. forces in Yemen and Somalia. The al-Qaeda leader interpreted these "retreats" as proof that his methods worked. He wrote,

And where was this false courage of yours when two explosions made you leave Aden in less than 24 hours? But your most disgraceful case was in Somalia, where after vigorous propaganda that lasted few months, regarding the power of America and its post cold war leadership of the new world order; you moved tens of thousands of international force, including twenty eight thousand American soldiers into Somalia. However, when dozens of your troops were killed in minor battles, and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu, you left the area defeated, carrying 14 your dead in disappointment and humiliation. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising

²⁰ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 192.

²¹ Stewart, 8, 25.

revenge. But these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. God has dishonored you when you withdrew, and it clearly showed your weaknesses and powerlessness.²²

He viewed this as a trend that his organization could exploit on a larger-scale, and it was, in part, based on the accurate assessment of America's intolerance for troop casualties. The exit of American forces from these countries was significant to how al-Qaeda planned for the future, but bin Laden was aware that the U.S. had not been deeply invested in either of those locales. After all, the Pentagon had been housing few troops in Yemen in 1992, and the humanitarian force in Somalia was sent as a temporary peacekeeping force that had no intention of establishing permanent bases. Bin Laden realized that it was going to take a much higher body count to extract the United States from Saudi Arabia, an American ally with long-standing ties to Washington and a major source of the world's supply of oil.

For years, Sudan had been the perfect place to headquarter al-Qaeda. The poor African country remained off the radar, and most of the Americans concerned with that part of the world were focused on the slaughter and famine stemming from the country's brutal civil war during which time an estimated 1.3 million died from 1983-1993.²³ Groups willing to resort to terrorism tend to gravitate toward areas with little government control, and Sudan became home to a number of such organizations during this period of instability. Turabi's government in Sudan was concerned with countless internal problems stemming from the protracted civil war and did not interfere with al-Qaeda business. Additionally, there was little incentive for Sudanese officials to bother bin Laden who was heavily invested in local businesses and improved the country's infrastructure.

²² Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," AFGP-2002-003676, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, "Harmony Program," <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

²³ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, "Sudan [2]," OA/ID 3546.

Two Declarations of War

Following the fallout from the Mubarak assassination attempt, Osama bin Laden returned to Jalalabad, Afghanistan in 1996 aboard a private jet, and he stayed in the eastern city before moving south to Kandahar in 1997. His relocation did not dampen his zealous indignation over the extended American military presence in Saudi Arabia, which had been in-country for five years since Kuwait had been liberated. In June 1996, a truck bomb in Saudi Arabia exploded outside an apartment complex called the Khobar Towers killing nineteen American personnel.²⁴ The terrorist attack triggered the relocation of the entire infrastructure responsible for maintaining Operation Southern Watch to be moved out of the public eye to the remote desert location of Prince Sultan Airbase. For bin Laden and his fundamentalist brethren, this transfer of Westerners from one spot in the holy land to another location in the holy land was no panacea. American and Saudi investigators concluded a wing of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah was responsible for the bombing of the Americans at the Khobar Towers, but there was also evidence that a team connected to bin Laden had been involved in the attack.²⁵

Bin Laden's first formal declaration of war against the United States of America occurred upon his return to Afghanistan. In a letter titled "A Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries" dated August 23, 1996, the al-Qaeda leader laid out his case against the United States, Israel, and the House of Saud, citing Islamic beliefs to justify his call to arms. In his declaration of war, bin Laden described the American occupation of Saudi Arabia as, "the greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet

²⁴ Gause, 128-129.

²⁵ Kepel and Milelli, 278.

Mohammad,” and depicted the U.S. influence in Saudi Arabia as “blatant imperial ignorance of America.”²⁶ The al-Qaeda leader appealed for help from the global community of believers,

My Muslim Brothers of the world: Your brothers in land of the two holiest sites and Palestine are calling upon you for help and asking you to take part in fighting against the enemy, your enemy; the Israelis and Americans. They are asking you to do whatever you can within one’s own means and ability, to expel the humiliate and defeat the enemy out of the sanctities of Islam.²⁷

Bin Laden issued his declaration after having only recently arrived in war-torn Afghanistan and prior to any major al-Qaeda operation against the American superpower.

For a Westerner, the decision of a single, relatively obscure individual to openly declare war against the United States might seem somewhat unremarkable and certainly odd. It appeared impractical, and even dangerous for bin Laden to proclaim his intentions to his enemy when he could have just as easily remained in the shadows. But such a public proclamation was not unfamiliar in the Muslim world, and bin Laden issued his declaration against his enemies based on the teachings of the Koran. According to Islamic practice, Muslims are required to offer a foe the opportunity to convert before an attack. This belief was based on the Koranic passage, “We never punish until we have sent a messenger.”²⁸ Thus, bin Laden’s declaration was not a publicity stunt or bid for attention but followed a century-old practice of providing his adversary the opportunity to avoid confrontation. The al-Qaeda leader was not naïve enough to believe that the United States would convert to Islam, but he wanted to follow the requisite religious antecedents for justifying his impending war. Of course, such declarations can also gather attention, and bin Laden hoped he might inspire recruits to join his modest organization.

²⁶ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 25.

²⁷ Bin Laden, “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites.”

²⁸ The Koran, 22:39.

Bin Laden's return to Afghanistan received a warm reception from many war veterans who remembered the Saudi's contributions during the 1980s struggle against the Russians. At the time of his arrival in 1996, much of the country was controlled by the Taliban, a group of Islamic fundamentalists who had been waging a holy war for the soul of Afghanistan. The Taliban made a logical partner for al-Qaeda since the two groups shared ideological principles based on a strict interpretation of Koranic law. As pressure mounted from his enemies, bin Laden benefited greatly from the local custom of hospitality known as Pashtunwali which required hosts to protect welcomed guests at all costs. The Saudi exile was joined in Afghanistan by his wives and children, as well as other members of al-Qaeda.

The civil war for control of Afghanistan was rooted in the communist retreat of the late 1980s. When a power vacuum ensued following Moscow's withdrawal in 1989, groups of fighters who had been unified in the quest to expel the Russian invaders began turning on each other. The Taliban emerged victorious out of the chaos to claim a controlling piece of the country.²⁹ The group was founded and led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, a one-eyed cleric who had opposed the Soviets.³⁰ According to legend, Omar had a dream in which he was told to fight in order to restore peace to post-war Afghanistan, and the Taliban leader initiated his military campaign with the mission to provide order to the lawless country.³¹ Afghan tribesmen, who are known for unifying against foreign occupiers, have also historically been notorious for arbitrarily changing sides for money, promises of power, or to join those appearing to have the upper hand. All of these things happened during the Taliban's sweep through the countryside. The Northern

²⁹ The word "taliban" means "student" in Pashtun.

³⁰ After the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Mullah Omar disappeared. He purportedly died in 2013, although this report did not surface until 2015.

³¹ Dexter Filkins, *The Forever Wars* (New York: Random House, 2009), 30.

Alliance, a loosely-aligned group forced to unite by the Taliban's military successes, bonded together to stand against Mullah Omar's forces.

In spite of the Northern Alliance's opposition, the Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan and installed its own form of governance. In Kandahar in 1996, Mullah Omar crowned himself the "Leader of the Faithful" by putting on the Cloak of the Prophet, a holy garment that according to legend had been worn by the Prophet Mohammad.³² The Afghan people were exhausted by the years of violence, and the Taliban were originally welcomed in cities and villages for their venerable quest to establish much-needed law and order. After the Taliban had consolidated its grip over the country, the new government created an Islamic state based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law. Under Mullah Omar's reign, punitive measures such as amputation for stealing, and death by stoning were imposed for adultery or homosexuality. Women had few rights and were expected to be covered from head-to-toe at all times. They could not go out in public without a male member of their family escorting them. The Afghan people had hoped the Taliban would deliver stability. Instead, the new rulers returned the country to the practices of the seventh century.

While international watch groups became gravely concerned about the Taliban's inhumane acts, Osama bin Laden maintained that Afghanistan was making progress. Bin Laden firmly believed that most of the countries which claimed to be Islamic had lost their way to secularism and profanity. He envisioned Afghanistan as the Islamic version of a "City on a Hill," a modern example of what the Prophet Mohammad had wanted. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as the Taliban called their new kingdom, could usher in a new Muslim empire.

³² Rashid, 20.

Initially, the al-Qaeda leader was focused on supporting the Taliban's effort by contributing to their quest to conquer all of Afghanistan. Bin Laden sent hundreds of al-Qaeda soldiers to join in the Taliban campaigns in 1997 and 1998. When the Taliban offensive stalled in 1998, the Saudi millionaire reportedly paid off several enemy commanders which led to key military victories and control of 90% of the country.³³ In time, however, bin Laden became a liability. His presence in Afghanistan eventually became a serious burden for the Taliban as his war against the United States escalated. Nonetheless, it proved difficult for Mullah Omar and his lieutenants to turn on the Saudi after his infusion of money and men had boosted their offensive drives into Northern Afghanistan.

Trouble followed bin Laden to Afghanistan. Just as al-Qaeda's presence eventually proved to be problematic for the Sudanese government, it was not long before the Taliban experienced unwanted international scrutiny for housing a notorious international fugitive. With support from other Taliban leaders, Mullah Omar requested that the al-Qaeda leader lower his profile and abandon planning operations against the United States, but bin Laden refused to shirk his leadership role or shrink from his previous declaration of war against America.³⁴ This rebuff created further complications for his Afghani hosts. How could the Taliban, a group devoted to an Islamic state and the practice of Pashtunwali, turn over a fellow Muslim warrior to the infidels in the West?

Bin Laden's 1996 declaration of war against the United States had gone largely unnoticed in the Western capitals, but it had stirred up controversy in the Arab world. His original fatwa received harsh criticisms from segments of the larger Islamic community which questioned bin

³³ Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), 79.

³⁴ Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60-61.

Laden's credibility to speak on religious jurisprudence. Bin Laden had not received the proper training to speak authoritatively on Islamic matters, and this discredited his fatwa in the eyes of many. To rectify this, bin Laden aligned himself with five other fundamentalists, one of whom was Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), to renew his declaration of war on February 23, 1998. The group which called itself the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders contended, "Killing the Americans and their allies, civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can carry it out in any country where it proves possible, in order to liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sanctuary [Mecca] from their grip, and to the point that all their armies leave all Muslim territory, defeated and unable to threaten Muslims."³⁵ Within six months of his declaration, bin Laden's threat to kill American civilians became a reality.

The Embassy Bombings

August 7, 1998 could be considered al-Qaeda's introduction onto the world stage. On that date, bin Laden's operatives simultaneously bombed United States embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania injuring thousands in the process. These strikes in East Africa exemplified how al-Qaeda cased its targets, prepared for missions, and operated on the day of an attack. The White House's weak response to the African bombings did little to deter bin Laden. These major attacks against two American compounds provided a blueprint for how al-Qaeda would act in the future when it targeted the USS *Cole* and later the American homeland.

Osama bin Laden was meticulous in his planning. In the case of the African attacks, bin Laden's men began surveying the American embassy in Kenya as early as 1993, five years

³⁵ Kepel and Milelli, 55.

before al-Qaeda finally went on the offensive.³⁶ Bin Laden's unwillingness to rush an attack showed patience, a personality trait that he instilled throughout his organization. Operation Kaaba and Operation al-Aqsa, as the African missions became known in al-Qaeda circles, were set to take place on the eighth anniversary of the American troop arrival in Saudi Arabia.³⁷ Bin Laden often coordinated his missions to coincide with a significant date but not all al-Qaeda operations occurred on a historical date of his choosing. The plans in Africa called for bomb-laden vehicles to be driven as close to the US embassies as possible before detonation in order to maximize their blast radii, thereby killing or maiming as many Americans as possible.

In the pre-9/11 days, al-Qaeda divided its operatives into small, individualized teams known as cells. Each cell, which only focused on one mission at a time, consisted of a hierarchical structure that started at the top with Osama bin Laden and worked its way down the chain-of-command to lower echelon members. This enclosed "need-to-know" system prevented a captured member of the cell from revealing information to interrogators about other active al-Qaeda missions. In the case of the African attacks, lower-level cell members prepared safe-houses and purchased the vehicles that were to be used by the suicide bombers. For the Dar es Salaam attack, four members of the cell loaded TNT, cylinder tanks, batteries, detonators, fertilizer, and sand bags into their truck.³⁸ On the eve of bombing, some members of the cells left the doomed cities before the attacks transpired while others waited to sanitize the safe houses as a forensic countermeasure or to troubleshoot any unexpected last-minute problems.

The embassy attacks did not go as planned for al-Qaeda in spite of the years of surveillance and the element of surprise. Mohamed Rashed Daoud al Owali, one of the would-

³⁶ United States v. bin Laden, 19-20.

³⁷ Benjamin and Simon, 27, 29.

³⁸ United States v. bin Laden, 37.

be suicide bombers in the Kenyan raid, was captured when he ran from the scene rather than remaining in the proximity of the explosion.³⁹ Owali's unexpected departure did not stop his co-conspirator, who went by the alias Azzam, from exploding the ordinance. Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, the driver of the suicide truck in Dar es Salaam, was unable to reach the nearest point of entry, and so he detonated his payload at a distance from the embassy.⁴⁰ Owali's escape made little difference in Nairobi where the death toll remained high, but the explosion in Tanzania was partially blunted because the blast detonated further away from the embassy than originally planned.⁴¹

From al-Qaeda's viewpoint, the bombings achieved the mission's goals although they were far from perfect. Bin Laden must have been exuberant with his operatives' abilities to coordinate two major attacks in two different East African countries just minutes apart. The attackers succeeded in killing more than two-hundred-fifty-two individuals and wounding over 5,000 people.⁴² Unlike al-Qaeda's previous attacks, the bombings remained at the forefront of international news as the grisly scenes were replayed throughout the news cycle. In a calculated effort to confuse the investigation, responsibility for the attacks was immediately claimed by "the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places," a fictitious group created by bin Laden.⁴³

The biggest disappointment for al-Qaeda concerned the body count. The United States had been the primary target and although its embassies were seriously damaged, few Americans

³⁹ Great Britain, Prime Minister, *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States*, 11 September, 2001, 14.

⁴⁰ Khalfan Khamis Mohamed was also known as "Ahmed the German" even though he was Egyptian-born.

⁴¹ Mohammad al-Owhali sought medical assistance at a nearby hospital, was eventually captured and turned over to the FBI.

⁴² Raphael Perl, *Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?*, 98-733F (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, September 1, 1998), 1.

⁴³ Great Britain, Prime Minister, *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States*, 11 September, 2001, 15.

died in the bombings. The plan had called for the attacks to occur in the morning when the embassies were at their busiest, and at a time which coincided with morning prayers so as to avoid killing faithful Muslims in the crossfire. This goal of minimizing collateral damage failed as most of the dead and wounded were native Africans, many of whom were Muslim. The Kenyan attack killed twelve Americans, but the Tanzanian bomb failed to kill a single one.⁴⁴

Instead of sending troops into Afghanistan, the White House countered by firing Tomahawk cruise missiles at al-Qaeda camps. The strikes killed a handful of low-level personnel, but missed the leadership structure altogether. In a 1999 interview, bin Laden shared what he had learned from the retaliatory strikes. “By the grace of Allah, the missiles were ineffective. The raid proved that the American army is going downhill in its morale. Its members are too cowardly and too fearful to meet the young people of Islam face-to-face.”⁴⁵ Bin Laden already had an aggrandized confidence in the role that the Arab-Afghans had played in forcing a Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, an experience which had warped him into believing that superpowers could be defeated by non-state actors. Hoping that his words would entice a fight, he taunted the United States military of being weaker than its powerful Soviet counterparts. Bin Laden criticized Americans for not having the stomach for the horrors of war and stereotyped its soldiers as weak and unreliable. He cited the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam in the 1970s as evidence of cowardice. As modern examples of Washington’s lack of resolve, the al-Qaeda leader pointed to its retreat from Yemen in 1992 and the Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in 1993. America’s underwhelming response to the African Embassy bombings only emboldened the Saudi to escalate his operations.

⁴⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 71.

⁴⁵ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 261.

The East African embassy bombings revealed patterns of how al-Qaeda was going to fight in the future, and the attack became a template for bin Laden's subsequent strikes against the USS *Cole* and the continental United States. All three of these missions had required significant preparation in terms of infiltration of foreign lands, internal communication and coordination between cell members, training or technical proficiencies, and casing of the target's security systems. Each strike was also characterized by suicide attacks, a tactic which would become al-Qaeda's trademark as exemplified in Africa in 1998, Yemen in 2000, and the United States in 2001. Bin Laden utilized multiple teams during the Africa raid, just as he later did on the four hijacked planes on 9/11. In Kenya, Yemen, and the United States, he employed multiple suicide bombers so that the pair or group could provide each other with the fortitude necessary to surrender their lives and deliver the necessary blast. Another trend found in all three missions was that al-Qaeda attacks were relatively inexpensive to execute but costly in economic terms to the United States. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, all of these attacks succeeded in killing Americans.

Al-Qaeda's Strategy

Ironically, Osama bin Laden's ultimate goal was to usher in an era of peace within Islam, although his plan was to accomplish this through violence. As previously discussed in this work, bin Laden's political objectives were 1) establish a new caliphate, 2) abolish the state of Israel, 3) overthrow Islamic leaders he considered apostate like the House of Saud, and 4) disgorge the United States from the Middle East. To achieve these objectives, the al-Qaeda leader did not hesitate to use violence. However, bin Laden's dream world would have consisted of a peaceful existence in which all of humanity had either converted to Islam or submitted to its reign. He felt an individual responsibility to fight against the Dar-al-Harb until it had been extinguished

leaving only the Dar-al-Islam and a worldwide peaceful coexistence of all people. This theory of fighting for peace is highlighted in the Taliban's book on strategy,

The Quranic approach to war is not narrow and one-sided; its causes and effects embrace the entire human race. According to the Book, war is waged to end repression and to obtain immediate conditions of justice and peace. The Holy Quran provides a practical and workable methodology for the implementation of this aim. The methodology is liberal and broad-based; it makes maximum allowance to the opponent to cooperate in the restoration of peace. When permitted, war aims at preserving and promoting, and not destroying, the human dignity and values.⁴⁶

Though it seems contradictory, bin Laden believed himself to be fighting to ultimately secure peace for his way of life. But the peace he sought was conditional on the eradication of the Dar-al-Harb, an act that would mean worldwide submission to Islam.

The leader of al-Qaeda viewed his fight with the United States as reactionary, particularly in terms of the U.S. military activity in Saudi Arabia. The American presence, which bin Laden viewed as an occupation, caused him to focus his attack plans on forcing a withdrawal. Bin Laden had initial success in disrupting a small contingent of American forces from Yemen, and his fighters may have aided in the Battle of Mogadishu that led to Washington's exit in Somalia. But, bin Laden understood that Yemen and Somalia were minor areas of operation for the United States. He was also aware that the complete removal of all American forces from Muslim lands was a lofty goal. At some point, the al-Qaeda leader decided his best chance for eventually driving the U.S. from the Middle East was to do the exact opposite -- draw America into the region for a war on Islamic soil.

Bin Laden came to the realization that regardless of how hard his forces damaged the United States through terrorist attacks, Washington was likely going to continue its current foreign policies regarding military bases in the Middle East. In short, small-scale attacks were

⁴⁶ Malik, 143.

not going to compel the evacuation of the entrenched American troops from Saudi Arabia, one of Washington's most valuable allies in the region. If by chance an al-Qaeda's attack managed to force the U.S. from the Middle East, then bin Laden's goal would have been realized anyway. Nonetheless, the Saudi knew the likelihood of this occurring was slim, and he calculated that the U.S. military would have to respond to any major terrorist attack. Drawing on his seminal experiences in the Afghan war in the 1980s, the al-Qaeda leader concluded that the only way to force the United States out of the Middle East permanently would be to draw them into a bloody war in a Muslim country.

The strategy of attacking a superpower to elicit an invasion is discussed in the *Management of Savagery*, a document attributed to al-Qaeda. Initially released on the Internet, this work by Abu Bakr Naji identifies methodologies that are meant to bring about the creation of a caliphate or Islamic Sunni state, an aspiration the author contended was unattainable through peaceful means. His strategy was based on the principles of attrition warfare, an approach designed to completely exhaust the invading force. Naji used the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. following its war in Afghanistan as the prime example of a how a modern superpower could be bankrupted and thus defeated by a smaller force. He outlined how the United States had filled the void after the Russian collapse, contending that Washington remained powerful by utilizing the media and regional proxies like Israel.

Management of Savagery argued that the 9/11 attacks had been designed to draw the U.S. military into "the first trap" in Afghanistan, a move Naji endorsed for its long-term demoralizing value.⁴⁷ Naji asserts that the American occupation of Afghanistan will "exhaust and drain its

⁴⁷ Abu Bakr Naji, trans. William McCants, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass* (Cambridge, MA: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, 2006), 45.

monetary and military capabilities” until the superpower was forced to permanently abandon Muslim lands.⁴⁸ Tactically, he suggested kidnappings, small-scale guerrilla attacks, damaging infrastructure, and infiltration once the US troops had arrived in-theatre. To undermine any American-controlled media biases, the insurgency was to broadcast its own updates to keep the Muslim world accurately informed of the war.

This strategy of enticing even more Americans into Muslim lands might seem paradoxical, but it makes sense given bin Laden’s Islamic beliefs and previous experiences. First, bin Laden understood that al-Qaeda had no chance of winning a traditional battle against the world’s greatest conventional military. Although much of his rhetoric demeaned the American soldier, he was not delusional to the fact that his troops needed to avoid a strength-on-strength fight with the United States. The al-Qaeda leader wrote,

Today your brothers and sons from the two holiest sites started the jihad for the sake of God to expel the occupying enemy from the land of the two holiest sites. There is no doubt that you wish to carry on this task; to restore the glory for the country and to liberate its occupied sacred places. Nevertheless, it must be obvious to you that, due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces a suitable means of fighting must be adopted, such as using fast moving forces operating in total secrecy. In other words to initiate guerilla warfare, were the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it.⁴⁹

Second, al-Qaeda was not worried about the length of time it would take to force the American withdrawal once Washington had been provoked into an invasion of a Muslim country. After all, the guerrilla war to eradicate the U.S.S.R. from Afghanistan had taken nearly a decade. Islamic doctrine does not stipulate an explicit duration of time that Muslims had to fight to banish an invading force; it only specifies that the jihad must continue until unauthorized foreigners are triumphantly expelled.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁹ Bin Laden, “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites.”

Third, an American invasion of Islamic lands virtually guaranteed that bin Laden would receive support from the wider Muslim community during the occupation. Islam's tenets for a defensive jihad require that "everyone able to perform it, male or female, old or young" must take part in repelling an invasion of a non-Muslim force into the Dar-al-Islam.⁵⁰ Bin Laden was not naïve enough to think al-Qaeda and its modest allies could collaboratively force the United States out of the Middle East. Yet, an American incursion into the Dar-al-Islam would make it a religious obligation for all Muslims to join the fight until the invaders were removed. This meant that al-Qaeda would theoretically be joined by the larger Muslim population as well as the inhabitants of whichever country the United States invaded.

Fourth, bin Laden speculated that an American invasion would be mired in a drawn out, costly war that would deplete the country's moral and financial coffers, just as Afghanistan had done to the U.S.S.R. Coercing the United States into a Muslim country was only part of his strategy; he still needed the local population to violently resist the occupation. In a letter to the people of Iraq from 2003, bin Laden offered tactical advice to the Muslim defenders. He stated, "We also underline the importance of dragging the enemy forces into a protracted, exhausting, close combat, making the most of camouflaged defense positions in plains, farms, hills, and cities. What the enemy fears most is urban and street warfare, in which heavy and costly human losses can be expected."⁵¹ Bin Laden hoped a long war filled with American deaths would slowly poison public opinion about the United States presence in the Middle East just as it had for the Russian people. He believed the, "huge economic drain that the Jihad placed on the Soviet economy" was "a magnificent blow to the morale of the Communist mindset."⁵²

⁵⁰ Misri, 601.

⁵¹ Bin Laden and Lawrence, 183.

⁵² Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 69.

Finally, Osama bin Laden's strategy for drawing the U.S. into a protracted conflict in a Muslim country was his method of instigating economic warfare. The al-Qaeda leader reasoned that the U.S. would not pull its troops out of Saudi Arabia, even if struck with a massive but quick terrorist attack. By contrast, a protracted, costly, and deadly war would force the U.S. government to reconsider its overseas commitments, particularly if no victory was in sight. This had happened in Vietnam. His plan hoped that economic exhaustion would destroy the will of the American people. Bin Laden used the Russian experience as a paradigm for what happens to overextended nations battling unpopular foreign wars. In a letter from October 2002 titled "Why We are Fighting You," bin Laden attempted to warn the American people of their future,

If the Americans refuse to listen to our advice and the goodness, guidance, and righteousness that we call them to, then beware that you will lose this Crusade Bush began, just like the other previous Crusades in which you were humiliated by the hands of the mujahidin, fleeing to your homes in great silence and defeat. If the Americans do not respond, then their fate will be that of the Soviets who fled from Afghanistan to deal with their military defeat, political breakup, ideological downfall, and economic bankruptcy.⁵³

Although it is difficult to pinpoint when bin Laden developed his strategy for economic warfare, the al-Qaeda leader discussed it following his relocation to Afghanistan in May 1996. While living in the White Mountains at Tora Bora, Osama bin Laden outlined his strategy to his son, Omar. He stated, "First we obliterate America. By that I don't mean militarily. We can destroy America from within by making it economically weak, until its markets collapse."⁵⁴ He continued,

That's what we did with Russia. We bled the blood from their body in Afghanistan. Those Russians spent all of their wealth on the war in Afghanistan. When they could no longer finance the war, they fled. After fleeing, their whole system collapsed. Holy warriors defending Afghanistan are the ones responsible for bringing a huge nation to its

⁵³ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 196-197, 208.

⁵⁴ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Sasson, 177.

knees. We can do the same thing with America and Israel. We only have to be patient. Their defeat and collapse may not come in my lifetime. It may not come in your lifetime, but it will come. One day Muslims will rule the world.⁵⁵

The conversation between bin Laden and his son Omar likely took place during the summer of 1996, probably in June or July. This meant that bin Laden's strategy was in place prior to the East African Embassy attacks in 1998 and the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000.

Bin Laden understood the importance that information would factor into his strategy, and thus, he tried to influence world opinion. He attempted to connect with Muslim fears for support of his conflict while simultaneously trying to incite terror in the West. His theme that economic warfare could lead to the downfall of a superpower became more prevalent in al-Qaeda rhetoric in the post-9/11 years, and not only from bin Laden. Ayman al-Zawahiri repeated bin Laden's message, "In Afghanistan, America is being dragged down the same abyss into which the U.S.S.R. fell – though much faster. America keeps silent over most of its losses [casualties] in Afghanistan, although the simple media of the mujahidin exposes their lies and publicizes their losses. America will leave Afghanistan, just like the Soviets left; and it will be afflicted by the same disasters that afflicted the Soviet Union after it left Afghanistan."⁵⁶

In October 2004, bin Laden released a message via al-Jazeera titled "Your Fate is in Your Hands Alone" in which he specifically mentioned al-Qaeda's strategy for economic war. He stated, "On the other hand, we have gained experience in guerrilla and attritional warfare in our jihad against the great and wicked superpower, Russia, which we, alongside the mujahidin, fought for ten years until, bankrupt, it was forced to withdraw [out of Afghanistan in 1989] – all praise be to Allah! And so we are continuing the same policy: to make America bleed till it

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim, Zawahiri, and bin Laden, 180-181.

become bankrupt – Allah willing. Nothing is too great for Allah.”⁵⁷ He went further by providing a name for the plan. “Even more critical for America was the fact that the mujahidin have recently forced Bush to resort to an emergency budget in order to continue the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq – evidence of the bleed-till-bankrupt plan, Allah willing.”⁵⁸

Osama bin Laden was resolutely determined to force the United States out of the Middle East, and he was willing to provoke a major war to bring the U.S. into the theater. He was unwavering in his belief that the United States was already illicitly occupying Saudi Arabia, and an invasion of Muslim land would only demonstrate to the larger Islamic community of America’s imperialistic disregard for the Dar-al-Islam. However, bin Laden’s grand strategy was predicated on successfully drawing the United States into a war within a Muslim country. To accomplish this, al-Qaeda needed to do something catastrophic.

Conclusion

Osama bin Laden’s war against the United States started off slowly with a surprise attack on two Yemen hotels in 1992 but grew in complexity and lethality by the time of the East African Embassy bombings. He probably supported the Islamic warlords in Somalia during the American humanitarian intervention in the East African country. Bin Laden realized that in order to follow the rules of Islamic warfare exemplified by the Prophet Mohammad, he needed to warn the Americans before his attacks and provide them the opportunity to submit to Islam. He rectified this by openly declaring war against the United States in 1996. When this fatwa was ignored in the West, bin Laden joined forces with other Islamic fundamentalist leaders, including Ayman al-Zawahiri to gain strength through numbers. Together, they declared war on America a second time. Months later, al-Qaeda bombed two American embassies in two different African

⁵⁷ Ibid., 217.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 218.

countries. Their unyielding goal was to oust the United States military from the Middle East, devastated and never to return.

Osama bin Laden survived the American cruise missiles launched in retaliation, and he continued to run al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan through the turn of the millennium. From this sanctuary, the al-Qaeda leader cautiously moved throughout the rugged countryside attempting to avoid American surveillance. During this time, bin Laden sought new ways to escalate his war against the United States, and the Saudi began crafting more sophisticated missions. He longed for bigger payloads which would inflict larger causality rates. Bin Laden reasoned that if he could do enough damage or kill enough Americans, the United States would have no option but to come after him. Once this happened, bin Laden prognosticated that Muslims from all over the world would rally in the defense of Afghanistan, and another superpower would suffer a humiliating defeat at the hands of faithful. Afghanistan would be his Alamo, the place to make his stand or die fighting for what he believed.

We pledge here today that neither time, nor distance can bend or break our resolve to bring to justice those who have committed these unspeakable acts of cowardice and horror. We will not rest. We will never retreat from this mission.⁵⁹

-Secretary of Defense William Cohen, during the African Embassy bombing memorial service

...my biggest disappointment was not getting bin Laden...⁶⁰

-President Bill Clinton, during a meeting with President-elect George W. Bush

Slow to React: The American Response to Al-Qaeda

While Osama bin Laden began planning missions against Americans in the early 1990s, the United States never developed an effective strategy to destroy al-Qaeda until after 9/11. This was partially because decision makers neither understood al-Qaeda nor the organization's potential for lethality, and most refused to believe that a non-state actor could pose a real threat to the world's most powerful nation. While cadres of al-Qaeda soldiers were passing through training camps in backwater locales and plans were being made to hurt the U.S., Washington did not fully realize the goals of this enemy or fully appreciate the pattern of escalating attacks. It even failed to recognize bin Laden's role. *The 9/11 Commission Report* clearly points out that American officials did not understand the ever-expanding threat. It stated, "Until 1996, hardly anyone in the US government understood that Usama Bin Laden was an inspirer and organizer of the new terrorism."⁶¹ As al-Qaeda became emboldened with its attacks in the late 1990s, the United States finally recognized the threat but refused to make strategy and policy changes to address the problem.

⁵⁹ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Speechwriting, Anthony Blinken, "Memorial Service for Embassy Personnel 8/13/98," OA/ID 3380.

⁶⁰ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 935.

⁶¹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 108.

Fighting Terror but Ignoring Al-Qaeda

For its part, the Clinton administration was unable to ignore traditional terrorist threats. The World Trade Center in New York City had been struck by a truck bomb in February 1993. A few years later, a federal building was decimated during the Oklahoma City attack of April 1995. In 1996, the Centennial Park bombing occurred during the Summer Olympics leaving a black cloud over the Atlanta games. The international scene fared no better. Americans were targeted and killed in Saudi Arabia in June in Dhahran and then again in Riyadh in November 1996.⁶² To address this burgeoning problem, the CIA and FBI each received additional resources during President Clinton's first term. According to White House documents, CIA expenditures on counterterrorism (CT) doubled between FY 1993 and FY 1996, while CT personnel handling human intelligence rose 52% from FY 1993 to FY 1995.⁶³ At the same time, the FBI saw a 40% increase in funding for counterterrorism in 1995-1996, and a growth of 73% more agents and personnel assigned to address terrorism between FY 1993 and FY 1996.⁶⁴

But despite the rise in funding, Capitol Hill seemed incapable of formulating a consistent policy or approach for fighting terrorism. Although non-binding, Congress issued a resolution recommending that, "The President shall use all necessary means including covert action and military force, to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy international infrastructure used by international terrorists, including overseas terrorist training facilities and safe havens."⁶⁵ In spite of strong statements like this, Congress, particularly members of the Republican Party, fought with the

⁶² Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council. TNT – Simon, "Saudi [Arabia] Khobar/Non-Iran [2]," OA/ID 2245.

⁶³ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files. National Security Council. Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, "Sudan [6]," OA/ID 3546.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

President over the Omnibus Counterterrorism Bill, an act designed to strengthen measures against the states sponsoring terrorist organizations while increasing international collaborations against such groups. Some critics, such as Louis Freeh, the Director of the FBI from September 1993 through June 2001, argued that Congress had removed the most proactive components of the Bill before passing it.⁶⁶ Even with previous opposition, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 passed through Congress and was signed into law.⁶⁷ As the title implies, the Act authorized the use of capital punishment for individuals guilty of acts of terrorism. The White House had sought legislative amendments which would have aided domestic surveillance in 1996, but these changes never gained traction until after 9/11 when President Bush signed them into law as part of the Patriot Act.⁶⁸

The expansions of the counterterrorism programs were not the only steps taken at the time to address these growing threats. President Clinton signed Executive Order 12947 in January 1995 to obstruct terrorist funding in the United States and outlaw financial contributions to designated terror groups.⁶⁹ Al-Qaeda was not on the list. Clinton issued Presidential Decision Directive 39 (PDD 39) during the summer of 1995 to “reduce the nation’s vulnerability to terrorism, to deter and respond to terrorist acts, and to strengthen capabilities to prevent and manage the consequences of terrorist use of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons

⁶⁶ Louis Freeh, *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 284, 288.

⁶⁷ Clinton Presidential Records, NSC Cables, Emails, and Records Management Systems, NSC – Emails, “MS Mail – Record (Sept 94 – Sept 97) [Khobar] [08/03/1996 – 08/05/1996],” OA/ID 590000.

⁶⁸ Timothy Naftali, “George W. Bush and the ‘War on Terror’” in *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*, ed. Julian Zelizer (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 68.

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1995* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996).

including weapons of mass destruction (WMD).”⁷⁰ In what would become an important document as the “bin Laden problem” grew, PDD 39 essentially provided legal grounds for capturing suspected terrorists from inside countries that did not have extradition agreements with the United States. Furthermore, PDD 39 identified terrorism as, “a potential threat to national security” and promised that the country would “deter and preempt, apprehend and prosecute, or assist other governments to prosecute individuals who perpetrate or plan to perpetrate such attacks.”⁷¹

With multiple attacks having occurred on U.S. soil, the White House searched for more effective ways to safeguard the country. On July 15, 1996, the President issued Executive Order 13010, creating the Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection.⁷² The Commission’s findings were concluded by October 1997, and the White House sought ways to implement the recommendations. Clinton eventually issued Presidential Decision Directive 62 (PDD 62) and Presidential Decision Directive 63 (PDD 63) in May of 1998.⁷³ PDD 62 created the Office of the National Coordinator for Security Infrastructure Protection and Counterterrorism, which bore the responsibility of improving security for domestic infrastructure. PDD 63 also hoped to protect critical infrastructure and created bureaucratic additions to PDD 62.⁷⁴ Clinton also requested an additional \$1.097 billion, most of which went to the Department of Defense, Federal Aviation Administration, the Justice Department, and the Treasury Department, to fund the

⁷⁰ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Simon, Steven and Benjamin, Daniel, “Interagency Terrorism Response Awareness Program VIII [Binder 2],” OA/ID 3930.

⁷¹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

⁷² Clinton Presidential Records, Staff and Office Files, President’s Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection, Advanced Copies, “Final Executive Summary,” OA/ID 16624.

⁷³ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Jaime Metz, Multinational and Humanitarian Affairs, “Terrorism – IPI Campaign [2],” OA/ID 1348.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

recommendations of the Gore Commission, which included safeguarding facilities and strengthening law enforcement.⁷⁵

The Clinton White House also called on the world community to take a united stance against terrorism. During the “Summit of Peacemakers” held in Egypt after the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, a group of twenty-nine delegates, including Israel and the Arab countries, committed in March 1996 to work together against terrorism.⁷⁶ Following a summit meeting a month earlier in Lyon, a Ministerial Meeting was held in Paris for the Eight in late July 1996 to discuss methods for stemming international terror.⁷⁷ The Eight, composed of leaders from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States, agreed upon twenty-five specific measures for immediate implementation that concerned border protection, improved security, tougher laws, and increased cooperation between nations.⁷⁸ In addition to cultivating promises at the Cabinet levels of government, the U.S. worked to increase cooperation among those fighting terror on the ground. To accomplish this, a law enforcement academy was opened in Budapest housing representatives from twenty-three countries.⁷⁹ By 1996, the FBI was offering counterterrorism training to agents from over forty countries.⁸⁰

This new focus by the government demonstrated the Clinton administration’s resolve to augment its efforts for combating terrorism through strengthened counter-terror efforts, tougher legislation, and international cooperation. However, many of these efforts were hampered by the

⁷⁵ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, “Terrorism – Money and Counter-Terrorism Act [1].” OA/ID 3547.

⁷⁶ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, “Terrorism – P-8,” OA/ID 3549.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Clinton Presidential Records, “MS Mail – Record (Sept 94 – Sept 97) [Khobar] [08/03/1996 – 08/05/1996],” OA/ID 590000.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

inability to identify rogue and emerging terrorist groups, a responsibility that fell on the intelligence agencies. The US Department of State exemplifies how one agency sensed the changing dynamics of terror but failed to recognize the full magnitude of its future adversary.

In accordance with Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f (a), the Department of State is required by law to provide a detailed report to Congress concerning terrorism.⁸¹ These reports, which must be completed every five years, are mandated to provide information into various terror organizations, an outline on states willing to sponsor or harbor terrorist groups, and detailed accounts of terrorist activities. According to its 1995 report, the State Department identified trends which suggested that state-sponsorship of terror was being supplanted by individual and group-sponsored terrorism, thus making it more difficult to track suspects.⁸² Furthermore, this *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report alluded to the fact that a large percentage of terrorists had either participated in the mujahedeen guerrilla campaign in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, or were currently being trained in or funded out of the country. With little mention of the Taliban, the report nonetheless showed that the United States was aware that previous attacks, including the assassination attempt of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, had their roots within the stateless power-vacuum taking place inside Afghanistan.

Although the Department of State had correctly identified new trends in terrorist organizations, it failed completely to recognize al-Qaeda. Bin Laden's group should have been categorized under the distinction of a non-state sponsored organization with significant ties to Afghanistan. The 1995 *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, however, failed to even mention the group. Osama bin Laden was referenced on three occasions for his role as a major financier of terrorist activities. His partner Ayman al-Zawahiri was briefly referred to as a leader of the

⁸¹ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1995*.

⁸² Ibid.

Vanguards of Conquest, an offshoot of the Jihad Group. Although the report does not specify Zawahiri's whereabouts, it placed bin Laden in Khartoum. The fact that the government knew of bin Laden's location but failed to identify al-Qaeda as a non-state sponsored terrorist organization or his role as the group's undisputed leader displayed Washington's conclusion that the Saudi millionaire posed no imminent threat to the United States.

The failure to list al-Qaeda in the 1995 edition of *Patterns of Global Terrorism* signified that the State Department either did not know the organization existed, or that agency did not find bin Laden's group to be dangerous enough to warrant mentioning. At the time of its publication, it was arguable that al-Qaeda was not listed alongside such groups as Hamas or Hizbullah because bin Laden's major operations were still in embryonic stages. Part of the reason that alarms in the United States were not sounding was because only four Americans had been killed in terrorist attacks in 1994 and twelve in 1995.⁸³ In the end, the 1995 report clearly showed that al-Qaeda was not on the State Department's radar as a credible terrorist threat. It was not until October 1999, months after the East African bombing in August 1998, that al-Qaeda was officially added to the Department of State's list of terrorist organizations.⁸⁴

By the time the Department of State submitted its report for fiscal year 2000 to Congress, America's attention to al-Qaeda had changed dramatically. This millennium version of the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* contained numerous references to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. One can only conclude that bin Laden's attacks against American targets in Yemen

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

in 1992 and Africa in 1998 had forced the State Department to seriously re-evaluate where the new threats to its security were originating.

Another important source for understanding what and when the United States government knew about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda prior to 9/11 can be found in the court case *United States of America versus Usama bin Laden* indictment S (9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS). Filed in the Southern District of New York, the Justice Department indicted bin Laden and a number of his followers on three-hundred and nineteen counts against the United States, primarily for the East African Embassy bombings. In doing so, the prosecutors revealed in the indictment the explicit details of al-Qaeda's past plots and concluded by portending what they assessed to be bin Laden's future aspirations. The description of the Embassy bombings was exhaustive. The prosecutors highlighted their case with intercepted phone messages and facsimiles, letters with the defendant's fingerprints on them, as well as bags and clothes which tested positive for TNT.

Bin Laden, of course, was in absentia during the proceedings. Still, the federal prosecutors were exceedingly knowledgeable about the defendants proving that the intelligence community was addressing the information gap on al-Qaeda. The indictment set forth a brief history of al-Qaeda, bin Laden's professional endeavors from the 1980s to the time of the trial, as well as citing his movements during his life in Sudan and Afghanistan. The prosecutors were aware of bin Laden's public statements put forth in the media regarding his predisposition to target Americans, and perhaps more impressively, were able to outline his more underground activities as well. They knew bin Laden's alias, his partners in crime, and his organization's structure. The indictment accused him of attacking US soldiers in Somalia, killing Americans in the African embassies, and even attempting to purchase nuclear weapons with the purpose of

targeting the United States. This all leads to one, perhaps unanswerable, question. With possession of this critical information, why was no arm of the government taking an active role in subduing bin Laden or al-Qaeda? PDD 39 clearly stated, “When terrorists wanted for violation of U.S. laws are at large overseas, their return for prosecution shall be a matter of the highest priority and shall be a continuing central issue in bilateral relations with any state that harbors or assists them.”⁸⁵ The American government had publicly accused him of killing combatants and non-combatants while trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In this light, why wasn’t al-Qaeda anyone’s priority? When the cruise missiles failed to kill bin Laden in August of 1998, why wasn’t the intelligence community searching for enemy number one?

Killing bin Laden

After failing to fully appreciate Osama bin Laden’s role as more than a simple financier of terror for most of the 1990s, American policymakers did finally recognize al-Qaeda’s goal of killing Americans. Yet, only limited action was taken. Sent the same month as the East African Embassy Bombing, a government document with talking points from the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright concluded, “Bin Laden’s goal in his own words is to ‘unite all Muslims and establish a government which follows the rules of caliphs,’ which he believes he can accomplish only by overthrowing nearly all Muslim governments, driving Western influences from those countries and eventually to abolishing state boundaries.”⁸⁶ This demonstrated that the Department of State’s knowledge of bin Laden had expanded beyond the simple axiom that he was a financial backer of terrorist groups, an action not unheard of among wealthy and connected Saudi men. This new understanding should not have been a difficult task given bin Laden’s

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Jaime Metz, Multinational and Humanitarian Affairs, “Terrorism – IPI Campaign [2],” OA/ID 1348.

penchant for speaking out publicly. After all, the leader of al-Qaeda had already declared war on the United States in 1996 and again during a press conference as part of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders in 1998. He gave interviews to a number of respected news outlets including CNN and often released statements that were available to the general public.

Narratives vary on which government or governments actually wanted bin Laden. The assassination attempt against the Egyptian president in 1995 was a good example. As the international pressure mounted on the Sudanese leadership to expel or deport bin Laden for his perceived contributions to the operation, it appeared that no government was willing to take custody of the Saudi dissident. According to President Clinton, the U.S. requested that the exiled son of Saudi Arabia should be returned to his land of origin, but the House of Saud refused to claim its prodigal son.⁸⁷

The question needs to be raised why the United States did not try to capture or attempt to kill Osama bin Laden at this time. Al-Qaeda had already targeted American military personnel in Yemen. Bin Laden was actively training a militia in Somalia. The international community was already angered by his alleged actions against Mubarak, and it was clear that Saudi Arabia wanted nothing to do with the political fallout of having an Afghan war hero return home in shackles. Moreover, the Department of State had by this point clearly identified bin Laden as a major financier of international terror. One problem was a lack of good intelligence. The United States was simply unaware of bin Laden's full intentions, and officials did not grasp the danger posed by the al-Qaeda leader.

⁸⁷ Clinton, 797.

Aware of its intelligence shortcomings, the CIA formed a station in January 1996 under its Counterterrorism Center (CTC) dedicated to monitoring Osama bin Laden.⁸⁸ An analyst named Michael Scheuer headed the group, which became known as Alec Station.⁸⁹ The station's importance grew as bin Laden's efforts against the United States expanded to undertaking more complex missions against the United States by the late 1990s. By the time of the East African Embassy bombings in 1998, Washington had better context on bin Laden and his organization because of the work of Alec Station, but it still did not take covert action against al-Qaeda.

Embassy Bombings Propel U.S. Reaction

The United States government wasted no time in its response to the African attacks. Within days of the bombings, the CIA Director George Tenet informed a group of high-ranking officials at the White House that Osama bin Laden and his network were responsible for the attack.⁹⁰ During the African Embassy memorial service, President Clinton swore, "No matter what it takes, we must find those responsible for these evil acts and see that justice is done."⁹¹ The retaliation took place less than a week later. Under orders from the Commander in Chief, the US military commenced with Operation Infinite Response on August 20th by launching more than seventy missiles into Afghanistan to destroy al-Qaeda training camps and kill bin Laden.⁹² American intelligence had reported that bin Laden was meeting with key lieutenants within his organization, and Washington's best-case scenario involved the extermination of al-Qaeda's

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Scheuer was the Chief of the bin Laden Unit from 1996-1999 and acted as Special Advisor to the Chief of the bin Laden Unit from 2001-2004. In 2005, Alec Station was rolled into the Counterterrorist Center (CTC).

⁹⁰ Albright, 366.

⁹¹ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service for Embassy Personnel 8/13/98," OA/ID 3380.

⁹² There is no consensus on the number of cruise missiles fired during Operation Infinite Response. For example, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has said there were only twenty-nine missiles fired. Others have put the number in the eighties.

leadership structure.⁹³ A Sudanese factory located in Northeast Khartoum owned by bin Laden was also targeted.⁹⁴ This component of the American retribution became a point of controversy and embarrassment when the claims put forth by US intelligence agencies that the pharmaceutical plant was making chemical weapons such as VX nerve gas could not be confirmed. This intelligence breakdown by the CIA was just one of a number of shortcomings that the American intelligence community would make in dealing with al-Qaeda prior to 9/11.

The American reprisal, fired from naval vessels in the Arabian Sea thirteen days after the Embassy bombings, killed between twenty and thirty individuals, none of whom was a known al-Qaeda leader.⁹⁵ The Tomahawk missiles cost the American taxpayer more than \$56,250,000.⁹⁶ This aerial attack also confirmed to bin Laden and his inner circle that the Americans lacked the will to commit soldiers' lives. According to government records and statements by his own son, the United States cruise missile retaliation into Afghanistan had missed bin Laden by only a few hours. There was some indication that the al-Qaeda leader was tipped off prior to the cruise missile attack by sympathetic allies in the Pakistani military or intelligence. However, this does not seem to be the case. Those closest to bin Laden assert it was just happenstance that he changed his itinerary, thus avoiding certain death.

The use of Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan was a low-level response, but the United States government did initiate other non-lethal action against the perpetrators. The White House followed up the military attacks by

⁹³ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 24, 2003.

⁹⁴ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Jaime Metz, Multinational and Humanitarian Affairs, "Terrorism – IPI Campaign [2]," OA/ID 1348.

⁹⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attack upon the United States, 117.

⁹⁶ Atwan, 80.

implementing economic measures against the al-Qaeda leader. On the same day as the retaliatory strikes, the President signed Executive Order 13099 which froze bin Laden's assets and prohibited American businesses from working with him.⁹⁷ At the time, the Americans were uncertain of bin Laden's financial situation but were aware that he hailed from one of the richest families in the Middle East.

The Clinton administration took further economic steps to weaken the financier. Declassified White House documents confirm that some in Washington, including officials at the Department of State, called on foreign allies for information and support against Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. After freezing bin Laden's assets in the aftermath of the East African attacks, the U.S. government offered up to \$2 million for information leading to the arrest of those responsible for the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.⁹⁸ The missile strikes provided a quick response to the embassy bombings, but was the Clinton administration attacking the cancer or simply treating the symptoms? By the weakness of its response, the White House was inadvertently sending the wrong message, reinforcing bin Laden's contentions about the United States.

Intelligence Problems

Prior to the September 11th attacks, the American intelligence community never had a proactive approach to Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda. As discussed, most U.S. analysts considered bin Laden merely a financier of terror for much of the 1990s. By 1998, U.S. intelligence had become aware that al-Qaeda was seeking ways to kill Americans, but the agencies failed in their ability to forecast the attacks in Kenya and Tanzania. Accurately

⁹⁷ Perl, *Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?*, 2.

⁹⁸ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office File, National Security Council, Jaime Metzler – Multinational Humanitarian Affairs, "Terrorism – IPI Campaign [1]," OA/ID 1348.

predicting when and where America's enemies are going to attack is a monumental undertaking, but to perform this crucial task the intelligence community is well funded at approximately \$80 billion per year.⁹⁹ In spite of these resources, the CIA and the other intelligence agencies were caught off guard by the East African Embassy bombings. These agencies continued to lag one step behind al-Qaeda plots through the turn of the century.

Part of the problem for American intelligence in mastering the "bin Laden problem" stemmed from an overreliance on signal intelligence (SIGINT) rather than human intelligence (HUMINT). As the name suggests, human intelligence is information collected through human sources and might be closer to what one envisions in a spy movie. Since the days of the Cold War, the U.S. intelligence community has expanded toward technological intelligence at the cost of more "traditional" human intelligence. The National Security Agency (NSA), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), and the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) possess the ability to collect enormous amounts of data through a variety of means and sources. Much of these agencies' work originates from signal intelligence, which is essentially the interception of transmitted information either through voice, phone, the Internet, or other means of communication. As the American interest in al-Qaeda grew through the mid-1990s, U.S. intelligence began monitoring bin Laden's activities in Afghanistan through signal intelligence rather than human intelligence. This approach proved short-lived.

When it was discovered that bin Laden had survived the Tomahawk missile strikes, the White House started exploring contingency options. President Clinton empowered the CIA to use lethal force against Osama bin Laden and a number of other top al-Qaeda operatives when

⁹⁹ Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community*, 6th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 17.

and if the opportunity presented itself.¹⁰⁰ Prior to the Embassy attacks in Africa, the President had only been amenable to the prospect of capturing the al-Qaeda leader. Once members of the diplomatic corps had been blown-up, President Clinton instituted a policy change which allowed the killing of bin Laden.¹⁰¹ This mission was originally slated as an aerial strike for B-2 stealth bombers, but the task was later reassigned to submarines deployed in the Arabian Sea.¹⁰² Clinton's cruise missile attack was the one and only attempt to target the Saudi millionaire, and no other high-ranking government official authorized a follow-up strike against bin Laden until after 9/11. This was partly because U.S. intelligence agencies lost their ability to gather information on the al-Qaeda leader.

The American intelligence community tried to continue tracking bin Laden following the cruise missile response in August 1998, but the Saudi adapted to their surveillance techniques. For many years, bin Laden's greatest weapon had been his satellite phone, a tool used to manage his global organization. After he became aware, probably through media reports, that the cruise missiles had targeted his phone, bin Laden altered the ways he communicated with his network of operatives.¹⁰³ Aware of the danger, bin Laden stopped using his phone altogether. The US missile strikes into Afghanistan and Sudan succeeded in compelling bin Laden to transform his modus operandi, but this minor tactical adaptation probably saved his life. Without the satellite phone signal, the American intelligence agencies lost the ability to pinpoint the al-Qaeda leader's location or eavesdrop on his conversations.

¹⁰⁰ Clinton, 804.

¹⁰¹ Even before the Reagan administration took legal action outlawing assassinations, the United States government had prohibited political killings. However, presidents have authorized the killing of foreigners if they are considered to be an imminent danger to the United States.

¹⁰² Albright, 376.

¹⁰³ Franks, *American Soldier*, 212.

According to the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, the CIA had already been searching for a magic bullet to fix the bin Laden problem even before the African embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania. In the spring of 1998, the CIA formulated a plan to enable Afghani tribesmen to grab bin Laden at his compound known as Tarnak Farms and hold him captive until the United States could smuggle him out.¹⁰⁴ On May 20, the CIA undertook a four-day rehearsal of the operation to grab bin Laden.¹⁰⁵ A week later, Tenet personally vetoed the idea because his subordinates deemed the chance of success too low. This decision was made two months before the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam bombings. Capturing bin Laden might not have prevented his operations in Africa. However, it would have been a major victory against a man who had publicly called for the killing of Americans.

Alec Station was not the only intelligence group hunting Osama bin Laden. The Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG), which was led by Richard Clarke for much of the 1990s, was also looking for bin Laden. According to Clarke, the Counterterrorism Security Group called for meetings on three separate occasions between 1998 and 1999 with the Principals to discuss the possibility of launching cruise missiles in Afghanistan at their Saudi quarry.¹⁰⁶ The intelligence reports of bin Laden's whereabouts could not be substantiated by more than one source, and the decision was ultimately made to wait rather than risk the political backlash of collateral fatalities. As the fates would have it, the restraint shown by the Counterterrorism Security Group paid off as bin Laden was only reported to have been in America's crosshairs at one of the three targeted locations.¹⁰⁷ Of course, it would have only

¹⁰⁴ George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: The CIA During America's Time of Crisis* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 112-113.

¹⁰⁵ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 541.

¹⁰⁶ Clarke, 199-200.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

taken one successful strike to finish off the man coordinating a global campaign against the United States.

Some have challenged Clarke's account as a misrepresentation of the full story. Michael Scheuer, who ran the bin Laden unit known as Alec Station for three years, contended that there were at least two missed opportunities to capture bin Laden and eight chances to target him with air power between May 1998 and May 1999.¹⁰⁸ He outlined those occasions as,

May 1998:	Capture opportunity in Khandahar
Sept 1998:	Capture opportunity north of Khandahar
Dec 1998:	Military attack opportunity Khandahar
Feb 1999:	Military attack opportunity Herat City
Mar-Apr 1999:	More than one attack opportunity outside Khandahar
May 1999:	Five days of military attack opportunities Khandahar ¹⁰⁹

According to Scheuer, the Director of the Central Intelligence George Tenet informed Richard Clarke, Sandy Berger, and President Bill Clinton on all ten occasions that there was an opportunity to kill the al-Qaeda leader. This meant that the numerous decisions to pass on the bin Laden operations were made at the highest levels of the government and by those most vested with protecting Americans from the al-Qaeda threat.

Part of the government's reluctance to attack al-Qaeda on those opportunities was because of the potential for collateral damage. While the cruise missile option ensured that there would not be any American military casualties during a strike into Afghanistan, it could not eliminate the potential for civilian casualties. The CIA's faulty intelligence report that had led to the unnecessary destruction of the pharmaceutical factory in Sudan in 1998 had been highly scrutinized in the press. The embarrassing intelligence breakdown made the agency hesitant of

¹⁰⁸ Michael Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 61.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

making another public mistake. This desire to avoid collateral damage was a central factor in the CIA's cautious approach to bin Laden from 1998 to 2001.

For much of the 1990s, the United States government was hindered by a lack of high quality intelligence on Osama bin Laden and his organization. This failure allowed the al-Qaeda leader to be mislabeled as merely a financier of terror instead of what he really was. Following the East African Embassy bombings, the U.S. intelligence community should have made infiltrating al-Qaeda a top priority, especially once it lost the ability to monitor bin Laden's satellite phone. If this proved impossible, decision-makers needed to commit themselves to killing or capturing bin Laden through other means. Unfortunately, the intelligence agencies simply did not have the necessary human intelligence sources on the ground in Afghanistan from 1998 to 2001 to track bin Laden or anticipate his next move. This lack of accurate real-time information made it vexing for policymakers at the White House to authorize a second attempt on bin Laden's life, especially considering how poorly their first attempt had gone.

Stalemate in Afghanistan

On August 20, 1998, the Department of Defense held a press conference, during which Secretary of Defense William Cohen concluded the question and answer portion by stating,

If there are states who sponsor terrorism, acts of terrorism, they will be held accountable. If there are individuals within states who are being given safe harbor and who fail to either turn over individuals or provide an aiding and abetting of them, then this is a signal that they are not beyond the reach of the United States. To the extent that these terrorists continue to threaten, to target Americans, then they cannot feel that they are immune simply because they're in some other country.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William S Cohen, *DoD News Briefing*, August 20, 1998.

This forceful statement implied that the United States was not only preparing to go after bin Laden but also the states sponsoring or hiding al-Qaeda members. In terms of the Taliban, this thinly veiled threat from the Secretary of Defense fell on deaf ears.

The United States was no ally of the Taliban, even before the group began harboring an international fugitive known for targeting Americans. Washington, which had contributed over a billion dollars to seeing the Russians defeated in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan in the 1980s, had lost interest in the country following Moscow's retreat. When the Taliban arose from the ashes of the civil war, the West was appalled by numerous accounts of human rights violations and angered by its harsh treatment of women. Bin Laden could not have picked a more suitable place of refuge when he fled Sudan. Afghanistan was an unstable, war-torn country with no firm political or diplomatic ties to the U.S. and a burgeoning Islamic identity.

The White House sought assistance for the bin Laden problem from two Cold War allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both of which had ties to bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. Pakistan had been a major player in supplying the mujahedeen force during the Russian invasion of the 1980s, and its military, especially its intelligence agencies, continued to have ties to the Taliban. In need of help, President Clinton requested assistance from Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on four separate occasions, and the American President threatened to label Islamabad as a sponsor of terrorism if Sharif's government did not change its course.¹¹¹ In 1999, the CIA began training a sixty-man team comprised of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for a cross-border mission into Afghanistan that was to return bin Laden.¹¹² The Americans offered Sharif the additional incentive of U.S. economic relief for a successful extradition of the al-Qaeda leader, but the plan had to be scratched after Sharif was overthrown during a military

¹¹¹ Clinton, 866.

¹¹² Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 5.

coup.¹¹³ General Pervez Musharraf, who replaced Sharif, stubbornly refused Pakistani cooperation in the mission. Not to be deterred, the Clinton White House continued to request assistance from Musharraf who became Pakistan's new powerbroker. The FBI Director Louis Freeh also met with President Musharraf in April 2000 in hopes of cultivating a deal for bin Laden's extradition.¹¹⁴ Once again, the Americans could not persuade Pakistan to action.

If Pakistan was the conduit for supplies to the Afghani freedom fighters, then Saudi Arabia was unquestionably the war's bankrollers. The House of Saud shared Washington's disdain for communism, and Riyadh helped the United States shoulder the cost of the conflict in the 1980s. Unlike the Americans, the Saudis continued to invest in Afghanistan following the Kremlin's withdrawal. Along with Pakistani assistance, the Saudi government helped finance the Taliban's conquest of much of the country. Riyadh became so close with the Taliban that it rebuffed the international community by becoming one of the only countries in the world to open diplomatic relations with Kabul. This honeymoon ended in 1998. With his government under pressure from Washington, Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal visited Kandahar to persuade Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden.¹¹⁵ After the meeting, the Saudi Prince departed under the impression that Mullah Omar intended to surrender bin Laden, but when Prince Turki returned to pick up his target, the Taliban leader reneged. This second meeting between Prince Turki and Mullah Omar in September 1998 turned into a heated affair, and the incident resulted in Saudi Arabia severing diplomatic relations with the Afghan government.

¹¹³ Richelson, 439.

¹¹⁴ Freeh, 286-287.

¹¹⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

The United States government also attempted to broker its own deal for bin Laden. In the days after the cruise missiles had descended on the al-Qaeda training camps in rural Afghanistan, the Taliban initiated conversations with the State Department which lasted for the next two years.¹¹⁶ The Taliban had entered the negotiations hoping to engineer bin Laden's departure from Afghanistan in exchange for diplomatic recognition, but Washington grew restless waiting and threatened serious repercussions unless bin Laden was surrendered by February 1999.¹¹⁷ The American delegation had warned its Afghani counterparts that the Taliban would be held accountable for any future al-Qaeda attacks. It was around this time that bin Laden, who had been an asset during the Afghan civil war, became a great liability for the Taliban. With limited options, the al-Qaeda leader knew his best option was to remain in Afghanistan, and he soon disappeared from Kandahar. The Taliban claimed ignorance as to bin Laden's whereabouts.

In the summer of 1999, the White House followed through with its threats. Under Executive order 13129, President Clinton froze approximately \$254 million of the Taliban's assets as punishment for refusing to hand over the al-Qaeda leader.¹¹⁸ The change in tactics did not work because the sanctions were leveled against a country that was already among the poorest in the world. The economic sanctions might have even redoubled the Taliban's efforts to protect bin Laden.

Although the United States had been unable to bring bin Laden to justice, the White House continued to press for more personpower and funding to combat terrorism. President Clinton called for \$6.7 billion to fight terrorism in 1999, which doubled the FBI's counter-terror

¹¹⁶ Albright, 371.

¹¹⁷ Rashid, 140.

¹¹⁸ Katzman, *Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors*, 2001.

budget and its agent count from the previous year.¹¹⁹ This call for an increased commitment to combating terrorism reveals the extent of the President's concern. Clinton, who was proud of his fiscal conservatism and balanced budgets, would not have splurged needlessly on terrorism unless he was truly concerned for the future of the country.

Ironically, while the White House and Congress were increasing the FBI's budget, the Bureau remained stalled in its handling of al-Qaeda. In spite of Osama bin Laden's rhetoric and attacks against the United States, he did not make the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List until April 1999.¹²⁰ This seemed rather tardy considering other intelligence agencies such as the CIA had been monitoring al-Qaeda's activities since 1996, and the Embassies had been bombed in 1998. The FBI's lack of expediency in adding bin Laden to the Most Wanted List exemplified the problem of inter-agency communication. The CIA, which handles international intelligence, was withholding information from the FBI, America's domestic intelligence and law enforcement agency, about the serious threat posed by bin Laden. The FBI's traditional prioritization of its role in domestic law enforcement over intelligence work might have also been a factor.

Policy Failures

One of the reasons al-Qaeda managed to slip through Washington's fingertips up to the millennium was that American policies towards terrorism were outdated and unsuited to halting an unconventional individual like Osama bin Laden or his global organization. According to White House papers, President Clinton had ordered that his counterterrorism policies be based on the following directives, "First, the U.S. will make no deals with terrorists or submit to blackmail. Second, we will treat terrorists as criminals. Third, we will work to prevent terrorist

¹¹⁹ Rashid, 137.

¹²⁰ Freeh, 285.

acts by bringing maximum pressure on states that sponsor terrorists through sanctions, by urging other states to do the same, and by creating a robust antiterrorism capability.”¹²¹

None of these approaches were relevant to al-Qaeda, which was a religiously-fueled, non-state organization. The group had no desire to broker a deal with the United States. The notion that religious zealots were amenable to blackmail was antiquated and evinced a misunderstanding of al-Qaeda’s paradigm. Al-Qaeda operated under a perceived religious mandate to remove American soldiers from Saudi Arabia and other “historically” Muslim lands. While a secular democracy might respect theocratic governments, it was unthinkable for the U.S. to conduct foreign policy according to fundamentalist religious mandate. Plus, it was unlikely bin Laden and his operatives would have simply stopped planning attacks against the United States, even if this had occurred. Washington did eventually begin treating al-Qaeda as an international terrorist organization, but the Justice Department did not bring an indictment against its members until 1998.

The last tenets of Clinton’s counterterrorism plan regarding international cooperation likewise failed. The U.S. brought about international pressure and UN sanctions against Afghanistan with the hope of capturing bin Laden. However, the Taliban leadership simply refused to surrender their guest. Diplomatic pressure had little effect in a failed state like Afghanistan. The administration’s attempts to convince regional allies to assist with the bin Laden problem also proved futile. Saudi Arabia, which had invested fortunes in Afghanistan dating back to the Russian invasion of 1979, did break off diplomatic relations with the Taliban when negotiations reached a stalemate. However, the Royal family never committed the full weight of the Kingdom into capturing its dissident son. The other state with a real chance for

¹²¹ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Transnational Threats, Clarke, Richard, “Terrorism – P-8,” OA/ID 3549.

getting bin Laden was Afghanistan's neighbor, Pakistan. Unfortunately for the Americans, Pakistan did little more than give lip-service to the task. In spite of a number of White House initiatives to increase US antiterrorism capabilities, al-Qaeda did not receive the attention it deserved even as the group extended its killing spree of Americans through land-based, sea-based, and aerial-based missions.

The Job No One Finishes

As the 1990s came to a close, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were finally recognized to be an expanding threat to the United States. This became clearer to the Americans after the caskets began returning from the East Africa Embassy bombings. Nonetheless, the White House was distracted by numerous other issues at the time. Clinton and his family were dealing with the repercussions of the president's affair with one of the White House interns. The Monica Lewinsky scandal became a political issue when the conservative right began calling for the President's impeachment for obstruction of justice. Soon, there were calls of "Wag the Dog" politics over Clinton's cruise missile response to the African Embassy attacks in 1998.¹²² According to these allegations, the Commander-in-Chief's decision to use force was questioned as merely a way for President Clinton to distract the nation from his personal affairs. Clinton's use of force during Operation Infinite Resolve was eventually exonerated by the National Commission on Terrorist Attack Upon the United States which found, "no evidence that domestic considerations entered into the discussion or the decision-making process. All

¹²² Released prior to the Lewinsky scandal, *Wag the Dog* is a movie starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert de Niro in which the American president creates a fake war in order to distract the country from a sexual affair.

evidence we have found points to national security considerations as the sole basis for President Clinton's decision."¹²³

In addition to the president's personal problems, a multitude of other problems plagued the post-Cold War world distracting Washington's attention. In spite of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein and his Republican Guard remained of great strategic concern for many Washington policymakers. During a speech at Stanford University in December 1998, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger alluded to Saddam Hussein by name thirty-four times while mentioning Osama bin Laden only once.¹²⁴ Iraq remained a target for many neo-conservatives who were angered that Saddam Hussein had remained in power following Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Although the no-fly zones prevented Saddam Hussein from using aggression against neighboring countries, his forces continued to occasionally fire upon the British and American pilots patrolling the skies above Iraq.

Additionally, the US government remained acutely aware of the destructive threat of rogue nuclear weapons. Concern over weapons of mass destruction did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although there was the possibility that a rogue state or group would be able to obtain a nuclear weapon, state-sponsored weapons programs remained the top-tier concern. Nuclear ambitions came to fruition in Pakistan in 1998, and this development had almost ignited a war with its traditional rival, India, which already possessed a nuclear arsenal. Washington insiders feared what might happen if Iran, which was often accused of supporting terrorist organizations, was able to advance nuclear aspirations. In spite of its efforts, the Clinton administration had failed in its various attempts to broker a peace between Israel and its

¹²³ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel III, March 23, 2003.

¹²⁴ Clinton Presidential Records, White House Staff and Office Files, National Security Council, Speechwriting, Tom Rosshirt, "[Middle East] [2]," OA/ID 4020.

neighbors. Just as there was serious apprehension over the outbreak of a war on the Indian subcontinent, the U.S. feared what might transpire if the nuclear-armed Israel decided to prevent Iran's program from ever going online.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States government found itself dealing with a number of global repercussions set in motion by the conclusion of the Cold War. The country was also confronted with the latest conflict in Eastern Europe known as the Kosovo War. A series of wars burned through the former state of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the U.S. and its allies intervened on humanitarian grounds in 1998. The NATO-led air campaign was another distraction taking policymakers away from the al-Qaeda threat, as Washington worked with other European nations to extinguish the ethnically-charged fighting in the Balkans.

The end of a century should have been accompanied by notions of modernity and hope for a better future. But instead the new century ushered in new and serious concerns at the highest levels of the US government over an al-Qaeda millennium attack on American soil. On December 31, 1999, representatives from the White House, DOD, CIA, FBI, and Attorney General Janet Reno met at the FBI's Strategic Information and Operations Center (SIOC) in case bin Laden's operatives struck the homeland.¹²⁵ The White House's anxiety did not center singularly on al-Qaeda, and there were grave concerns over cyber-attacks and Y2K. After ignoring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda for much of the 1990s, high-ranking officials of the U.S. government spent the last hours of the decade and the first hours of the new year preparing for the worst.

¹²⁵ Freeh, 295-296.

Conclusion

As a result of multiple domestic terrorist attacks on American soil, the Clinton administration increased funding and personpower for programs geared towards protecting the United States homeland. Although the government had been caught off-guard by the African attacks in 1998, the White House did order military action by targeting bin Laden, his operatives, and his training camps inside Afghanistan within weeks of the African bombings. However, the result inflicted little damage on al-Qaeda's infrastructure, and bin Laden eluded the strikes altogether. This American reprisal should have marked the start of a tougher stance against bin Laden's organization.

Instead, Washington fumbled to formulate a coherent policy on Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Stymied in its efforts to come up with an effective strategy for handling the idiosyncratic group, the White House adopted a wait-and-see attitude. If American policymakers had fully understood al-Qaeda, its underlying ideology, its motivation, or its ultimate goals, this never would have been allowed to happen. Part of the problem originated from a lack of reliable intelligence. The U.S. intelligence community failed to infiltrate al-Qaeda and was unable to replace the intelligence from bin Laden's satellite phone with on-the-ground actionable intelligence. These agencies lost the White House's confidence after the cruise missile response failed to hit bin Laden in Afghanistan, and a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan was unnecessarily destroyed. This distrust between the Clinton administration and its intelligence community prevented the launch of a second mission to eliminate bin Laden. In addition to these issues, the United States was never able to persuade regional allies to assist with the bin Laden problem. As a result of these multiple failures, bin Laden continued to plot against the United States and survived with his organization into the next millennium.

The impediments to developing a comprehensive strategy against al-Qaeda were many: 1) a lack of vision and understanding of the threat by intelligence agencies, 2) a White House preoccupied with other domestic and international problems, 3) political division in Congress which precluded fundamental changes to operational procedures, 4) internal law and United Nations policies that provided sovereignty to states unable to secure their borders, 5) a lack of international cooperation from influential Muslim nations that either directly or indirectly supported anti-Western rhetoric, 6) America's inability to overcome the inertia of the international security system that had been built on Cold War principles.

The year 2000 meant little to Osama bin Laden personally, who had no need for the non-Islamic calendar. Yet for bin Laden, the years leading up to the millennium marked the beginning of his campaign against the West like the quiet before a storm. He had declared war against the United States, had planned and financed operations against America, had killed her sons and daughters, and had survived. Rather than abandoning his war with the United States, Osama bin Laden was inspired by his victories which only motivated him to double-down with more elaborate plans for bleeding America. He still wanted an invasion.

It was monstrous, a clear act of war by a sworn opponent of the United States, right in the middle of a heated presidential campaign. Yet within forty-eight hours, the *Cole* had virtually disappeared from the news cycle. As for the campaign itself, the attack was a nonissue. I can't recall either candidate ever raising it, or the larger terrorist threat it spoke of, in any serious, on-going way.¹²⁶

-Louis Freeh, Director of Federal Bureau of Investigation

And in truth, for all that they wanted to put daylight between themselves and the Clinton administration, they [the Bush administration] weren't any more successful at resolving difficult and competing issues in their opening months than their predecessors had been.¹²⁷

-George Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence¹²⁸

The Lost Opportunity: The American Response to the USS Cole

As pointed out by historian Christopher Rein, the United States has a history of entering wars following an attack or a perceived attack upon its naval vessels.¹²⁹ In 1898, the alleged attack against the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor caused President McKinley to declare war on the Spanish empire, a move which resulted in American acquisition of foreign territory. The German decision to unleash unrestricted submarine warfare was a major factor in the American entry into the Great War. Most notably, the Japanese devastation to Pearl Harbor's "Battleship Row" thrust a reluctant White House into the Second World War. A minor naval engagement off the coast of Vietnam known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident led to the longest war in American history up to that point. So, why did the near-sinking of the USS *Cole* fail to provoke a similar reaction?

¹²⁶ Freeh, 292.

¹²⁷ Tenet, 142.

¹²⁸ Brackets added by author to provide context.

¹²⁹ This idea was discussed between Rein and the author on the campus of the University of Kansas.

For much of the 1990s, American policymakers were indisputably ignorant of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. After early al-Qaeda missions were disregarded and bin Laden's declarations of war were ignored, the United States government could no longer remain passive following the East African Embassy bombings in 1998. President Clinton authorized the use of deadly force in Afghanistan and Sudan, but the effort failed to inflict serious damage. If anything, the tepid strikes invigorated al-Qaeda's resolve. Once American officials realized that the al-Qaeda leader had not been neutralized, US intelligence agencies, including the CIA, increased their efforts to track bin Laden with the end-goal of killing or capturing him. Two years passed with bin Laden still at-large before a small explosive-filled boat crewed by two haphazardly trained men nearly sank an American destroyer. Since Washington was already in pursuit of bin Laden for killing civilians before the bombing of the USS *Cole*, why did America back away from its objective of getting bin Laden at all costs following the incident in Aden?

A number of inaccurate narratives surround the American response to the USS *Cole*, and this chapter examines the legitimacy of these allegations. One such claim was that policymakers at the highest levels of the United States government were not certain who was responsible for the USS *Cole* attack. This appears dubious, and members of the U.S. intelligence community have challenged this observation. A second claim posits that the Clinton White House did absolutely nothing after the Yemen attack. While little debate exists concerning the lack of an aggressive military response following the USS *Cole*, the Clinton administration did utilize various forms of diplomacy to deal with the "bin Laden problem." The last claim alleged that the Bush administration handled the problems originating from Afghanistan more effectively than the Clinton administration. Like the other two narratives, this was also inaccurate. The

Bush White House was just as negligent as the Clinton White House in its poor handling of the Taliban, Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden.

Narrative One: The U.S. Failed to Discern Who Was Behind the USS *Cole* Bombing

One of the narratives that proliferated after the USS *Cole* bombing alleged that the primary reason the United States showed restraint against the global al-Qaeda network was because the government did not know who was responsible for the attack. The United States would eventually establish with absolute certainty that Osama bin Laden had personally overseen the Aden attack, had financed the operation, had selected the location, and had tried to handpick the suicide bombers. Unfortunately for American policymakers, all of these facts could not be ascertained immediately after the bombing.

Under this theory, the White House was reluctant to order offensive action because officials feared retaliating against the wrong individual or group. President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and the National Security Advisor Sandy Berger have all put forth this argument. During his testimony to the 9/11 Commission in January 2004, NSA Berger stated that there was “no conclusion by the time we left office that it was al-Qaeda.”¹³⁰ In her memoirs, Albright wrote, “It wasn’t until after I left office that the FBI conclusively established a link between al-Qaeda and the *Cole* attack.”¹³¹ These observations were an oversimplification of a highly complex situation. This rationalization for inaction also unfairly passes the burden of responsibility for a lack of response to the USS *Cole* bombing from the decision-makers onto the intelligence community.

¹³⁰ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 193.

¹³¹ Albright, 378.

Various individuals from US intelligence agencies have stepped forward and denied the allegation that the Clinton administration had been uninformed about the identity of the perpetrators behind the USS *Cole* attack. FBI special agent Ali Soufan contended that al-Qaeda was always at the forefront of the Yemen investigation. While working at the New York Field Office, Soufan had authored a memo predicting a major attack one week before the bombing of the USS *Cole*. Fluent in Arabic, Soufan had been deployed as part of the FBI ground team in Yemen. He disputed the narrative that no one had known who was responsible for the attack. When he heard Sandy Berger's statements to the 9/11 Commission, Soufan was deeply disturbed by the National Security Advisor's willingness to contort the story. Soufan recalled, "Everyone – the White House, the military, the CIA, CENTCOM – were all briefed on the fact that the bombing of the *Cole* had been an al-Qaeda operation. We waited for an official U.S. response against al-Qaeda. And we waited."¹³²

John O'Neill, the head of National Security in the FBI's New York office, also suspected that the USS *Cole* bombing had been perpetrated by al-Qaeda operatives even before his arrival on the scene in Yemen.¹³³ The FBI was not the only agency connecting bin Laden with the crime from the outset. Like O'Neill, Special Agent Ken Reuwer of NCIS had an initial idea of who was responsible before landing in Aden. He stated, "Things like al-Qaeda had never left my scope, but it was certainly re-energized as soon as I heard about an attack on a Navy ship. It is what first came into my mind obviously but you don't jump to conclusions. You can form opinions but you work with facts and that's what we set about to do."¹³⁴ A high-ranking official at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), who wished to remain anonymous, was even more

¹³² Soufan, 194.

¹³³ O'Neill retired from the FBI and was killed during the September 11th attack in New York.

¹³⁴ America Abroad Media, "Remembering the Cole," <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/The%20investigation%20into%20the%20Cole%20bombing.pdf>.

blunt. He stated, “We had a very solid indication that it was al-Qaeda. We presumed. Within a couple of weeks it was clear.”¹³⁵ Michael Scheuer, the former Chief of the bin Laden Unit, concurred with Soufan and the other intelligence agents that there had been no uncertainty about who was responsible for the attack. Scheuer was unequivocal on this point. He stated, “I can say with confidence that CIA working-level officers had no doubt about who authored the attack on the *Cole*—al-Qaeda’s fingerprints were visible from the moment the water-borne bomb was detonated. Whatever the reason Mr. Clinton decided not to militarily respond to the near-sinking of the *Cole*, it was not due to a lack of intelligence pointing to al-Qaeda’s culpability.”¹³⁶

The press also had nascent ideas about who had killed the seventeen American sailors. Less than forty-eight hours after the bombing, an article from the *New York Times* already identified Osama bin Laden as a possible mastermind behind the attack.¹³⁷ Of course, not all of the news reporting on the USS *Cole* turned out to be so accurate. Looking for a scoop, the *Washington Times* reported in its October 25, 2000 edition that the National Security Agency (NSA) had warned that an attack in the Middle East was imminent prior to the bombing.¹³⁸ These allegations turned out to be false, but the *Washington Times* was not wrong about everything. They also carried a story blaming bin Laden for the attack.

The USS *Cole* investigation was a fluid situation with clues and evidence emerging over days, weeks, and even months. The FBI initially dispatched special agents from the Washington field office (WFO) as well as investigators from their New York office. If the team uncovered proof that al-Qaeda had been responsible for the bombing, then the trial would take place in the

¹³⁵ Gutman, 213.

¹³⁶ Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell*, 104.

¹³⁷ Clinton Presidential Records, “Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1],” OA/ID 21113.

¹³⁸ Raphael Perl and Ronald O'Rourke, *Terrorist Attack on USS Cole: Background and Issues for Congress*,

Southern District of New York where the initial indictment of bin Laden, *United States of America versus Usama bin Laden* indictment S (9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS) had originally been filed. If proof was found, the FBI agents from New York were ordered to take over the case. After the team did indeed discover enough evidence to support the already widely-held belief that al-Qaeda had been behind the bombing, the FBI team from Washington returned stateside. This retreat by the Washington field office revealed the direction the FBI leadership saw the case unfolding.

Approximately a month after the attack, President Clinton's advisors decided that there was adequate proof against al-Qaeda to present their findings to the president. During a meeting on November 11, Sandy Berger and Richard Clarke informed President Clinton that it appeared bin Laden's network was responsible for the USS *Cole* bombing.¹³⁹ Two weeks later, Berger and Clarke briefed the President that although the investigation was not yet finalized, the intelligence community had concluded that the Yemen cell members had trained at bin Laden camps and that there were at least two intelligence reports tying bin Laden to the attack.¹⁴⁰ By December 21, the CIA reported that their "preliminary judgment" was that al-Qaeda was involved, that Nashiri was leading a cell, and that they had established a timeline from the planning phase up to the actual bombing in Aden harbor.¹⁴¹ Even with this information, there was no public response from the White House.

Those at the highest levels of government stated that the reason the U.S. failed to retaliate for the USS *Cole* was because the intelligence community had been unable to conclusively identify al-Qaeda as the culprits. Yet, as discussed, a number of highly regarded and informed

¹³⁹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel II, March 24, 2003.

¹⁴⁰ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 194.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

witnesses from the center of the intelligence world reported that bin Laden's organization was always considered to be at the forefront of the investigation. Perhaps part of this confusion developed because the decision-makers were dealing with fluctuating levels of certainty. President Clinton and some of his closest advisors wanted the American case against al-Qaeda to be absolute. The intelligence agencies asserted with reasonable certainty that bin Laden and his organization were behind the Aden attack, but none of them were willing or able to state that conclusion with the unachievable 100% certainty demanded by the overly-cautious President.

For unverified reasons, the White House stopped distributing written reports concerning their theories on who was responsible for attacking the USS *Cole*.¹⁴² The silence, which began not long after the bombing, extended into the final months of the Clinton presidency. This approach made little sense with the stated policy. If the administration was truly concerned with determining who was accountable for the bombing of one of its destroyers, then the White House would have wanted to circulate as much accurate and updated material on the attack as possible. By blacking-out the discussion, officials were able to plead ignorance and give cover to the apparent decision to do nothing. Suppressing the dissemination of intelligence reports also protected policymakers. If documents were leaked or disclosed indicating that the White House had been aware that al-Qaeda was involved in the deliberate killing of naval personnel and still chose to do nothing, it would have been a political embarrassment for the President and his cabinet.

Although questions remained concerning the absolute certainty of their conclusions, officials up and down the chain-of-command at the FBI, CIA, DIA, and other intelligence agencies were pressing their case to the White House that al-Qaeda was responsible for the

¹⁴² Ibid., 193-194.

Yemeni attack. Leaders rarely have the good fortune to make decisions with all of the facts, and great ones have the ability to make the right call against calculated risk. With eight years of experience in the White House, the Clinton administration had plenty of experience dealing with similar situations. Given this fact, it becomes difficult to understand why the White House was so reluctant to pursue Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda particularly since neither the organization nor its leader had ever been brought to justice for the East African Embassy bombings and the retaliatory missile strikes were known to have been ineffective. President Clinton had every right, and if not a duty, to retaliate against al-Qaeda while the USS *Cole* investigation evolved. Even if it was later discovered that another organization had been responsible for the attack in Yemen, President Clinton would have been taking the fight to a group who had declared war on the United States on multiple occasions, decimated two of its foreign embassies, and murdered American citizens.

Narrative Two: The US Did Nothing after the USS *Cole* Attack

Another narrative concerning the USS *Cole* bombing was that the United States government did absolutely nothing in the wake of the al-Qaeda attack. These allegations often depicted Clinton as a “lame duck” president, who simply ignored the bin Laden problem on his way out the Oval Office. While it was incontrovertible that the Clinton White House never ordered military operations against bin Laden after the USS *Cole* attack, his administration did seek a diplomatic resolution to the conflict.

As the White House struggled with its response to USS *Cole*, the intelligence community continued to experience obstacles. The FBI team in Yemen working to link al-Qaeda to the bombing was proving more successful with each passing week. Yet, intelligence agencies were incapable of pin-pointing bin Laden’s location for an extended period of time because the Saudi

fugitive used counter-surveillance techniques such as staying on the move and avoiding the use of his satellite phone. This strategy paid off for bin Laden. One of the most detrimental failures of US intelligence agencies in the pre-9/11 years was a lack of human intelligence gathering inside Afghanistan. Because there was not an American presence collecting information in-country, the intelligence community was forced to rely on locals for information, causing the quality of reporting to fall along a wide spectrum. Delving for credible indigenous sources, the CIA recruited at least thirty Afghan agents known as the “Seniors” to follow bin Laden’s every move.¹⁴³ Even this group, which consisted of native Afghans, found it extremely arduous to track the Saudi’s activities.

Without concrete knowledge of bin Laden’s movements or location, military planning became taxing for the Americans. A Tomahawk cruise missile offered unprecedented accuracy, but its GPS-based logistics programming required specific coordinates. Like cruise missiles, a traditional bombing campaign would require tangible marks. During this time, the drone program was not combat-tested, and the CIA was still working on upgrading the UAVs from being primarily a real-time surveillance provider to an offensive weapon armed with Hellfire missiles. The option of inserting US Special Forces teams into hostile territory offered the additional benefit of providing eyes on the ground that could verify bin Laden’s death but that too required more specificity. Another option would have been a land-based invasion, a decision which would have invariably alienated allies and risked igniting an unwanted and unpopular confrontation against Mullah Omar’s Taliban forces. This was, of course, the response bin Laden desired most.

¹⁴³ Woodward, 6.

Several White House insiders have claimed that they wanted to go after al-Qaeda in the months after the USS *Cole* attack. Richard Clarke, who was one of Clinton's primary counterterrorism advisors at the time, contended that decision-makers in Washington knew that al-Qaeda was responsible for the Yemen bombing, but felt the FBI and CIA's failure to officially state bin Laden as the culprit hurt the case for a military response.¹⁴⁴ Michael Sheehan, a State Department specialist appointed by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as Director of the Bureau of Counterterrorism, and Dale Watson, who was working on the FBI's Counterterror unit, shared Clarke's desire to avenge the USS *Cole*. Like Clarke, Sheehan and Watson were unable to convince others in the administration to target bin Laden militarily. Following the Yemen attack, Clarke claimed that his requests for bombings in Afghanistan fell on deaf ears during White House meetings with the Principals.¹⁴⁵

Of course, wanting to go after bin Laden and possessing the ability to do so are not one and the same. Clarke, Sheehan, and Watson's ambition to target the al-Qaeda leader meant little without workable intelligence on his location, something the intelligence agencies were struggling to provide. General Tommy Franks, who led Central Command (CENTCOM) from 2000 to 2003, questioned how the military was supposed to get bin Laden when no one knew where he was. Angered by those who went public on this issue, Franks stated, "I never received a single operational recommendation, or a single page of actionable intelligence, from Richard Clarke."¹⁴⁶ The Americans needed to know where their target was hiding.

In the midst of the joint investigation by the FBI, CIA, and Yemeni intelligence, US officials began formulating a response under the assumption Osama bin Laden was the culprit.

¹⁴⁴ Clarke, 223.

¹⁴⁵ The author has submitted Mandatory Declassification Review Requests at the Clinton Presidential Library to ascertain additional information on this topic.

¹⁴⁶ Franks, *American Soldier*, 227.

After the USS *Cole*, the National Security Council requested that the intelligence community, including the CIA, draft an Afghan directory of potential al-Qaeda and Taliban targets, a project that became the backbone for Operation Infinite Resolve.¹⁴⁷ The hit list included a number of traditional military options, including training and storage facilities, as well as more novel selections such as Afghani heroin factories.¹⁴⁸ By the middle of November, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger called on General Shelton to review the options for eliminating bin Laden.¹⁴⁹ Created in 1998, Infinite Resolve went through a number of modifications following the bombing in Aden harbor. An updated plan provided by Shelton offered thirteen options which included a prolonged air campaign against al-Qaeda, but the revisions did not have a scenario for a land-based invasion of Afghanistan at that time.

As part of its diplomatic approach, the White House decided to turn to the international community for assistance against Afghanistan, a nation which had isolated itself from the wider world under the Taliban rule. On October 15, 1999, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1267 which banned foreign flights by Ariana, Afghanistan's national airline, and allowed UN members to freeze Taliban assets.¹⁵⁰ When the sanctions did not have the desired effect, the UNSC authorized Resolution 1333 in December 2000 to pressure the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden and demanded the cessation of state-sponsored support of

¹⁴⁷ Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell*, 104.

¹⁴⁸ Afghanistan has been the world's foremost producer of heroin, which comes from poppy production. In the early years of the Taliban's rise, the group outlawed poppy farming. Either out of economic necessity or because of the starvation taking place in the countryside, the Taliban allowed farmers to return to their poppy fields at some point during their rule.

¹⁴⁹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel III, March 23, 2003.

¹⁵⁰ Katzman, *Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors*, 2001.

international terrorist organizations.¹⁵¹ Expanding on the previously-passed NSCR 1267, Resolution 1333 called for the international community to freeze bin Laden's assets, embargo arms to the Taliban, and stop all non-humanitarian flights from Afghanistan until the Taliban capitulated to the United Nations demands.

As the Clinton administration drew to a close, the US intelligence community was in the midst of constructing a plan for Afghanistan. Under Cofer Black, the head of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, a plan called "Blue Sky" was created to directly engage al-Qaeda.¹⁵² The plan was delivered to Richard Clarke on December 29, 2000. "Blue Sky" proposed an immediate increase of support to the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban groups, an action designed to exert pressure on al-Qaeda by disrupting their sanctuary in Afghanistan. The Clinton administration did not enact "Blue Sky" in its last weeks in office, but it left a foundation for dealing with al-Qaeda to their successors.

Rather than initiating a military response, the Clinton administration embraced a strategy of utilizing diplomatic means to bring Osama bin Laden to justice in its last months in office. In his memoirs, the President wrote, "I was very frustrated, and I hoped that before I left office we would locate bin Laden for a missile strike."¹⁵³ Clinton's strike never happened. However, "Blue Sky," represented a plan designed by the intelligence community that was ready for the next administration to resolve Clinton's unfinished business in Afghanistan. After the Bush White House retained Clinton's counterterror group, it appeared "Blue Sky" would be activated.

¹⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001).

¹⁵² Tenet, 130-131.

¹⁵³ Clinton, 925.

Possible Reason: The US was Overseeing Middle East Negotiations

Some individuals posit that the White House did not respond militarily to the USS *Cole* because President Clinton feared jeopardizing a last-hour effort toward a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although these two policies were, of course, not mutually exclusive, Clinton's top priority was resolving the long-standing Middle Eastern feud before his departure from the Oval Office. The President had invited Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to Camp David in early July 2000 for a week of negotiations.¹⁵⁴ In an unprecedented offer, Barak appeared willing to withdraw from large swaths of territory held by Israel since its victory during the Six Days War/June War in 1967, open to discussion over the sovereignty of Jerusalem, as well as the return of certain Palestinian exiles. Unwilling to arbitrate, Arafat balked at these concessions, and the summit failed.¹⁵⁵ Aware of the rare foreign policy opportunity, President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright continued their attempts to broker peace between the two sides until their final hours in office. In her memoirs, Albright considers the inability to negotiate a peace between the Israelis and Palestinians to be her greatest disappointment as Secretary of State.

From a strategic standpoint, there is no doubt that President Clinton desired stability in the Middle East, but he also had a personal interest at stake. If Clinton had been able to negotiate a successful resolution between these two longstanding adversaries, he would have cemented his presidential legacy as the statesman who resolved an intractable issue which had plagued policymakers for half a century and earned a Nobel Peace Prize. According to the narrative that Clinton was avoiding military action after the USS *Cole* in order to focus on the

¹⁵⁴ Albright, 486-496.

¹⁵⁵ Ehud Barak lost the following election to Ariel Sharon, a hardliner. By passing on Barak's offer, Arafat ironically helped usher in a Prime Minister considered unsympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Middle East concessions, the Commander-in-Chief would necessitate all the political capital he could accrue if he was to achieve peace at the negotiation table. There were concerns that the Middle Eastern delegations might have been angered if the U.S. initiated hostilities in Afghanistan during the summit.

This is a weak theory. The President could have easily justified an American retaliation for the bombing of a naval ship. He had, after all, set a precedent by using force following the East African Embassy bombings. It is highly unlikely that the Israelis, who have always maintained a heavy-hand against terror, would have objected to an American reprisal. There is no way of knowing with certainty how the Palestinians would have reacted, but the U.S. would have been centering its strikes inside Afghanistan, not a place known for being sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. If President Clinton had been serious about responding with force to the attack upon the USS *Cole*, the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks provided an excuse but no serious obstacle.

Possible Reason: Clinton Did Not Want to Hurt Gore

The actions or inactions of an outgoing American president are always going to impact an election, a case that is particularly true when the vice president is one of the candidates running for that office. In the presidential election of 2000, Bill Clinton supported Vice-President Al Gore campaign. This desire to assist Gore in his highly contested race against Texas Governor George W. Bush might have been a contributing factor in dissuading President Clinton from initially taking military action against bin Laden after the attack on the USS *Cole*.

The Presidential election of 2000 was a statistical toss-up. Under the Twenty-Second amendment, Clinton was banned from running for a third term, and thus, the White House was going to have a new occupant regardless of which party won. As the incumbent vice-president,

Al Gore was the presumptive Democratic nominee. The Republicans had no clear-cut favorite before George W. Bush moved to the front, ultimately defeating Arizona Senator John McCain as his party's nominee.

During the primaries and the presidential campaign, serious foreign policy discussions were overlooked or avoided by both parties. Focus on domestic issues over foreign policy is typically a higher priority for the American electorate, and therefore each of the presidential candidates concentrated their attention on issues closer to home like taxes, crime, health care, and education. When Bush and Gore were asked to address their views on the status of the foreign relations, most of the questions and responses concerned hostile states, such as Serbia or Iraq. Osama bin Laden was not considered a talking-point by either candidate, and the American media ignored the subject during the election season.

President Clinton publicly supported Al Gore's bid for the presidency by making campaign trips on his behalf as well as by engaging in media appeals. In his memoir, Clinton described feeling strongly that Gore was the right candidate for the job going so far as to say, "he had had a more positive impact on our country as vice president than any of his predecessors; he had the right positions on the issues and would keep the prosperity going; and he understood the future, both its possibilities and its dangers."¹⁵⁶ Yet in this particular election, the President's coattails were not what they had once been. While President Clinton's approval ratings remained high, he had faced serious personal and political scrutiny for his behavior with Monica Lewinsky.¹⁵⁷ He had survived the Republican-led impeachment but did not emerge unscathed from the affair. The situation put Gore in the uncomfortable position of owning his work as part

¹⁵⁶ Clinton, 911.

¹⁵⁷ President Clinton's approval ratings were actually better during this second term than his first term in spite of the impeachment proceedings.

of the Clinton administration while disassociating himself from the politically-damaged President. During a phone conversation, President Clinton joked with Gore that he would stand outside *The Washington Post* and allow the Vice President to bullwhip him if he thought it would help the campaign.¹⁵⁸ But, it was too late. The damage had already been done.

In the case of the East African Embassy bombings, President Clinton had responded with Tomahawk cruise missiles within two weeks of the incident. The USS *Cole* attack had occurred on October 12, 2000. Less than a month later, the American public went to the polls to elect their next Commander-in-Chief. Campaigns are fluid things, and the period between October and November was a critical time for Gore and Bush to make their final appeals to the millions of voters.

Perhaps recent history influenced President Clinton's decision process. The President, who had no previous military experience, had been affected by the loss of American military personnel during the Black Hawk Down debacle of his first term. This factored into his decision to use missiles to retaliate rather than placing boots on the ground during his second term, as exemplified after the Embassy attacks. But, the President had faced criticism of "Wag the Dog" politics because the missile strikes had occurred around the time his extra-marital affair was gaining media attention. The retaliatory strikes were also controversial because the American intelligence agencies had wrongly claimed that chemical weapons were being produced at the Sudanese pharmaceutical plant. The destruction of the factory was viewed by critics as an irresponsible use of power.

Regardless of what action Clinton took or failed to take against al-Qaeda in the waning days of his presidency, his decision would have affected the polls in the final weeks of the

¹⁵⁸ Clinton, 873.

election. There was little chance that the President would have authorized troops into Afghanistan, especially since the U.S. had recently managed the Kosovo intervention through the air. That left a traditional bombing campaign or another cruise missile strike. Once again, these options required precision targets.

Of course, there was another option available to the White House. The President could have waited until after the November election to use military force. This course of action would have had the additional benefits of allowing more time for the investigators to identify the perpetrators behind the USS *Cole*, and it could not have negatively impacted Gore's campaign. President Clinton decided against this, and he left office with Osama bin Laden still at large.

Narrative Three: The Bush Administration Did a Better Job of Handling Bin Laden than the Clinton White House

The Presidential election of 2000 became one of the most hotly contested in the history of the country with Texas Governor George W. Bush winning the Electoral College but losing the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore. The election results from the powerful swing state of Florida were so close that the decision required a series of recounts. When the Florida Supreme Court refused to stop the recount, Bush appealed to the United States Supreme Court. Nearly a month after the November election, the United States Supreme Court decided the *Bush v. Gore* dispute by a single vote, and George W. Bush became the forty-third president of the United States.

When the dust from the election finally settled, the outgoing President and the President-elect met at the White House to discuss the transfer of power and the future of the country. President Clinton was apprehensive that the new administration appeared overly concerned with Iraq instead of focusing on America's most serious threats. According to Clinton, the outgoing President warned George W. Bush that Osama bin Laden was the nation's largest security

concern, and he believed there were numerous other problems which took precedence over the actions of relatively-enveloped Saddam Hussein.¹⁵⁹ The President-elect neither responded to Clinton's commentary at that meeting nor did the new administration heed the former President's advice.

The uncharacteristic nature of the 2000 election interrupted a smooth transfer of power. However, this delay was not crucial in impacting how the new administration would ultimately deal with al-Qaeda. The *Bush v. Gore* case was settled in December, and the President entered the White House as scheduled on January 20. President Bush and his advisors might have been distracted from assembling their administration and deprived of part of the generally available transitional period, but these unforeseen circumstances should not excuse the administration's mishandling of bin Laden. If al-Qaeda had been a top priority, the Bush administration still had plenty of time to take the fight to Afghanistan in the eight months prior to September 11.

Instead, the new administration continued to deal with the bin Laden threat in a similar manner as the Clinton White House. For all the hype between the great American political parties, wide-sweeping change can be difficult to institute from presidential administration to administration, especially during the earliest days of any new administration. The United States government is akin to a giant supertanker, which can only change directions slowly and with a great deal of momentum. Consistent with modern political practice, President Bush appointed a number of the most powerful positions in the US government. These selections, many of whom had served previously in the White House during the Cold War, were consistent with the direction that President Bush hoped to pursue for the country. The new administration retained a number of Clinton holdouts in the intelligence arenas with DCI George Tenet and FBI Director

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 935.

Louis Freeh holding their positions. Although there were new faces in the President's cabinet, the status quo attitude towards al-Qaeda never changed. The supertanker simply headed in the same direction.

The Bush administration came to power with ambitions of distinguishing itself from the previous White House. It accomplished this goal in some areas, but members of the cabinet tasked with creating policy to address the bin Laden situation failed to act. President Bush and key members of his team treated the USS *Cole* bombing as a closed issue, even though the attack had occurred only a few months before the presidential transition. President Bush had complained about Clinton's lack of action stating, "When al Qaeda blew up the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen, America mounted almost no response at all."¹⁶⁰ Bush's Secretary of Defense felt the same. Donald Rumsfeld asserted, "In like fashion, American leaders did not act forcefully in response to al-Qaida's fatal attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000."¹⁶¹ These statements demonstrate that Bush and Rumsfeld clearly attributed the lack of retaliation to the Clinton administration's malaise on the issue, thus implying that the USS *Cole* was no longer their problem to address.

During his presidential campaign, then-Governor of Texas George Bush had addressed the USS *Cole* bombing on CNN stating, "I hope we can gather enough intelligence to figure out who did the act and take the necessary action. There must be a consequence."¹⁶² It was on the campaign trail that Bush received his initial briefings concerning the al-Qaeda threat.¹⁶³ He was updated on the USS *Cole* investigation after only a few days in the Oval Office. On January 25,

¹⁶⁰ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 191.

¹⁶¹ Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 282.

¹⁶² The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 201.

¹⁶³ Bush, 134.

DCI George Tenet shared the same information that he had with President Clinton; the CIA believed the perpetrators were part of al-Qaeda but the case was not absolute.¹⁶⁴ The new President, who was eager to dissociate himself from the legacy of his predecessor, did not want to follow Clinton's example of resorting to cruise missiles. By not responding to the USS *Cole* attack, Bush was ironically adopting the same lackluster course of non-action as Clinton had in his final months in office.

In terms of defense policy, President Bush entered office more concerned with missiles than he was with a small group living in the Afghan mountains. Bush had filled his advisory cabinet with aging Cold Warriors who assured the President that America's most dangerous threat remained intercontinental ballistic missiles. To address this, Bush longed to revive a project proposed under Ronald Reagan known as "Star Wars." This type of futuristic missile defense system, which in theory would create an impregnable wall around the continental United States, had proven to be a pipedream in the 1980s because military technology could not meet the architect's lofty aspirations. By making this once far-fetched initiative a reality, Bush hoped to increase security for Americans. Focusing on high tech national defense systems differentiated the new President from the previous one.

President Bush, who had been receiving intelligence reports on al-Qaeda since his campaign, continued being briefed on the subject by the CIA after taking office in January 2001. The CIA's Michael Morell briefed the Commander-in-Chief each morning, and he recalled inundating President Bush with information on al-Qaeda, bin Laden, Afghanistan, and the Taliban.¹⁶⁵ The CIA ensured the President was fully apprised of the threat, and one can only

¹⁶⁴ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 201.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Morell, *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism – From al Qaeda to ISIS* (New York: Hatchet Book Group, 2015), 39.

conclude that his calculated choice to refrain from initiating a military response to the USS *Cole* had little to do with the distractions of his unconventional transitional period.

Like President Bush, other high-ranking officials inside the new administration were also briefed on the dangers of al-Qaeda during their early days in office. These updates were often provided by the outgoing members of the Clinton White House or by the intelligence community. The process was aided by Bush's decision to retain most of the top intelligence officials from the previous administration. According to government hearings, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin Powell were all informed that al-Qaeda sleeper cells had infiltrated multiple Western countries including the United States.¹⁶⁶ During his exit meeting with Dr. Rice, Sandy Berger speculated that President Bush's new NSA would spend most of her time on terrorism, specifically on al-Qaeda.

Trouble with Allies and the Department of State

Before the Bush administration took office, one American general continued the efforts he had started during the Clinton administration to garner foreign support against al-Qaeda. In January 2001, General Tommy Franks, the commander of CENTCOM, met with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in Rawalpindi to press for regional assistance against bin Laden and al-Qaeda.¹⁶⁷ During their meeting, President Musharraf offered Pakistani assistance in Afghanistan in exchange for American economic and military aid. Because of Pakistan's continuous support of the Taliban, Musharraf might have been the United States' best prospect of an ally who could actually deliver bin Laden. The opportunity slipped away because General

¹⁶⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel II, March 24, 2003.

¹⁶⁷ Franks, *American Soldier*, 227-229.

Franks was not authorized to make such a deal at the time, and Pakistan would not join in the hunt for bin Laden until after 9/11.

The Bush White House continued its dialogue with Musharraf, but the effort was more of a formality than a top priority for the administration. Just as Clinton had made appeals to Pakistani leadership, President Bush followed up General Franks' interaction with President Musharraf in a series of written appeals. If the new President had correctly identified the threat from bin Laden, there were other avenues to increase pressure on the Pakistani leader which he did not pursue. Instead, Bush relied on the low-key appeal of a diplomatic letter. NSA Condoleezza Rice and other officials in the administration initiated their own attempts at harnessing support from Afghanistan's neighbor. However, the White House never threw its full weight behind the effort, and no concrete agreements with Pakistan were ever put in place.

Pakistan was not the only Muslim country reluctant to assist the United States with the bin Laden issue. Long-time American ally Saudi Arabia also remained sluggish in providing assistance to the Bush administration when it came to al-Qaeda. Saudi intelligence had been attempting to track bin Laden's activities for years, and the government was additionally concerned with the domestic ramifications of hundreds of al-Qaeda members with roots in the Kingdom. The House of Saud remained apprehensive of what might happen if these disgruntled fighters returned home and redirected their wrath against the monarchy. The royal family was also involved in Afghani affairs because Saudi Arabia had been a major supporter of the Taliban during the country's civil war, a relationship that had become strained in the late-1990s. Through the work of their intelligence agencies and their allies, the Saudis possessed enormous amounts of intelligence on bin Laden and his global network that would have been invaluable to

their American counterparts. Hoping the situation remained in the background, the House of Saud was slow to share this information with Washington.

In dealing with Saudi Arabia, the Bush White House took a different route than the previous administration. Clinton officials had convinced the House of Saud to negotiate directly with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar in exchange for bin Laden. Multiple attempts led by Saudi Prince Turki had failed and resulted in an official diplomatic rupture between the governments of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Although the two sides discussed a number of other policy matters, the Bush administration did not continue the Clinton strategy of pushing the Saudis to play an intermediary role in Afghanistan. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States summarized, “The Bush administration did not develop any diplomatic initiatives on al Qaeda with the Saudi government before the 9/11 attack.”¹⁶⁸

This proved to be a foreign policy mistake. For many Sunni Muslims, Saudi Arabia was viewed as the protector of Mecca and Medina and the foremost leader in the Islamic world. Once U.S. intelligence reports started raising concerns over the probability of an impending al-Qaeda attack, the Bush administration should have pressured the House of Saud into action. Saudi Arabia was one of the only governments in the world that could have successfully negotiated with the Taliban for bin Laden. At the very least, the U.S. government should have pushed for full disclosure of information from the Saudi intelligence services since their American counterparts would have benefited greatly from knowing what the Saudis knew about al-Qaeda.

To its credit, the Bush administration did try going directly to the source of the problem, the Taliban. Mirroring another move of the previous administration, the Department of State

¹⁶⁸ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

continued its attempts to negotiate for bin Laden through his Taliban hosts. The United States had already imposed economic sanctions on Afghanistan, despite it being one of the poorest countries in the world, and new threats of escalatory punishments did little to compel an Afghan conciliation. Just as the talks had proved fruitless during the Clinton days, the two sides remained stymied in the early months of 2001.

In addition to the problems resonating out of Afghanistan, the Department of State was dealing with a myriad of other issues which included the continued threats of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and unexpected negotiations with the Chinese government after one of its jet fighters crashed into an American reconnaissance plane in April 2001. Perhaps one of the most distracting foreign problems originated from the Middle East. Secretary of State Colin Powell invested much of his early months trying to slow the rising tensions between the Israelis and the Palestinians, who had entered into a conflict known as the Second Intifada. Early on, Powell and much of the State Department were preoccupied with the highly-volatile Intifada, not on resolving the challenges in Afghanistan.

Besides seeking diplomatic resolutions to the al-Qaeda threat instead of military solutions, the Bush administration followed the Clinton policy of hoping that budgetary increases might be the answer to protecting the American homeland. Prior to 9/11, there was agreement at the highest levels of the Bush government concerning the need to increase spending for counterterrorism programs. The FBI and CIA were slated to be the primary benefactors of the windfall. These proposed escalations of funding were similar to how President Clinton and his advisors had dealt with al-Qaeda in the 1990s. Throwing money at the problem in the absence of a clear and targeted policy had not worked for Clinton, and it would continue to prove futile for Bush.

Department of Defense

Even the Department of Defense did not appear overly concerned with the al-Qaeda threat at the onset of the new administration, and its highest-ranking officials developed a dovish stance on the USS *Cole* bombing after taking office. During the transition period, Rumsfeld's predecessor William Cohen had briefed the incoming Secretary of Defense on a number of important issues including the al-Qaeda threat. However, Rumsfeld entered the Pentagon with his own agenda which aspired to transformative change for the Armed Services. Rumsfeld also pursued a global review of American military capabilities aimed at increasing efficiency, something he believed the Department of Defense was failing to achieve in the post-Cold War world. To accomplish his ends, Rumsfeld asked for \$35 billion more than the Clinton budget had requested the previous year, an appeal that was eventually pared down by the administration.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, there is no question that Rumsfeld inherited a well-funded agency with very deep pockets. The Secretary of Defense hoped to create a "new military" for a new century.

In his early months on the job, Rumsfeld's military reviews focused on how the Armed Forces should handle aggressive states. Instead of investing time on rogue quasi-states or non-state actors such as al-Qaeda, Rumsfeld centered his attention instead on Russia and China, as well as the growing missile threats from Iran and North Korea. Small wars were not a priority. When the Pentagon's Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-intensity Conflict (SOLIC) departed the post in January, the position was not filled until after September

¹⁶⁹ Rumsfeld, 331.

11, 2001.¹⁷⁰ This meant that the DOD’s highest-ranking office tasked with terrorism was empty for the first eight months of the Bush administration.

The highest-ranking officials at the Pentagon had no interest in retaliating on behalf of the sailors lost in Aden harbor. The Secretary of Defense contended that the time for a retaliatory strike had passed on the previous President’s watch, even though the attack had only occurred a few months earlier. In a written statement from 2004 to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Rumsfeld stated, “I do not believe that launching another cruise missile strike 4 months after the fact would have sent a message of strength to terrorists. Indeed, it might have sent a signal of weakness.¹⁷¹” The Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz shared this opinion going so far as to call the USS *Cole* “stale” by the time the Bush administration took office.¹⁷² These were sad positions from leaders who were supposed to be advocating on behalf of the United States military personnel.

Multiple Courses of Action

Although new to the Oval Office, President Bush had multiple options for dealing with the bin Laden situation long before September 2001. These policy changes were available to the President even in his earliest days in office because the plans had been crafted during the previous administration. “Blue Sky” was Cofer Black’s plan developed a month before the Clinton administration left office that called for increased American support to the Northern Alliance to disrupt al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan. Richard Clarke took “Blue Sky” and incorporated its ideas into a second policy paper called “Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from

¹⁷⁰ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 208.

¹⁷¹ Donald Rumsfeld, *Remarks by Secretary of State Donald H. Rumsfeld before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Panel IV, March 23, 2004.

¹⁷² The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 202.

the Jihadist Networks of al Qida: Status and Prospects.”¹⁷³ This plan estimated that it would take between three to five years to blunt al-Qaeda capabilities, but it recommended the immediate removal of bin Laden and the organization’s leadership structure as soon as possible.

Richard Clarke, whose job along with most of the counterterror group had been retained from the Clinton to Bush administration, was never able to convince the new administration that al-Qaeda was a clear and present danger. After the transition, NSA Rice downgraded the power of Clarke’s position. During his time working with the new Principals, Clarke held meetings with Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Steve Hadley, but he failed to secure serious policy change on al-Qaeda.¹⁷⁴ One such example occurred a few days after the Bush administration entered the White House. On January 25, Clarke forwarded a “Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from the Jihadist Networks of al Qida: Status and Prospects” to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice with hopes of setting up an NSC Principals meeting to reevaluate White House policy.¹⁷⁵ No immediate meeting to discuss this plan was scheduled. In fact, there was not a Principals committee meeting on the topic of al-Qaeda until September 4, 2001 over eight months later.¹⁷⁶

In his memo to Rice, Clarke had asked with a tone of urgency when the new administration was planning to retaliate for the USS *Cole* attack. NSA Rice responded to Clarke on January 31 that a Principals meeting was not necessary, but that he could, “develop a strategy.”¹⁷⁷ Clarke’s abrasive personal style made few inroads with the Principals, and

¹⁷³ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷⁴ Clarke, 227-246.

¹⁷⁵ Tenet, 143.

¹⁷⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 201.

¹⁷⁷ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 65.

consequently, he never managed to present his concerns personally to the new President. Exemplifying the lack of importance the administration attached to al-Qaeda, President Bush never had a meeting to discuss terrorism with Richard Clarke, his National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Infrastructure Protection, until after the devastating attacks on September 11th.¹⁷⁸

Louis Freeh, the long-standing director of the FBI through the Clinton years, was another Washington-insider who surmised that the Bush administration did not fully appreciate the bin Laden threat until it was too late. Freeh, who was not close to Bill Clinton or Richard Clarke, was at first optimistic that President Bush and his advisors would take bolder measures in their Afghan policies. Although he worked for the Bush White House for less than half a year, the FBI Director did not see any fundamental changes in the way the United States leadership was addressing the looming al-Qaeda dilemma.

In addition to the White House, the intelligence community was culpable for its inability to track Osama bin Laden and its failure to infiltrate his network of operatives. However, agencies such as the CIA can only institute policy changes with the approval of the White House. For example, the CIA could not have commenced with operation “Blue Sky” unilaterally. To enact such a plan, a US intelligence agency must first get presidential approval. While American intelligence on bin Laden remained thin, reports began filtering in that al-Qaeda was looking to strike again. As this information flowed in, the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet expressed his concern to a number of officials in the Bush administration suggesting that a policy review was long overdue.

¹⁷⁸ Clarke, 242.

During the spring of 2001, U.S. intelligence began intercepting communications that al-Qaeda was planning something big. On April 19, George Tenet and Michael Morell briefed President Bush and Vice President Cheney that credible sources were reporting that bin Laden was planning multiple sophisticated attacks against American interests.¹⁷⁹ Intelligence analysts continued producing similar reports, and Morell briefed the President during his daily meetings with reports titled “Bin Ladin Attack May Be Imminent” and “Bin Ladin Planning High-Profile Attacks.”¹⁸⁰ In spite of these ominous reports, the White House did not act.

DCI George Tenet continued conveying his warnings each week during his routine briefing with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. After a particularly heated meeting on July 10, Tenet believed the White House was finally going to escalate its policy towards al-Qaeda. That afternoon, the CIA informed Rice during a briefing that seven different pieces of evidence predicted an impending attack.¹⁸¹ Cofer Black, the CIA’s specialist on Counterterrorism, then suggested to Rice that the United States needed to go to a “war footing.” The individuals advocating for an immediate offensive war against al-Qaeda left the meeting under the assumption that policy changes were coming, but the sense of urgency at the conference table never materialized into anything concrete.

With no sense of increased urgency and no discernible shift in policy, the July meeting passed into history as one of a series of lost opportunities. Rather than making a unified decision on how to respond to the USS *Cole*, the Bush administration simply allowed the issue to linger unaddressed and festering. The only decision concerning the *Cole* bombing on which the

¹⁷⁹ Morell, 40-41.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸¹ Tenet, 150-151.

Principals were able to come to a consensus was that a Tomahawk cruise missile strike was not the answer. Outlining the position of the Bush administration, NSA Rice asserted,

The President had made clear that he didn't want his administration to be put into the position of the Clinton administration after the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in 1998 and the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. The only real option then had been a "standoff" – one in which cruise missiles or maybe bombers could be used from international waters or U.S. military bases, but nothing more because there was no regional support. In fact, our administration did not respond militarily to the *Cole* incident because we didn't want to launch a feckless cruise missile attack and leave al-Qaeda intact, allowing Osama bin Laden to crow that he had survived the United States' military response. We needed a more comprehensive approach.¹⁸²

Too Little, Too Late

The idea to address the problems in Afghanistan finally began taking root in the summer of 2001. To implement this policy change, a three-phased plan was formulated that would be initiated as part of a presidential directive.¹⁸³ The first stage was to give the Taliban one final chance to hand over Osama bin Laden. Should this attempt fail, the U.S. would begin covertly supporting anti-Taliban groups while building support for an international coalition. If neither approach worked, the American government would take action to overthrow the Taliban. A major shift in foreign policy was required by the new approach, and it necessitated support from the highest levels of government. A meeting to discuss this plan did not transpire for several months. This delay angered many of the hawks who already felt too much time had been wasted.

On August 6, 2001, President Bush was informed during his Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB) that there were signs that al-Qaeda's next move was going to occur on American soil. The briefing was titled "Bin Ladin Determined to Attack Inside the United States."¹⁸⁴ Because

¹⁸² Rice, 65.

¹⁸³ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 206.

¹⁸⁴ Rice, XVI.

of the sensitive nature of the briefing, only a select few other than the President were privy to this information. According to President Bush, the classified document stated, “We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that...bin Laden wanted to hijack a US aircraft.”¹⁸⁵ The PDB seemed to have made little impact inside the White House. In spite of the possibility of a domestic attack, the Principals delayed holding another meeting to discuss the threat report for another month.

When the Principals finally met in early September to discuss amending the Afghan policy, Richard Clarke sent a desperate and belligerent note to NSA Condoleezza Rice. Still angered by a lack of response for the USS *Cole*, Clarke wrote,

The fact that the USS *Cole* was attacked during the last administration does not absolve us of responding to the attack. Many in al Qida and the Taliban may have drawn the wrong lesson from the *Cole*: that they can kill Americans without there being a US response, without there being a price...One might have thought that with a \$250m hole in a destroyer and 17 dead sailors, the Pentagon might have wanted to respond. Instead, they have often talked about the fact there is ‘nothing worth hitting in Afghanistan’ and said “the cruise missile cost more than the jungle gyms and mud huts” at terrorist camps.¹⁸⁶

In this one paragraph, Clarke bluntly summarized the gravity of America’s failure to respond expeditiously and forcefully to the attack on its own Navy. The Principals finally met on September 4 to discuss a plan for Afghanistan. Most of the meeting was spent debating whether the DOD or the CIA should be responsible for handling the Predator drones program.¹⁸⁷ However, the group did come to a consensus to approve the new presidential directive on Afghanistan.

¹⁸⁵ Bush, 135.

¹⁸⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 212-213.

¹⁸⁷ Tenet, 160.

After being in office for eight months, the highest levels of the Bush administration finally decided on a new policy for Afghanistan, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda in early September 2001. The proposed presidential directive was expected to take at least three more years to fully implement, a timeline which further exposed the complete lack of urgency toward terrorism.¹⁸⁸ The plan allotted the CIA between \$125 million and \$200 million per year to supply anti-Taliban groups.¹⁸⁹ On September 10, NSA Rice sent the presidential directive to President Bush for his final approval.¹⁹⁰ One day later, nearly 3,000 Americans were dead.

Conclusion

The American response to the USS *Cole* bombing was most likely affected by its proximity to the Presidential election of 2000. The Yemen attack transpired less than a month before Americans were going to the polls, and President Clinton would leave office a few months later. Even if President Clinton chose not to undertake military action because of its potential impact on Vice President Al Gore's chances of winning, he still had time in the Oval Office after the November election. Clinton was hindered by a lack of actionable intelligence, and not as some have postulated, because of ongoing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The claims that the Clinton administration did not know who was responsible for the USS *Cole* attack were weak, and leaders in the intelligence community have refuted this narrative. The Clinton White House knew of bin Laden's role in the Aden bombing and never should have allowed him a reprieve. At the time of the USS *Cole* attack, the al-Qaeda leader was still at large and wanted for his involvement in the African Embassy bombings. Unable to get their man, the Clinton administration left the unresolved dilemma to its successors.

¹⁸⁸ After 9/11, this plan was expanded and became National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) 9.

¹⁸⁹ Woodward, 36.

¹⁹⁰ Rice, 70.

During his presidential campaign, President Bush declared on CNN that the bombing of the USS *Cole* demanded a response. After taking office in January 2001, President Bush had his chance. Instead, the President and his advisors continued the lackluster policies established during the Clinton administration regarding al-Qaeda. The Bush White House could have retaliated for the USS *Cole* bombing during its early months in office but decided the time for a response had passed. Just as the Clinton administration had given haphazard attention to various groups and threats other than al-Qaeda, President Bush and his advisers were similarly distracted. The Bush administration failed to understand the post-Cold War threat paradigm in which non-state actors can be deadly and more difficult to detect than a traditional enemy.

Instead, the Bush White House underestimated the exigency of al-Qaeda threats and treated the USS *Cole* bombing with neglect. When the families who had lost their sons and daughters on the USS *Cole* requested to meet with the new commander-in-chief, President Bush declined to take a meeting.¹⁹¹ The new administration had entered office hoping to make a clean break from Clinton's policies, but instead held steady to the previous administration's inertia towards Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden. Like their predecessors, President Bush and his advisors did not fully understand al-Qaeda's capabilities and refused to take decisive action. This attitude of neglect toward terrorism would change on a Tuesday September morning.

President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, and President George W. Bush, a Republican, each had opportunities prior to 9/11 to pursue Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and perhaps avert the largest terrorist attack on domestic soil. If the previous attacks designed to kill Americans had not delivered bin Laden's message loudly and clearly, then the near-sinking of a warship should

¹⁹¹ Soufan, 253.

have sounded the alarm and caused the United States government to fight back. Instead, successive presidents made listless attempts at diplomatic solutions, Washington went about business as usual, and bin Laden survived to see his magnum opus.

The influence of the government will be felt in its most legitimate manner in maintaining an armed navy, of a size commensurate with the growth of its shipping and the importance of the interests connected with it. . . Undoubtedly under this second head of warlike preparation must come the maintenance of suitable naval stations, in those distant parts of the world to which the armed shipping must follow the peaceful vessels of commerce. The protection of such stations must depend either upon direct military force. . . or upon a surrounding friendly population.¹⁹²

-Alfred Thayer Mahan, opening of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*

Although the U.S. economy, with vast industrial, technological, agricultural, and resource components, is one of the most powerful in the world, it is not self-sufficient. We depend on the continued flow of raw materials and finished products to and from our country. Ensuring that the world's sea lanes remain open is not only vital to our own economic survival; it is a global necessity.¹⁹³

-Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare*, 1994 edition

Naval Doctrine: An Examination of the USS Cole's Presence in Yemen

In his personal writings, Harry S. Truman concluded that, "We didn't become a very great trade nation until we became interested in sea power."¹⁹⁴ Although President Truman was writing about the struggles the nation had faced during its infancy, it was a fitting remark from the man whose presidency coincided with a new age in American naval power. The Second World War marked the ascendancy of the United States Navy as the world's most powerful naval force, a stature that was only challenged for a short period in the 1970s by the Soviet Union's Red fleet. However, as President Truman noted, the United States had not always been captivated with sea power. America's engagement of naval power can be attributed to several

¹⁹² Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890, 1918), 40.

¹⁹³ Department of the Navy, Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 3.

¹⁹⁴ Harry S. Truman, *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Margaret Truman (New York, Warner Books, 1989), 196.

factors, not the least of which was the persuasive writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan. His influence in shaping the political discourse was so profound that Mahan's philosophies remained at the core of American naval doctrine a century after his death.

The USS *Cole* deployed to the Middle East in 2000 as part of the American-led coalition force that had been operating off the coast of Iraq since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait a decade earlier. While this constituted the basic reason why the USS *Cole* was joining the Fifth Fleet in 2000, a deeper appreciation of America's global naval presence relies on an understanding of the United States Navy's doctrine and operational capabilities. These themes help explain the purpose behind the presence of the USS *Cole* in Aden, Yemen on October 12, 2000.

Alfred Thayer Mahan

In the post-Civil War years, the United States remained primarily focused internally. The country's great military shrunk during the Reconstruction period, and the Army's forces that survived demobilization were mostly involved with counterinsurgency operations in the Indian Wars. These brutal campaigns led to the closure of the West, a geographic region that had helped shape the American identity. At the beginning of this era, Americans harbored little ambition for external conquest. This began to shift as the country neared a new century, and the influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan helped shape national sentiment by promoting a new approach to manifest destiny.

A.T. Mahan, a graduate of the Naval Academy who had never managed to distinguish himself while serving on the high seas, made his contribution with the pen. He deduced that all military action could be explained and organized through a series of scientific laws that had

“universal application” even as technological advances altered the battlefield.¹⁹⁵ After years of working on his theories at the Naval War College, he published *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* in 1890 to widespread acclaim. This work, along with his supplemental writings, resonated with policymakers and the general public alike, transforming Mahan into an international celebrity.

Mahan’s primary thesis was that naval power and national greatness were directly connected. His opus opens with a declaration that, “The history of Sea Power is largely, though by no means solely, a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war.”¹⁹⁶ This was hardly an innovative concept at the time, as Mahan’s series of treatises on naval power coincided with an era of increasing popularity of nationalism, expansionism, racism, and imperialism. These sentiments fit perfectly into Mahan’s theories which argued that great countries participated in a zero-sum game for commerce, colonies, and, ultimately, power.

Apparent throughout his writing, Mahan’s model was built on his assertion that Great Britain’s hegemonic status as a world power existed because of geographic position and the dominance of the Royal Navy. Mahan found purpose in promoting a strong navy, a goal he argued the United States needed to address expeditiously. He contended that in order for the United States to be recognized as a first-class international power, the country needed to modernize and expand its navy, strengthen its merchant marine force for commercial purposes, and acquire colonies for resources and to act as naval bases. His theories were an amalgamation of politics, military power, and economics, each of which drove the next. He wrote,

¹⁹⁵ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 13.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it, except in the case of a nation which has aggressive tendencies, and keeps up a navy merely as a branch of the military establishment. As the United States has at present no aggressive purposes, and as its merchant service has disappeared, the dwindling of the armed fleet and general lack of interest in it are strictly logical consequences. When for any reason sea trade is again found to pay, a large enough shipping interest will reappear to compel the revival of the war fleet.¹⁹⁷

Even though Mahan built upon the work of his predecessors, his legacy was solidified by melding these various philosophies into one thesis and by the popularity of his publications. He borrowed from the principles of Antoin-Henri Jomini, whom Mahan often referenced in his own writings. Like Mahan, Jomini was both a practitioner of war as well as a theorist. Jomini based his philosophies on what he believed were the practical lessons of the bloody Napoleonic wars. In turn, Mahan appropriated Jomini's primarily land-based concepts and applied them to naval warfare. Perhaps the most significant shared notion between the theorists involved lines of communication and interior lines, two separate concepts that were tied together. Keeping in mind the speed at which information moved during the epoch in which they wrote, both Jomini and Mahan believed that any nation that could control an enemy's lines of communication held a significant advantage during war. A force could gain interior lines by capturing and holding positions deemed to be of strategic importance. Interior lines were additionally desirable to shorten the distance that communication needed to travel and because they enabled forces to become concentrated at a faster rate than the enemy.

For most of their country's history, Americans have opposed the preservation of a large-standing army, and the concept of funding a sizable non-wartime navy was considered even more outlandish. Mahan recognized the existence of this national narrative even conceding the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 22.

economic benefits of small but nimble militaries. However, he found this to be short-sighted as well as a dangerous risk for a growing nation, and Mahan became fixated on modifying public opinion. A radical idea for the era, he began calling for the creation of a powerful navy even during peacetime. He argued, “The United States, with no aggressive purpose, but merely to sustain avowed policies, for which her people are ready to fight, although unwilling to prepare, needs a navy both numerous and efficient, even if no merchant vessel ever again flies the United States flag.”¹⁹⁸ Mahan’s effort to redirect the discourse targeted the government in addition to the person on the street.

Drawing his conclusions from the triumphs of the British empire, Mahan envisioned a sizable navy capable of operating far from America’s shores. His writings were categorically opposed to the country producing a smaller, cheaper navy capable of raiding but unable to defeat a top-tier enemy in a decisive battle. His ideal force would be capable of defeating foreign navies in great battles, at any location on a map, thereby providing the United States with naval supremacy. This was not a universally accepted theory, and Julian Corbett, a British contemporary of Mahan, disagreed over the importance of decisive naval battles.¹⁹⁹ Corbett rejected the decisive battle because he felt it was extremely difficult to draw an enemy into such a fight on the high-seas where avoiding battle was much easier than on land. Instead, Corbett valued the dispersal of naval forces to multiple sea-lanes over the concentration of forces required for large-scale battles. A navy capable of projecting such offensive power through a decisive victory, Mahan argued, would protect the continental United States through distance and

¹⁹⁸ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., Between the Years 1887-1911* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1915), 447.

¹⁹⁹ Like Mahan, Sir Julian Corbett advanced notions of naval warfare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most notably in his influential *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

deterrence. Control of the sea would assure safety to the country's merchant marine force, while allowing the additional benefit to policymakers of being able to disrupt an enemy's commercial trade at will. It was this fusion of military and economic power that Mahan believed would shape America's future.

Writing at the perfect time for his message to resonate, Alfred Thayer Mahan's ascendancy occurred amidst the closing of the American West. During this era, American energy transitioned from internal interests on the continent to a more global outlook. The United States was hardly alone in its active search for territory, and other powerful nations such as Great Britain, Germany, and Japan were similarly enticed by the notion of imperialistic expansion. All of these powers recognized the strategic advantages of being able to control advanced bases in foreign territories, a political goal that the United States had embraced with the purchase of Alaska and Midway Island, as well as the later acquisitions of Samoa and Hawaii. Even though the United States already possessed coaling stations on these Pacific islands before Mahan's work in the 1890s, the propagation of his philosophies on seapower coincided with America's conquest and subjugation of foreign lands. As a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Philippines, Guam, and Wake Island were ceded to the United States along with Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean.

Mahan's works became so prominent that he travelled the world meeting with heads of state, a stature that did not abate at the century mark. Rather, the naval theorist continued embracing changing naval dynamics in the decade before his death in 1914. Much of his earlier writing focused on historic conflicts between France and Great Britain, the latter of which Mahan venerated as, "the greatest maritime nation in the world."²⁰⁰ His lectures at the Naval

²⁰⁰ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 29.

War College were eventually printed as a series titled *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., Between the Years 1887-1911*. In these lectures, Mahan addressed the burgeoning naval race between the United States, Germany, and Britain. Even though he promoted the idea that time should pass before historical analysis should begin, Mahan felt compelled to write about the Russo-Japanese War which ended in 1905. The recentness of the conflict did not deter Mahan from dissecting the war, most of which involved criticizing Russian naval mistakes rather than complimenting the performance of the Japanese navy. Many of his conclusions involved extrapolating on the lessons of the Asian war so the United States would not suffer a similar fate in future wars.

Above all else, Mahan wanted to persuade the country's populace and the United States government that naval expansion was a necessary and immediate policy concern, not simply an illusory academic proposition. The man who purportedly hated being on the water proved instrumental in the movement that accomplished this mission, not because of his military prowess, but through his written word. His contribution was so utterly successful that the United States Navy continued to be influenced by his ideas a century later.

Naval Doctrine Publication 1 Naval Warfare – 1994

Published in 1994, Naval Doctrine Publication 1 (NDP1) *Naval Warfare* attempted to clarify the purpose and capabilities of the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. NDP1 was the first work of six such publications put out by the Department of the Navy which included NDP2 *Naval Intelligence*, NDP3 *Naval Operations*, NDP4 *Naval Logistics*, NDP5 *Naval Planning*, and NDP6 *Naval Command and Control*. The timing of the publications in the early 1990s was particularly important because this was a period when each military branch sought meaning and identity at the closure of the Cold War. Additionally influential during the

writing of *Naval Warfare* was the fact that the Armed Forces had only recently completed the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, a highly-celebrated victory that some thought was an example of how wars would be managed and fought following the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.

As the title suggested, NDP1 focused on explaining what doctrine was and how it fit with the American way of war. NDP1 referenced the Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02 for an initial definition of doctrine which stated, “Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application.”²⁰¹ The authors of NDP1 were not fully satisfied with the simplicity of this definition, adding that doctrine evolved and was a framework which influenced training, education, tactics, techniques, and procedures. According to NDP1, doctrine should not be considered merely a set of rules but rather a common understanding that provided a language inside the naval services, and which could be used as a dialect understood between all the branches of the military.

Naval Warfare delineated the various ways that naval forces could be used and expounded on the ways in which these forces fought as part of national strategy. It presented past naval experiences as anecdotal examples to clarify abstruse terms and theories. The purpose of naval forces (the term used collectively for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard) were categorized in *Naval Warfare* as deterrence, forward presence, sealift capacities, joint operations, naval operations other than war, and finally, naval operations in war. As this list illustrated, American naval forces participated in several roles outside their most recognized function of combat. Keeping a forward presence was a near-constant endeavor.

²⁰¹ NDP1 - 1994, 50.

NDP1 introduced attrition warfare and maneuver warfare as the two ways that naval forces fight during a war. The American strategists claimed that their naval forces were capable of conducting operations centered on either style of warfare, but they contended that future wars should only be fought using one of these methods. Attrition warfare, which styled itself on slowly wearing down an enemy force, was considered by the authors of NDP1 to be an outdated and costly way to fight in terms of time, resources, and cost of lives. Described as a philosophy, maneuver warfare was instead deemed the preferred method of fighting for the speed at which a force could conclude a war by focusing on the destruction of the enemy's center of gravity. By definition, the removal of the center of gravity would lead to a discontinuation of military operations and an immediate end to a conflict.

The final chapter of NDP1 was intended to describe the future direction of naval warfare. The ideas in this chapter were synonymous with the Bush administration's assessment that the United States was overseeing a "new world order," a phrase the president had used during a congressional address in 1991. President Bush, and other policymakers at the time, contended that the termination of the Cold War would usher in an age where the United States, as the world's sole superpower, would be capable of stopping regional conflicts before escalation could occur. These idealized aspirations were apparent throughout NDP1 which asserted that the Navy's forward deployment and ability to project power could prevent, deter, or end conflicts. The removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait appeared at the time to be a working example of American military power resolving a localized conflict before war broke out in an entire region.

The American experience in the Middle East further influenced the writing of NDP1. A major theme throughout the publication was that American naval forces needed to be prepared to operate in joint warfare and coalition warfare in the future. The emphasis on shared

responsibility among the United States Armed Services was a familiar theme for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard which have traditionally worked in unison. The more serious disconnect existed between this group and the Army and Air Force. *Naval Warfare* emphasized that the services should continue improving interoperability because post-Cold War conflicts would demand unified fighting, as had been the case in the Persian Gulf. Similarly, NDP1 outlined how naval forces were capable of cooperating and fighting alongside foreign militaries as part of multinational coalitions, another recent experience for the US military during the liberation of Kuwait.

Naval Doctrine Publication 1 Naval Warfare – 2010

The authors of the 1994 edition of Naval Doctrine Publication 1 (NDP1) *Naval Warfare* understood that their work had a service life. Just as their contribution had been influenced by Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, and the conclusion of the Cold War, the Navy would readdress sea power in the wake of future conflicts and the constantly evolving geopolitical world landscape. The production of an updated publication aligned with NDP1's definition of doctrine which allowed for fluidity and a constant reevaluation of lessons-learned. To modernize its ideas, the Navy printed a second version of Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare* in March of 2010 which drew from the military's experiences during the "War on Terror," Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare* from 1994 must be the primary textual source for examining the naval theory behind the USS *Cole*'s presence in Yemen because this was the guiding doctrinal framework when the destroyer was deployed to the Middle East in 2000. However, it is also important to briefly address the major institutional similarities and differences expressed between the 1994 and 2010 version of NDP1. The USS *Cole* bombing

was not specifically mentioned by name in the revised edition. Despite this omission, NDP1 2010 provided additional context to the multifaceted reasons why the American destroyer stopped to refuel at a non-military installation in Yemen on October 12, 2000.

Written sixteen years apart, NDP1 2010 was plainly rooted in the Navy's previous work from 1994. For example, the table of contents in the 2010 edition remained almost identical with "Who We Are," "What We Do," and "How We Fight," even as the content within these sections had been updated. Large portions of the earlier publication remain in the 2010 version with some of the content remaining in the exact same language. One prominent exception to the publication's design was that the newer edition did not contain a final chapter that attempted to predict future trends in naval warfare.

There were other differences between the two volumes. The authors of the 1994 *Naval Warfare* had included pictures and full-page historical examples, both of which disappeared in the updated version in lieu of a limited number of charts. Although readership of the 1994 NDP1 might have been limited in scope, the Navy was successful in having published a document that was understandable to a layman. By contrast, the text of NDP1 2010 seemed unconcerned with appealing to a larger audience, but instead only targeted those well-versed in a military thought.

The most significant changes in the 2010 edition of *Naval Warfare* were shaped by the September 11th attacks and the ensuing American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Terrorism and the defense of the continental United States, issues barely referenced in NDP1 1994, became prevalent themes throughout the 2010 edition. In the original, the United States Coast Guard was treated as the tertiary branch of the naval group, and its primary functions in NDP1 1994 were participation in humanitarian operations and interdicting drug trafficking. This emphasis transformed in the 2010 version that pronounced the Coast Guard's new role was to act as

sentinels in the War on Terror. The Coast Guard was joined in the fight by the Navy and Marine Corps. To emphasize this doctrinal shift, the Navy added a new concept to its “Maritime Strategy” in the NDP1 from 2010, titled “Contribute to Homeland Defense In-Depth.”²⁰²

In contrast to the earlier edition, the authors of NDP1 2010 acknowledged the continued need for operations far from the U.S. homeland, even as they recognized the dilemma of long-term sustainability of global basing. This had not been a major concern in 1994, but events like the USS *Cole* bombing and other attacks against deployed forces in politically unstable parts of the world caused a reevaluation of how naval forces would preserve a forward presence. The 2010 version stated,

Diminishing overseas access is another challenge anticipated in the future operating environment. Foreign sensitivities to US military presence have steadily been increasing. Even close allies may be hesitant to grant access for a variety of reasons. Diminished access will complicate the maintenance of forward presence, placing a premium on naval forces and their ability to respond quickly to developments around the world as well as their advantages to operate at sea and in the air, space, and cyberspace. Assuring access to ports, airfields, foreign airspace, coastal waters, and host-nation support in potential commitment areas will be a challenge and will require active peacetime engagement with states in volatile areas. In war, this challenge will require power-projection capabilities designed to seize and maintain lodgments in the face of armed resistance.²⁰³

Even though NDP1 2010 recognized a trending dilemma with its overseas military installations, the Navy refused to deviate from the Mahanian-based principles of maintaining a constant forward presence, gaining sea control, and extending power projection. The aforementioned concerns with advanced basing is a problem that the Navy has yet to adequately address.

The strategists of *Naval Warfare 2010* postulated that American naval forces would make a difference in the War on Terror. The document recognized that having military personnel

²⁰² Department of the Navy, Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), 21-22.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 19.

deployed in foreign countries could create a backlash against the United States, even warning about the footprint naval forces create overseas. In spite of this anxiety, NDP1 stated, “Forward presence allows us to combat terrorism as far from US shores as possible. Where and when applicable, forward-deployed naval forces isolate, capture, or destroy terrorists and their infrastructure, resources, and sanctuaries, preferably in conjunction with coalition partners.”²⁰⁴ This analysis seemed short-sighted. Rather than address in depth the thorny issue of basing, the authors of *Naval Warfare* simply concluded that forward presence was an efficient method for fighting terror.

Mahan’s Connection to Naval Doctrine

A full century after the publishing *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, Alfred Thayer Mahan’s thesis on sea power remained embedded in the strategy of the United States Navy. Over time, his ideas were challenged, even as the popularity of his work proliferated, with critics arguing that his conclusions were biased or that his strategy was flawed. These criticisms did not prevent Mahan’s teachings from remaining foundational in the practices of the United States Navy as evidenced in the 1994 Naval Doctrine Publication 1 (NDP1) *Naval Warfare*. NDP1 mirrored the Mahanian principle that a powerful navy supported by a commercial fleet and strategically-located colonies will generate the environment necessary for a country to flourish both militarily and economically.

Mahan was clear that he was not writing to become the next great historian, but rather the former naval officer wanted his work to influence policy and the overall direction of the American Navy during his lifetime. He surmised that the United States would only become an international leader with the combination of a powerful Navy, a viable merchant marine fleet,

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 26.

and dominion over foreign colonies. Mahan believed that his research, which included anecdotal examples dating back to antiquity, proved that the United States required all three of his components if it desired stature among the world's most powerful nations.

Part of the impetus behind Mahan's work was that he did not consider the United States to be ready to face future conflicts. He speculated that the country possessed the natural resources and fortitude for war, but not the forethought or operational planning to prepare for the worst. He wrote that, "in all the raw materials of military strength no nation is superior to the United States. She is, however, weak in a confessed unpreparedness for war."²⁰⁵ By the 1990s, this issue of naval preparation was no longer an issue. By all accounts, the United States Navy had become the most formidable in the world, a result of the Second World War and the Cold War.

At the most basic level, Mahan's concept of projecting power through the use of a dominant navy resonated in the 1994 edition of NDP1. This may appear redundant, but there was always the possibility that Mahan's principles could have fallen out of popularity with the Navy in the eighty years since his death. In light of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, politicians could have advocated for a leaner, more defensive fleet, something Mahan vigorously argued against. The Navy's purpose, of course, was supposed to be driven by national strategy, and a smaller, more cost-efficient navy has only been a serious political consideration in the aftermath of expensive conflicts such as World War Two and Vietnam. Instead, a deep-water fleet capable of projecting power remained a national aim throughout most of the Cold War, a position that did not fall out of favor in the 1990s. These ideals were captured in NDP1 as, "The ultimate source of peacetime persuasive power, however, lies in the implied guarantee that both

²⁰⁵ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 24.

the intent and capability to protect our national interests are present just over the horizon, with the fortitude and staying power to sustain operations as long as necessary.”²⁰⁶

Even though the scope of Mahan’s hypotheses exceeded well beyond the topic of combat, U.S. naval planning for future conflicts drew heavily from Mahan’s basic tenets. Mahan placed significant importance on a navy’s ability to prove victorious in the “decisive battle,” which he contended would render an enemy incapable of protecting its homeland, trade fleet, or colonial possessions. Though he lived before aircraft carriers, jet fighters, and cruise missiles, Mahan understood that unchecked control of the sea generated power projection over land as well as water. These twentieth century technological advances actually reinforced Mahan’s concept of how a naval force could control land by controlling sea. His theory was prevalent in the 1994 edition of NDP1 which specifically outlined how control of the sea would allow the United States to,

- 1) Protect sea lines of communication.
- 2) Deny the enemy commercial and military use of the seas.
- 3) Establish an area of operations for power projection ashore and support amphibious operations.
- 4) Protect naval logistic support to forward deployed battle forces.²⁰⁷

Writing during a period when the United States was immersed in the Second Industrial Revolution, Mahan gave prominence to the nexus of economic and military power. He summarized, “Commercial value cannot be separated from military in sea strategy, for the greatest interest of the sea is commerce.”²⁰⁸ Mahan worried that too much of America’s commerce was dependent on foreign shipping. His apprehension became the motivation behind

²⁰⁶ NDP1 - 1994, iii.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁰⁸ Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., Between the Years 1887-1911*, 302.

his advocacy for the growth of a merchant marine force as a national priority. Although he witnessed a great period of expansion for the American Navy, a buildup he helped to spark, Mahan did not live long enough to see the full potential of America's international trade. This vision of the United States flourishing as an economic power from sea-based commerce came to fruition after the Second World War and continued for the rest of the century. By 1994, 90% of the world's trade and 99% percent of American import-export traveled by the sea.²⁰⁹

Just as Mahan had advocated, one of the primary functions of the United States Navy's forward presence was to protect sea-lanes. America's inability to guard its commercial fleet became apparent amid the First and Second World Wars. Resolving this issue became a priority for the United States Navy. By NDP1 2010, the Navy recognized that, "The safety and economic security of the United States depend in substantial part upon the secure use of the world's oceans. The United States has a vital national interest in maritime security. The economic well-being of people in the United States and around the world depends heavily upon the trade and commerce that traverse the oceans."²¹⁰

Based on his own historic analysis, Mahan postulated that a wise nation would not allow a military conflict to interfere with the stability of its economy. He wrote, "It may safely be said that it is essential to the welfare of the whole country that the conditions of trade and commerce should remain, as far as possible, unaffected by an external war. In order to do this, the enemy must be kept not only out of our ports, but far away from our coasts."²¹¹ The United States Navy addressed this concern. Perhaps shaped by the unilateral tenets of the Bush doctrine, the authors of NDP1 2010 took an even more draconian approach than Mahan. It stated, "We cannot permit

²⁰⁹ NDP1 - 1994, 3.

²¹⁰ NDP1 - 2010, 30.

²¹¹ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 41.

conditions under which naval forces are impeded in freedom of maneuver and freedom of access, nor permit an adversary to disrupt the global supply chain by attempting to block vital sea lines of communication and commerce. We impose local sea control wherever necessary, ideally in concert with friends and allies, but by ourselves if we must.”²¹²

A.T. Mahan was also a proponent of the United States government acquiring colonial territories. The former sailor was unapologetic on the issue of imperialism, which was a common political stance in the 1890s and early 1900s. Mahan was concerned that the United States did not possess colonies at the time of his publication of *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, and he was apprehensive that the U.S. would not join other nations in the race for foreign territory. He predicted that, “Such colonies the United States has not and is not likely to have.”²¹³ He also asserted that if Washington did not alter its stance on colonies, then the creation of a new navy would be superfluous. Mahan continued, “Having therefore no foreign establishments, either colonial or military, the ships of war of the United States, in war, will be like land birds, unable to fly far from their own shores. To provide resting-places for them, where they can coal and repair, would be one of the first duties of a government proposing to itself the development of the power of the nation at sea.”²¹⁴ Although the notion of classical imperialism has fluctuated as a national ambition over time, the United States has continued maintaining overseas bases for its “birds” to the present day.

In Mahan’s time, many Americans and Europeans would have agreed that the control of foreign colonies was a symbol of a nation’s eminence. If overseas possessions were to be the gauge of greatness, then the United States took serious steps forward after the Spanish-American

²¹² NDP1 - 2010, 28.

²¹³ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 40.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

War of 1898 which resulted in colonial acquisitions in both the Pacific and Atlantic. This defeat of a European power proved to be the genesis of American territorial acquisition outside the continent. As the American empire expanded and foreign policy remained committed to action outside the continent, military doctrine was adapted to accommodate these growing needs.

During the Interwar period, the role of the Marine Corps had been solidified as an expeditionary force. Tasked with operations that could occur across the globe, the Navy and Marine Corps pioneered new doctrine on amphibious warfare. As outlined in the *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0 (MCDP-1)* published in 2001, “In the years between World War I and World War II, the Marines, building on their long experience as an expeditionary force from the sea, created the concept of modern amphibious warfare. The Marines studied past operations, experimented with new equipment such as landing craft and amphibious assault vehicles, and conducted innovative amphibious exercises with the fleet. These efforts resulted in the doctrine and new tactics, techniques, and procedures in amphibious warfare. . .”²¹⁵ This doctrine was developed over time through a series of publications that had roots in the Navy’s *Landing Force Manual* from 1927. Building off this foundation throughout the 1930s, the Marine Corps created a series of works on the subject which included the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* in 1934, a document that underwent several revisions and updated versions before the Navy officially approved the work under the title of *Fleet Training Publication 167, Landing Operations Doctrine* (F.T.P 167) in 1938. With the creation of FTP 167, the earlier versions of *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* were ordered to be burned.

New global responsibilities and the acquisition of overseas territory demonstrated to the United States the difficulty of foreign rule as evidenced by the American experience with the

²¹⁵ United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 1-4.

Philippine insurrection that erupted on the island chain after the Spanish-American War. To educate its forces on the proper methods for quelling native populations, the Marine Corps created the *Small Wars Manual*. Developed throughout the 1930s and published in 1940, the *Small Wars Manual* was a lengthy, fifteen-chapter counterinsurgency document. Describing why such a document was needed, the manual stated,

Small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps. During about 85 of the last 100 years, the Marine Corps has been engaged in small wars in different parts of the world. The Marine Corps has landed troops 180 times in 37 countries from 1800 to 1934. Every year during the past 36 years since the Spanish-American War, the Marine Corps has been engaged in active operations in the field. In 1929 the Marine Corps had two-thirds of its personnel employed on expeditionary or other sea duty outside the continental limits of the United States.²¹⁶

There were several reasons that the United States government needed the Marine Corps to be able to protect American interests overseas. As highlighted in the *Small Wars Manual*, the United States expanding overseas presence increased the need for the president to be able to protect citizens and property abroad. From a military standpoint, the major reason that the Marine Corps needed to be prepared to face varying contingencies in foreign lands was to establish and defend America's advanced basing system. Through advancements in amphibious warfare, the Marines could take or re-take territory for overseas bases, while the *Small Wars Manual* provided methodologies for ensuring an environment that was secure against threats from local populations. The changes in doctrine during the Interwar period offered practical answers to the problems facing Mahan's theoretic argument for a forward naval presence.

Mahan died before the U.S. entered the First World War, but the millions of lives lost did little to dissuade the popularity of imperialism, and European control in the Middle East and Africa actually expanded after the war. Colonialism was not limited to Western nations during

²¹⁶ United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 2.

this period, as exemplified by Japan's acquisition of strategic islands and retention of control of part of the Asian continent for its limited role in the global war. Japan's continued expansionist ambitions along with Nazi Germany played a crucial role in fostering the next world war. Ironically, the United States ranked below several European nations in the number of overseas bases during the interwar period because American strategists worried that an increase in military installations abroad might provoke conflicts with Japan and Germany that could otherwise be avoided.²¹⁷ After defeating the Axis powers in the name of freedom and self-determinism, American policymakers publicly admonished the concept of classical imperialism, a change in attitude that caused friction with its former European allies in London, Paris, and Moscow.

Yet, Washington refused to acquiesce to its own idealized rhetoric against imperialism even as it rebuked other colonial powers. While the United States recognized the independence of former colonies like the Philippines in 1946 and offered statehood to territories such as Alaska and Hawaii in 1959, it also retained dominion over foreign-lands like Puerto Rico and Guam. In a similar trend, the U.S. initially refused to surrender its foreign military installations such as the naval base and airfields inside the liberated Republic of Philippines. Another example much closer to home, Washington also retained its military facilities at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, a country that had fought for independence decades earlier. The decision to continue operating out of Cuba did not change after the communist overthrow of the island in 1959 which had ushered in a new government that actively sought the expulsion of American forces.

During the Cold War, the United States retained control of a global system of foreign military bases under the pretense that these forces were an essential bulwark against the global

²¹⁷ James Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing: An Anatomy of the Dilemma* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 28-29.

spread of communism. This language of fear implied that it was in the best interest of local governments to allow or accept American bases for their own security. International basing of the U.S. Armed Forces waxed and waned throughout this era with significant increases occurring amidst war times, such as during the Asian conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. The total number of bases was marginally influenced by foreign governments, many of which demanded the Pentagon respect local sovereignty and withdraw American military installations from its borders. Some of these anti-basing efforts were successful in forcing change, such as in the Philippines where the U.S. finally abandoned its facilities in 1994, forty-eight years after the Pacific nation received American independence.²¹⁸ Local protests against U.S. bases rarely deterred American ambition which was ultimately based on self-interest and gave little credence to foreign dissidence. With the descent of the U.S.S.R., the narrative for overseas bases had to be reinvented, but the U.S. continued its expansive basing system in the name of global security.

Herein lies the important connection between A.T. Mahan and the United States Navy. Although neither the 1994 nor the 2010 version of NDP1 advocated for the advancement of the classic definition of colonialism in terms of a country-colony relationship, these military publications nevertheless fully endorsed the use of naval bases inside foreign countries as part of national strategy. The 1994 edition of NDP1 did not focus on forward naval bases because naval doctrine at the time was operating under the assumption that the United States would always have access to such facilities. This reflected a pre-9/11 mentality which took for granted the support of foreign host nations. Although the topic received limited attention, NDP1 did prescribe one of the “basic roles of our naval forces” was “seizing or defending advanced naval

²¹⁸ For further insight into the removal of American basing in the Philippines, see C.T. Sandars' *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* pages 105-126.

bases.”²¹⁹ By the writing of the 2010 edition of NDP1, the Marine Corps was specifically codified with this responsibility.²²⁰ These bases were selected for their strategic importance at places which enabled the protection of American shipping lanes and could offer military advantages in future conflicts.

Excluding its continental home ports, the Navy and Marine Corps’ global base structure was grounded on the strategic value of a given location. According to Mahan, the selection of such bases depended on position, military strength, and the resources accorded from that spot.²²¹ He concluded that the most important of these three was position because military strength and resources could be brought in or built. Mahan also understood the importance of naval chokepoints, a concept he borrowed from Jomini. He addressed this issue at length in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, even discussing the advantages of a Panama Canal decades before it opened.

The Mediterranean is an excellent example of how American naval forces have followed Mahan’s philosophies for both projecting power and protecting sea lanes. In his treatise, he contended that, “Notwithstanding the difficulty of maintaining distant and separated dependencies, a nation which wishes to assure a share of control on any theater of maritime importance cannot afford to be without a footing on some of the strategic points to be found there.”²²² Adhering to Mahan’s strategy, U.S. naval forces have remained constant in terms of movement and basing in the Mediterranean since the Second World War. This was primarily

²¹⁹ NDP1 - 1994, 15.

²²⁰ NDP1 - 2010, 15.

²²¹ Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., Between the Years 1887-1911*, 132-134.

²²² *Ibid.*, 200.

because of the strategic value of its shipping lanes, as Mediterranean routes have brought Middle East petroleum and commercial goods headed to Western Europe and the United States.

To ensure the flow of goods and as a precautionary move against future conflicts, the United States Navy and Marines Corps have sustained strategically-located bases and established friendly ports throughout the Mediterranean region. One example is Naval Station Rota in southern Spain, a base that houses American and Spanish forces. Located near the Strait of Gibraltar, the Navy values Rota because whoever governs Gibraltar regulates the passage between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. At the opposite end, the Suez Canal controls the only other major waterway connecting the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. The United States has never established a naval base at the Suez, but there are several military installations in the vicinity.²²³ For instance, the United States Sixth Fleet is located at Naples, Italy, one of several American bases housed in the country. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay lies northwest of the Suez on the Greek island of Crete. Naples and Souda Bay constitute the major naval bases in the eastern Mediterranean, but there are also Air Force bases in Turkey, Spain, and Italy, and an Army installation in Italy. Collectively, these forces constituted an overwhelming power capable of protecting or closing the Strait of Gibraltar or the Suez Canal. They also fulfilled Mahan's desire for, "the maintenance of suitable naval stations, in those distant parts of the world to which the armed shipping must follow the peaceful vessels of commerce."²²⁴

Doctrine as Exemplified by the USS Cole

The U.S.-led coalition forced Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, and Saddam Hussein lost significant military resources because of his gamble. However, the Iraqi leader retained both his

²²³ The United States was granted access to non-naval bases in Egypt at various points after the Second World War. This collaboration might have been most well-known during the rule of Anwar Sadat.

²²⁴ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, 40.

military and political grip over Iraq. In the post-Desert Storm era of the 1990s, Hussein found new ways to incite the ire of Western and Middle Eastern leaders alike. Saddam Hussein feared that portions of Iraq's heterogeneous population would rebel against his weakened regime. Concerned over uprisings from the Kurds in the north and the Shia in the south, the Iraqi dictator turned his guns on his own citizens. The United Nations reacted to the internal war by calling on coalition forces to institute a no-fly zone over portions of southern Iraq. This became known as Operation Southern Watch. Operation Northern Watch was created with a similar mission over the skies of northern Iraq. Although these operations were successful in protecting portions of the Iraqi population from aerial threats, the effort did not deter Hussein. He continued to ignore the UN mandates, and numerous clashes occurred between coalition and Iraqi forces in the decade after the war causing the American military presence in the region to prolong its stay. In the fall of 2000, the USS *Cole* began its deployment to assist in this standoff.

Just as A.T. Mahan would have hoped, the USS *Cole* was part of the Navy's mission to project power far from the friendly confines of the Atlantic seaboard. After leaving Naval Station Norfolk on August 8th, the USS *Cole* spent ten days in the Atlantic before leaving control of the Second Fleet and joining the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.²²⁵ During its time with Sixth Fleet, the destroyer docked at several European ports and also deployed to the Adriatic as part of Operation Silent Lance. The USS *Cole*'s mere presence in the region illustrated the significance the United States placed on the free flow of goods through the Mediterranean sea-lanes. Additionally, the destroyer's involvement in Operation Silent Lance was meant to act as a deterrence against localized violence in the former Yugoslavia. Armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles, the USS *Cole* was capable of immediate offensive action against land-based targets in

²²⁵ Commanding Officer, USS *Cole* (DDG 67), Department of the Navy, *USS Cole (DDG67) Command History for Calendar Year 2000*, Report from Commanding Officer USS *Cole* to Director of Naval History (NO9BH) Naval Historical Center.

the Balkans. Each of these actions were an exemplification of “what we do” in the 1994 edition of NDP1.

The USS *Cole* had an identifiable purpose for its subsequent deployment to Fifth Fleet in October 2000. General Anthony Zinni, a former Commander in Chief of Central Command, outlined the possible roles the USS *Cole* might have encountered upon entering the warzone. During his testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Zinni summarized,

We enforce several U.N. Security Council resolutions. They come down to three continuing operations that we have had ongoing since almost the end of the gulf war to this date. One is the defense of Kuwait. We keep forces on the ground in Kuwait continuously that are our forward forces that we build upon with prepositioned sets of equipment on the ground and at sea to enlarge that force to be able to defend Kuwait. The second operation that we conduct continuously is the maritime intercept operation that I mentioned where at sea we intercept smugglers coming out of Iraq violating the U.N. resolution. And then the third is, as I mentioned, the enforcement of the no-fly, no drive zones.²²⁶

To achieve these goals, the USS *Cole* was part of a joint operation force that was fulfilling aspects of naval doctrine by maintaining a forward presence, seeking to create an environment based on deterrence, and assisting in naval operation other than war. The USS *Cole*, of course, was also capable of carrying out naval operations in war, should the need arise.

As part of a carrier battle group, the USS *Cole* assisted in America’s power projection in the Middle East. Iraq was the specific target for the carrier group because the country threatened regional instability, but the size, power, and commitment of the force also acted as a visible deterrent to other countries, such as Iran, that might not support America’s political ambitions in the Middle East. Outside the threat of nuclear weapons, few weapons can project power ashore like an American aircraft carrier. Destroyers were designed to protect capital ships, and the USS

²²⁶ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

Cole's first responsibility, had it left Aden unscathed, would have been to defend aircraft carriers from Iraqi sea or air threats.

The USS *Cole* was sailing to the Middle East to join the nearly decade-long deterrence effort against Saddam Hussein's regime. Naval doctrine subdivides deterrence into nuclear and conventional categories, and American forces in the region were supposed to be prepared to deter both. Because Hussein often blocked United Nations inspectors during their in-country searches for illegal weapons, the international community was ambivalent about Iraq's nuclear capabilities. If Iraq had escalated with offensive action, the entire carrier battle group, including the USS *Cole*, would have commenced with naval operations in war. The 1994 edition of NDP1 explained how the combination of naval actions worked in unison. It stated, "Our ability to project high-intensity power from the sea is the cornerstone of effective deterrence, crisis response, and war."²²⁷

The USS *Cole* also would have assisted in operations other than war. The United Nations had placed economic sanctions on Iraq to punish Saddam Hussein for invading Kuwait and to discourage him from future military action that might spark regional instability. The sanctions, which were to be carried out through an embargo, did not work as conceived. While much of his population struggled, Saddam Hussein's lavish lifestyle continued uninterrupted. Hussein had funded his regime and his wars on Iraq's petroleum sales, an area specifically targeted by the embargo. In a bid to bypass the United Nations, the Iraqi leader attempted to transport and sell his country's petroleum on the black market. Intercepting the illegal distribution of oil became the job of the United States Navy.

²²⁷ NDP1 - 1994, 64.

For all of their immense power, large ships such as aircraft carriers and battleships were not suited nor designed for such a mission. For these type of operations, smaller ships such as destroyers or frigates were more practical. Prior to its deployment to the Mediterranean in August 2000, the USS *Cole* had patrolled the Caribbean in a similar role as part of a counterdrug operation.²²⁸ The ship had been prepared to stop-and-board smaller, faster craft during this deployment. This experience, along with the USS *Cole*'s speed and firepower, would have provided flexibility to the Navy as it attempted to plug Iraq's off-shore petroleum smuggling ring. There was no shortage of work for the American Navy, as the embargo-runners were undeterred by the presence of the coalition force. By August 2000, the naval coalition had questioned 29,307 vessels, boarded 12,763 suspected craft, and forced 748 boats into port for further inspection.²²⁹

Refueling Protocol and the USS Cole

During the Second World War, the aircraft carrier replaced the battleship as the premier capital ship, and in the process, became the face of America's post-war navy. The designers of the new aircraft carrier utilized technology derived from wartime research. The legacy of the Manhattan Project is often tied to the first atomic bomb, but the ensuing scientific advancements in terms of power had equally global effects. Although never facing an existential threat, the Navy confronted questions of its future worth at the conclusion of the Second World War. The heightening of Cold War tensions, and to a lesser extent the Korean War, reminded policymakers of the need for a navy capable of projecting power on a global scale. To meet this expanding need, the government turned to the Forrestal-class in the mid-to-late 1950s before unleashing the

²²⁸ Clinton Presidential Records, "Memorial Service USS Cole 10/18/00 [1]," OA/ID 21113.

²²⁹ Schneller, 69.

USS *Enterprise* in 1961, the world's first nuclear-powered attack carrier.²³⁰ The production of the Nimitz-class, a ship powered by twin nuclear reactors, succeeded the previous aircraft carriers. The USS *George Washington* and USS *Abraham Lincoln*, both of which were assigned to the USS *Cole*'s home port of Norfolk, were Nimitz-class aircraft carriers.

The rise of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier changed how the Navy operated in terms of overseas basing. Taking into account the needs of the non-nuclear members of carrier battle groups, the average range for an aircraft carrier and its support ships was approximately 1,500 nautical miles.²³¹ To meet this need, the Navy strived to maintain or acquire naval facilities that could service and supply the aircraft battle groups at 1,500-mile intervals throughout the world's busiest sea routes. This network of bases emphasized location rather than the overall number of naval facilities.

Before the first nuclear carrier was commissioned, the United States Navy had already begun equipping its submarine force with nuclear reactors capable of generating lengthy periods of submersion. The single reactor nuclear engine enabled extended dive times that allowed the enhanced submarines to deploy deeper into enemy territory. The Navy began arming new classes of submarines with nuclear missiles meant to act as a deterrent to enemy nations, most notably the Soviet Union. The Navy examined the idea of incorporating nuclear power to a larger percentage of the combat fleet, but the concept was rejected as fiscally unrealistic. So, while the nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines could operate at sea for great lengths of time, the majority of America's fleet still required frequent stops for fuel.

At the micro-level, this explained why the USS *Cole* was in Aden, Yemen; it was a non-nuclear ship that needed petroleum. In the fall of 2000, the destroyer was ordered from the

²³⁰ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 335.

²³¹ Blaker, 68.

Mediterranean during which time the ship switched from operating under the Sixth Fleet to the Fifth Fleet. In accordance with naval protocol for warzones, the USS *Cole* needed to arrive at its destination with at least fifty-one percent of its fuel tank full. It was impossible for the destroyer to meet this criteria during its 3,300-mile trek, and consequently the ship was forced to seek fuel in route. Unlike the Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines, the Arleigh-Burke destroyer needed fuel either from a pump at a U.S. military installation, from an American oiler, or from a foreign port.

There were no U.S. naval bases in the USS *Cole*'s path once it left the Mediterranean and crossed into the Red Sea via the Suez Canal. The closest naval base on the USS *Cole*'s route was located in the Persian Gulf at a shared facility at Bahrain. This was not a possibility based on naval refueling protocol. The second option of being refueled by a naval tanker was also unfeasible for the USS *Cole* during its voyage. In spite of the Navy's global reach, there were few refueling oilers available in each command. The reason for the lack of strategic buildup of oilers was twofold. First, the US Navy had long enjoyed access to friendly harbors. Even if some of these governments harbored anti-American sentiment, there was always a plethora of ports willing to put politics aside for American currency. The second reason for the lack of fuel tankers was that at times of fiscal cuts, the United States government has preferred to fund ships with offensive over operational capabilities.

At the time of the USS *Cole*'s voyage in 2000, the entire United States Navy only possessed twenty-one refueling oilers.²³² These tankers were almost exclusively assigned to aircraft carrier battle groups, and thus, the Navy's policy was for individual ships to seek friendly harbors for their petroleum needs. In this, the case of the USS *Cole*'s stop in an unprotected

²³² Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

foreign port was not out of the ordinary. During Congressional testimony following the USS *Cole* attack, Admiral Clark stated, “I’m on the record I’d like to have more resources. But never would we send an oiler. I can’t recall a circumstance in my career where we sent an oiler with a single ship.”²³³ The USS *Cole*’s presence in Aden Harbor was predicated on both principle and practical need.

The USS *Cole* was part of the Navy’s century-old concept of maintaining a system of advanced bases and friendly ports. The ship’s refueling needs had progressed from coal to petroleum, but at the elementary level, the USS *Cole*’s basic need for fuel was still the same as it had been for naval vessels for decades. Even with the scientific advancement of nuclear-powered ships, the U.S. Navy remained reliant on advanced basing.

Conclusion

Few have generated the long-term impact on United States naval doctrine like Alfred Thayer Mahan. Though his popularity with the general public diminished with time, Mahan’s teachings have remained the preeminent bedrock for American naval forces a full century after the initial publication of *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Mahan’s philosophy remained prominent in both the 1994 and 2010 editions of Naval Doctrine Publication 1 *Naval Warfare*, and this trend is not likely to change in the near future. NDP1 articulated a significantly softer approach to the overt colonial aspirations advanced in Mahan’s teachings, but naval doctrine has continued in its advocacy for overseas bases. Recognized as a growing problem by NDP1 2010, this adherence to the need for embedded bases in foreign territory has caused rifts between the United States and local populations that view the bases as intrusive to their national sovereignty or exploitive in nature.

²³³ Ibid.

The USS *Cole* had both an overarching mission and a specific operational need for stopping in Yemen on the morning of October 12, 2000. In accordance with the Navy's doctrine, the American destroyer was deploying to the Middle East to assist in the coalition effort against Iraq. The warship had stopped in Aden's port to refuel its tanks to a minimum of 51% capacity, as protocol required before entering a hot zone. Although the United States retained naval bases throughout the world, the USS *Cole* could not reach the safety of any of these overseas military installations without breaking naval regulation. The fleet's oilers were overburdened at the time, and none were made available for an open water refueling operation on a lone ship.

Since the attack on Khobar Towers in June 1996, the Department of Defense (DoD) has made significant improvements in protecting its service members, mainly in deterring, disrupting and mitigating terrorist attacks on installations. The attack on USS COLE (DDG 67), in the port of Aden, Yemen, on 12 October 2000, demonstrated a seam in the fabric of efforts to protect our forces, namely in-transit forces. Our review was focused on finding ways to improve the US policies and practices for deterring, disrupting and mitigating terrorist attack on US forces in transit.²³⁴

-Crouch-Gehman DOD Report, released January 9, 2001

The investigation clearly shows the commanding officer of the *Cole* did not have the specific intelligence, the focused training, the appropriate equipment and on-scene security support to effectively prevent or deter such a determined, such a pre-planned, assault on his ship.²³⁵

-Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, during a press conference on the USS *Cole*

The Seam: Naval Failures at Aden Harbor

The Arleigh-Burke destroyer was a warship designed primarily for protecting aircraft carriers against blue-water threats, and the USS *Cole*'s advanced weapons systems were technological marvels capable of identifying and intercepting missiles, torpedoes, and helicopters while at sea. While in harbor, however, the Navy continued to rely on human sentries, known as rovers, to recognize danger just as it had since the days of John Paul Jones. Without adequate support, the Inport Watch team failed to intercept two al-Qaeda bombers who nearly sank the ship.

During the military's evaluation of the attack in Yemen, the Department of Defense concluded that a "seam" existed which had allowed the bombing to occur unimpeded by American forces. Heroic action by the crew saved the ship, but the crux of the matter was that

²³⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *DoD USS Cole Commission Report* (9 January 2001) by U.S. Army Gen. (Ret) William Crouch and U.S. Navy Adm. (Ret) Harold Gehman, Open-File Report, U.S. Department of Defense (Washington, D.C., 9 January 2001), 1.

²³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, The Federal News Service, Inc. News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, and Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, "USS Cole Briefing," January 19, 2001.

the USS *Cole* was not prepared to defend itself while in harbor on October 12, 2000. Even though the damage occurred at the tactical level, the failures that enabled the al-Qaeda suicide bombers to breach the hull of the destroyer were apparent up and down the Navy's chain-of-command. The Navy was negligent in its Anti-Terrorism and Force Protection training and selection of small-arms that it provided to the USS *Cole*. The leadership team aboard the USS *Cole*, particularly the Force Protection team and Inport Watch, was additionally culpable for failing to follow naval protocol designed to protect the ship.



FBI picture of the forty-by-forty-five-foot hole²³⁶

²³⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Famous Cases and Criminals - USS Cole Bombing," <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.

Anti-Terrorism Force Protection Training and Planning

Prior to departing for the Middle East, the USS *Cole*'s crew received regimented instruction in force protection from the US Navy. The USS *Cole*'s leadership team was responsible for educating themselves as well as disseminating material to the rest of the crew. In February 2000, Commander Lippold attended a Level III Force Protection/Anti-Terrorism seminar for Commanding Officers and Executive Officers.²³⁷ During exercises with the Atlantic Fleet in May 2000, the USS *Cole* was recognized for excellence in Anti-Terrorism and Force Protection.²³⁸ In June of the same year, the entire seven-person Force Protection team attended a Level II Force Protection course in Little Creek, Virginia.²³⁹ The USS *Cole* was the only ship in the George Washington Battle Group to attend at that time. The USS *Cole*'s officers were not alone in being educated on the importance of protecting the ship, and every member of the crew had completed Level I Force Protection/Anti-Terrorism training.²⁴⁰ This program consisted of a brief, a movie called "Out of Harm's Way," handouts and a booklet, and concluded with a question and answer period over the material. By completing these actions, the *Cole* met the Navy's requirement for force protection.

There were deficiencies in the training, most notably with Level I. The more advanced Level II and Level III of the Anti-Terrorism and Force Protection training provided some rigor. Level III training was held for the highest and second highest ranking officers on a ship. The *Cole*'s Force Protection team was required to attend the week-long Level II course, and all

²³⁷ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 74.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

individuals had to successfully pass a test in order to retain their position aboard the ship.

Completion of Level II qualified the Force Protection team to impart Level I to their crewmates.

In many ways, Level I training was rudimentary. Perhaps because Level I was required for everyone in the Navy, the information was presented in generalities with a few anecdotal examples. There was important, yet remedial, information found in Level I such as an explanation of THREATCONs and tips for protecting oneself while on liberty in foreign countries. One major issue was that the training ended with a question and answer segment rather than an examination to test retention of the material. This method did not encourage individuals to take the training seriously. Another problem was that Level I did not delve into the deeper nuances of force protection, and anyone standing guard as part of the Inport Watch teams should have been receiving advanced training before being assigned to protect the ship. The information found in Level I offered only an introductory look at force protection.

Before a ship in the United States Navy enters a foreign port, the crew is required to already have a defensive plan in place. Based on information the ship has received from its theater command, a Force Protection Team was supposed to discuss and implement a series of measures to ensure a safe environment for both the crew and the ship. Reflecting the perceived threat levels of a given port, the force protection team was responsible for carrying out a minimum number of defensive actions. At the time of the USS *Cole*'s departure to the Middle East, the Force Protection team received a THREATCON level from command as well as a Yemen Threat Level. The THREATCON levels at the time were ALPHA, BRAVO, CHARLIE, or DELTA. These escalated with ALPHA being the lowest threat and DELTA indicating that an attack had already occurred in the region.

Although a ship's commanding officer will ultimately be held accountable for completing each component of the force protection plan, he or she has a small amount of flexibility. For example, when the USS *Donald Cook* refueled in Aden harbor in the fall of 2000, the ship never completed Measure 30 of its force protection plan, an action which reminded its sailors to lock all parked vehicles on the shore. Because the *Donald Cook* was scheduled for a Brief Stop for Fuel (BSF) and was not allowing its personnel a liberty visit ashore, this measure was not applicable to the situation. Skipping Measure 30 was a permissible action for the *Donald Cook*, but the ship was required to report this deviation and receive permission to alter its force protection plan from its theater command at Fifth Fleet before doing so. After leaving a port, the force protection team had to once again report to its command that the warship had been delinquent in fulfilling a particular measure or measures.

During its service in the Mediterranean with the Sixth Fleet in the fall of 2000, the USS *Cole* had likewise formally requested alterations from its standard force protection plan. In August and September, the destroyer had deviated its ALPHA force protection in Malta, Slovenia, France, and Spain based on reports that these European locals were considered low-threat. This decision did not come under any scrutiny because the USS *Cole* did not face any serious threats during this time.

Before its arrival at Tawahi port in Aden, the USS *Cole* had not requested any changes to its BRAVO force protection plan. This meant the ship was responsible for accomplishing all sixty-two defensive measures. According to naval regulation, all deviations from these conditions were required to be discussed by Commander Lippold and his Force Protection Officer. Their suggestions for deviations from the plan would then be reported to command. According to the Lieutenant Commander for the Abraham Lincoln Battle Group responsible for

overseeing force protection for all ships in this command, “The USS COLE did not request any [deviations] and no deviations were authorized. Unless a ship requests a deviation and the staff authorizes the deviation, the ship is expected to comply with the measures in their [Force Protection Plan] FPP (common sense). Any deviation from an approved FPP would have to be authorized by the same authority.”²⁴¹

A ship’s commanding officer has very limited latitude when it comes to force protection. The reason that the USS *Donald Cook* was able to bypass Measure 30 of its force protection plan was because the action regarding parked vehicles was not applicable during its short stop in Yemen. A Commander in the Abraham Lincoln Battle Group described this exception as,

[W]e expect units to comply with all directed **applicable** measures, based on conditions they actually encounter. COLE requested no deviations and we approved none. We therefore expected them to comply with all **applicable** measures pertaining to the conditions they would encounter during their BSF...For all CTF 50 units, we thoroughly review each proposed Force Protection plan against the applicable Area of Responsibility THREATCON measures, current intelligence for the proposed port, and all available information on the expected threat. Requested deviations are carefully considered before any Force Protection plan is approved.²⁴²

The USS *Cole*’s Force Protection Officer would state after the attack in Yemen that he had planned on informing theater command for the Abraham Lincoln Battle Group of the deviations from the force protection plan after the ship had set sail from Aden.²⁴³ This might have been the Force Officer’s intent, but it still does not excuse the more serious problem that he had failed to discuss force protection prior to the ship entering Aden. The Force Protection Officer was not supposed to be making these types of life-or-death decisions completely on his own. He should have been working through the chain-of-command.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

²⁴² Ibid., 84-85.

²⁴³ Ibid., 59.

Firepower and Command Oversight

The USS *Cole* was not properly equipped to defend itself on October 12, 2000. The firearms that had been dispatched that morning were not capable of providing overwhelming firepower. The ship did possess heavier weapons, but these were either still in the armory or un-manned at the time of the attack.

The tactical level of war is significantly different on sea than on land, and disabling a watercraft is not the same as stopping a car or truck. One notable mechanical difference is that the engine to most cars is located in the front of the vehicle, while boats are generally powered from behind. Land-based Military Police (MP), protecting a base for instance, are trained to put a round through the engine block of a suspicious vehicle before it reaches a post. This tactic allows US forces to initially disable the vehicle through non-lethal means.

Accomplishing the same outcome is significantly more problematic for the Navy. A considerable factor is the design and placement of a boat's engine. An outboard motor, which is generally located above the waterline in the tail-end of a boat, could be spotted at a distance. Nevertheless, it would still require a well-placed round to hit the engine. To accomplish this, a shooter would need to be located either behind the threat, or have an elevated shooting platform which would facilitate the necessary angle to see the motor. An inboard motor would make this endeavor highly improbable because the engine's location in the hull of the ship would make it impossible to spot.

Another unique problem for the Navy is the concept of drift. Watercraft will continue to drift even after an engine has been turned off. Unlike a car which requires pressure on a pedal, the accelerator on a boat is generally hand-powered and constant. Thus, neutralizing the pilot of a boat will not stop the craft's movement. In order to protect against the possibility of an

explosive-filled vessel and a remote-control detonation, the US Navy needed to be able to stop an approaching boat quickly with a minimum amount of continued movement. In force protection, proximity is an essential element. According to the Navy's Standard Rules of Engagement (SROE), deadly force is only allowed as a last resort once non-lethal options have been exhausted.

The USS *Cole* had been outfitted with a variety of weapons for force protection.

According to naval records, the *Cole*'s armory on the morning of October 12, 2000 included,

<u>Weapon</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
9-MM pistol	28
M-14 rifle	17
M-60 machine gun	4
M-79 grenade launcher	2
12-gauge shotgun	14
Concussion grenades	Unknown
Fire Hoses	Unknown ²⁴⁴

Were these weapons adequate, appropriate, and available to the Inport Watch to protect against naval threats while in port? The M-14 is gas-powered rifle that fires a 7.62 caliber round.

Although some considered the M-14 to be an antiquated weapon by 2000, the Navy had continued its use. According to naval documents, the M-14 was considered effective up to 460 meters. High pressure fire hoses were supposed to be used as a non-lethal method for preventing watercraft and ultralight aircraft from getting too close to the ship. These were only capable of deterring would-be attackers inside forty yards.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

The USS *Cole*'s armory was also supplied with protective gear and communication systems for its sentries. On the day of the attack, three Quarterdeck watches and two of the rovers were outfitted with protective helmets and flak jackets as precautionary measures. Communication during combat is vital, and the ship's rovers were supplied with Wireless Internal Communication System (WICS) radios to enhance coordination between teams. In case the WICS radios failed, they were also provided a basic whistle to sound an alert or call for backup.

At 0930 on 12 October 2000, Inport Duty Section Three assumed the watch over the USS *Cole*.²⁴⁵ This group of thirteen individuals, one of whom was unaware that he was on-duty at the time, was responsible for protecting the ship during the refueling process. On that morning, the group was commanded by a Lieutenant who held the title Command Duty Officer. Although Alpha Measure 5 of the force protection plan recommended "rifles are the preferred weapon" for sentries at the fantail and forecastle, none of the Inport Watch onboard the *Cole* were armed with a M-14 rifle on October 12 according to the Navy's records. The Officer of the Deck, Petty Officer of the Watch, and Internal Rover were all outfitted with 9-MM pistols, while the Messenger of the Watch, the Topside Rover on the Forecastle, and Topside Rover on the Fantail were armed with 12-gauge shotguns.²⁴⁶

Shotguns have traditionally been designated for short-range, anti-personnel combat, and small-caliber pistols, such as the 9-MM, are generally utilized as a secondary or last resort weapon. These weapons would have been effective against intruders, but given their extremely limited range, offered little impact at a distance against land or water-borne threats. The Navy estimated that the 12-gauge shotgun's maximum effective range was 40 meters and the 9mm was

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 49.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

slightly further at 50 meters.²⁴⁷ Accuracy from these distances would only have been possible with highly trained shooters. These weapons would not have stopped the al-Qaeda suicide bombers from detonating their payload unless the defenders had been standing directly above their boat.

The USS *Cole*'s armory did hold heavier weapons than shotguns and pistols. According to the ship's records, four .50 caliber machinegun tripods were mounted the morning of the attack, and the two M-60s were located on the bridge wings. The .50 calibers aboard the *Cole* were heavy machineguns capable of generating a large rate of fire and known to be effective at distances up to 1829 meters. Although not nearly as powerful as the .50 calibers, the M-60 was a gas-powered, lighter machinegun that could hit targets at 600 meters.

In Aden, the USS *Cole*'s crew exceeded the minimum requirements of the force protection plan by mounting the .50 calibers as a precautionary move. In accordance with protocol, the ammo for the guns had remained in storage. The USS *Cole*'s Force Protection Officer estimated that it would have taken five to seven minutes to load and man the weapons in the case of an emergency.²⁴⁸ This generous response estimate, if correct, was entirely too slow to counter an emerging threat before the enemy was upon the ship. Perhaps more unsatisfactory, there was no one assigned to man the .50 calibers on the morning of October 12, 2000, leaving the tripods unarmed and unmanned.

In addition to the small arms, the USS *Cole* had two rigid hull inflatable boats (RHIB) available for several functions, including force protection. When utilized for this action, the RHIB's primary purpose was to act as a first-line of defense by identifying threats and positioning itself as a deterrent against enemy forces attempting to access the hull of the ship. If

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

a situation allowed enough time, the first job of the sentries aboard the RHIB was to communicate potential dangers to other members of the Inport Watch team who would have had an elevated view of any port from atop the USS *Cole*. In accordance with Measure 31 of the force protection plan, all picket boats were supposed to be armed with M-16 rifles, one M-60 with 200 rounds of ammunition, and 10 concussion grenades. The entire Inport Watch team, including the crews in the RHIBs, was supposed to be updated on the use of deadly force as well as any changing Rules of Engagement (ROE) prior to entering all foreign ports.

In the years before the USS *Cole* bombing, the Navy's choice of equipment aboard the RHIBs was questionable. The sailors aboard the small boats needed either advanced marksmanship or overwhelming firepower to stop a moving target on the water, preferably both. Even in the confines of a harbor, both an RHIB and any water-based threat would be affected by the waves generated by water traffic. Because the USS *Cole*'s armory was not supplied with M-16s, the RHIBs would have most likely been outfitted with M-14 rifles, in addition to the M-60. As previously stated, naval records indicated that the M-14 rifle's maximum effectiveness would not have exceeded 460 meters, while the M-60 could hit a man-sized target at no more than 600 meters. Unlike the M-14 rifle which uses a magazine, the M-60 is a machinegun that is fed from a disintegrating belt. At sea, the undulation of the waves would have made fire efficiency difficult for both weapons, and almost impossible for the M-60 if it were not mounted on a stationary tripod at the front of the RHIB.

In accordance with the mandates of force protection, all RHIBs were supposed to be equipped with ten concussion grenades. Although it was not specifically listed in the Navy's requirements for RHIBs, these grenades would have been fired from a grenade launcher, like the M-79, a weapon the USS *Cole* carried in its armory. Like the M-14 and M-60, relying on the

ability of an M-79 to place a concussion grenade against a moving target would have been a challenging proposition on the water.

Of course, the RHIBs' abilities to protect the ship were theoretical, unless a commanding officer actually deployed the small boats. Under THREATCON BRAVO, small picket boats with armed crewmembers were supposed to establish a perimeter and circle around their ship at fifteen-minute intervals. The force protection plan that the USS *Cole* was committed to complete included the following measures under THREATCON BRAVO,

Measure 18. Water taxis, ferries, bum boats, and other harbor craft require special concern because they can serve as an ideal platform for terrorists. Unauthorized craft should be kept away from the ship; authorized craft should be carefully controlled, surveilled, and covered. Inspect authorized watercraft daily.

Measure 31. Designate and brief picket boat crews. Prepare boats and place crews on 15-minute alert. If the situation warrants, make random picket boat patrols in the immediate vicinity of the ship with the motor whaleboat or gig. Boat crews will be armed with M16 rifles, one M60 with 200 rounds of ammunition, and 10 concussion grenades.

Measure 31 (MSC). Implement measures to keep unauthorized craft away from ship. Coordinate with husbanding agent and port authority, as necessary.²⁴⁹

On October 12, 2000, the USS *Cole*'s Inport Watch team did not deploy the RHIBs to establish a defensive perimeter in the midst of the busy harbor. This turned out to be a fatal omission and never should have been allowed to happen. The USS *Cole*'s deviation was not like the previously stated case of the USS *Donald Cook*, which overlooked a measure in force protection because it was not relevant in Aden. Rather, the USS *Cole*'s crew was actively choosing to disregard multiple actions from the force protection plan, each of which was clearly applicable on that morning. The escalated threat level of BRAVO over the lesser ALPHA should have indicated to the crew that they were in semi-hostile environment during their refueling in Yemen.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 99-100.

On the morning of the attack, the decision was made to waive Measure 31 because, “The security risk of having the boats in the water on 15-minute alert was deemed a greater risk than leaving in the skids for the short length of the visit.”²⁵⁰ Part of the logic for this decision was that the USS *Cole* could only lower the boats to the starboard side, and thus this action was not possible while refueling was also taking place on that side of the ship. According to established naval protocol, convenience can never justify skipping defensive measures.

One solution to the refueling dilemma could have involved launching the RHIBs into the water prior to the start of the refueling process. This action would have required the small boat crews to operate for a longer period of time than fifteen minutes, but that was not an inappropriate request for trained military personnel. As an alternative, the small boat crews could have worked in shifts. Although other naval ships had passed through Aden without facing any previous attacks, the USS *Cole* was traveling through a dangerous part of the world on THREATCON BRAVO which required the crew to be on a war-footing.

Of course, it was impossible to determine with absolute certainty what would have occurred if the USS *Cole* had deployed the picket boats on the morning of October 12. It is conceivable that smaller boats circling the perimeter of the USS *Cole* might have disrupted the al-Qaeda bombers to the point of abandoning their attack. At the very least, the picket boats would have forced the attackers to detonate their ordinance from a greater distance. The RHIBs might have lessened the impact on the USS *Cole* which would likely have saved lives. This was the finding of the House Armed Services Committee report which stated, “It is conceivable, though unprovable, that some of the measures not implemented could have either prevented the

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 56.

attack or mitigated its consequences.”²⁵¹ The evidence is indisputable that deploying small boat crews would have enhanced the ship’s security.

This leads to the question – why did the United States Navy allow its commanders to deviate from the required force protection plan? The USS *Cole* was not alone in bypassing Measure 31 in Aden Harbor. Naval records later determined that only one US warship had put picket boats in the water at Tawahi harbor in the previous two years.²⁵² This pattern of non-compliance should have been addressed immediately. Depending on the THREATCON, the use of RHIBs was a mandated command with obvious tactical benefit. Individual ships discussed their force protection plan up the chain of command prior to a stop, and the Force Protection Officer was required to report which measures had been completed. Thus, high-ranking officers at Fifth Fleet were aware that the ships’ commanding officers were not dropping their RHIBs in the water in Yemen in direct contravention of protocol. Yet, there are no records of repercussion for any of the US warships which refueled in Aden prior to the *Cole*’s arrival.

In this, CENTCOM failed. Individual captains arriving in Yemen were universally ignoring force protection protocol. Perhaps more importantly, the Navy’s chain-of-command was not taking appropriate action to prevent this from occurring. This created a culture of complacency. Fifth Fleet should have been establishing a precedent each time one of its warships traveled to Yemen. If even one of the ship’s commanding officers failed to meet their force protection plan, there should have been immediate repercussion to correct the CO and deter other ships from acting in a similar fashion.

²⁵¹ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 14.

²⁵² Robert Natter, Second endorsement of *Investigation to Inquire into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000* from January 4, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 2004), 148.

Communication and Knowledge

On October 12, 2000, the crew of the USS *Cole* was not prepared to effectively defend the ship. This responsibility falls on the ship's commanding officer and his leadership team. The Force Protection team and the Inport Watch had not been properly briefed on local threats in Yemen, a mistake which had tragic consequences. Communication down the chain-of-command did not occur as it should have prior to the USS *Cole*'s arrival in Aden, leaving the crew with limited situational knowledge.

The key behind the al-Qaeda plan in Yemen was the decision to approach the American warship in a non-hostile manner. The bombers even smiled and waved at the sailors as their craft floated toward the USS *Cole*. This ruse should not have mattered. The USS *Cole*'s force protection team should have been controlling the approaching boat regardless of whether it presented itself as friendly or hostile. This rapid threat evaluation would have been easier with small patrol boats establishing a perimeter around the USS *Cole*'s hull.

According to the ship's records, the Operations and Intelligence briefings in the days before the USS *Cole*'s arrival in Yemen did not address the threat level. These meetings, which were held on October 8 and 10, were a contributing factor to the USS *Cole*'s crew being unprepared for the THREATCON in Tawahi harbor. This responsibility should have been completed by the Force Protection Officer, and the Commanding Officer should have ensured this action transpired.

Several members of the USS *Cole*'s crew noticed the two men approaching in the new, white boat moments before the explosion. A Fireman onboard recalled seeing the "white boat

one-half mile out” and watched the craft turn parallel with the USS *Cole* on the port side.²⁵³ A Gas Turbine System Technician Fireman, who had also spotted the al-Qaeda team, provided the best description of the boat as white with red trim, thirty-five feet long by six or seven feet wide, and containing a four or five foot storage well in the bow.²⁵⁴ He also estimated that the boat was moving at approximately five or six knots as it crept toward the USS *Cole*.

The Inport Watch team was responsible for monitoring all possible threats during the refueling process in Yemen. A Lieutenant led the thirteen-person force. The group was actually smaller on October 12th because one Fire Controlman was unaware that his watch had been switched to that morning and three other members were designated Backup Alert Force. This left only a handful of individuals monitoring Aden harbor.

The Fantail Rover never saw the al-Qaeda vessel during its approach across the waterfront.²⁵⁵ The Forecastle Rover, a Torpedoman’s Mate, Petty Officer 3rd Class, observed the white boat in the moments before the explosion. Although the details were not clear to him, the Torpedoman’s Mate remembered hearing on the general announcing system that trash would be picked up during the refueling stop that morning. Assuming the suicide bombers were merely the workers of an anticipated local trash barge, he stopped monitoring the boat, moved away from their approach, and was standing on the Starboard bow when the bomb detonated.

Several members of the Inport Watch team detected the boat before it reached the exterior of the *Cole*, but the group suffered from a lack of situational information, a responsibility that was supposed to be handled by the Force Protection team. According to force

²⁵³ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 70.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ The precise location of the Inport Watch was compiled during the Navy’s investigation into the attack. Enclosure Eighty shows a diagram of the Inport Watch Team. This drawing, along with the Navy’s photos and videos of Aden harbor on October 12, 2000, remain classified.

protection Measure 1, each sailor was supposed to be briefed on threat levels as they pertained to Aden harbor.

Measure 1. Brief crew on the port specific threat, the Security/Force Protection Plan, and security precautions to be take while ashore. Ensure all hands are knowledgeable of various THREATCON requirements and that they understand their role in implementation measures. Remind all personnel to be suspicious and inquisitive of strangers, be alert for abandoned parcels or suitcases and for unattended vehicles in the vicinity. Report unusual activity to the Officer of the Deck.²⁵⁶

This never happened. Thus, the individuals in the Inport Watch, who were also inappropriately armed for stopping advancing watercraft, were being asked to protect the ship without knowing what actions were deemed necessary. This made for an impossible situation.

Furthermore, the Watch Team failed in its handling of traffic management around the USS *Cole* in Tawahi harbor. One of the reasons for this failure cited by the Inport Watch was that they were expecting local trash boats to approach the destroyer. Commander Lippold had not originally intended to order a trash dump, but he changed his mind after being convinced by a subordinate. This was not a planned activity, but not one that was out of the ordinary, and the force protection team should have been able to respond effectively to this contingency. After all, Force Protection Measure 18 and Measure 19 for ALPHA, the most basic defensive level in the Navy, required “Control authorized watercraft and keep unauthorized craft away from the boat” and “Identify and inspect workboats.” Measure 39 stated, “Implement measures to keep unauthorized craft away from the ship. Authorized craft should be carefully controlled.” These measures clearly stipulated the actions the Inport Watch should have been taking. The smaller watercraft never should have been allowed to reach the *Cole*’s hull.

²⁵⁶ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000, 99.*

This basic misunderstanding of their mission appeared rampant throughout the performance of duty by the USS *Cole*'s crew. An informal survey conducted by JAG during the Command Investigation illustrated the problem. Of the thirty-five randomly selected members of the crew interviewed, twenty-five, including two members of the Force Protection team, could not recall the THREATCON.²⁵⁷ Perhaps even more unsettling, a mere twenty of the thirty-five interviewed were aware that the USS *Cole* was refueling in Yemen on the day of the attack.

These deficiencies exemplify the serious communication problems later identified aboard the USS *Cole* on the morning of October 12, 2000. The Navy's *Command at Sea*, a pedagogical book for new commanding officers, specified that "Watchstanders must be vigilant and attentive to all details. The appearance of normal, steady state conditions should never be an excuse for relaxing attention."²⁵⁸ Yet, the blame cannot rest entirely with the Inport Watch because the team had never been properly briefed by the Force Protection Officer, the Command Duty Officer, or any another ranking officer. This communication breakdown revealed a dearth in leadership.

Rules of Engagement and Experience

During its time in Aden harbor, the crew of the USS *Cole* had every right to defend themselves. Like all naval vessels, the ship was operating under the Standing Rule of Engagement (SROE) which stated,

A Commander has the authority and obligation to use all necessary means available and to take all appropriate actions to defend that Commander's unit and other U.S. Forces in the vicinity from a hostile act or demonstration of hostile intent. Neither these rules, nor the supplemental measures activated to augment these rules, limit this inherent right and obligation. At all times, the requirements of necessity and proportionality, as amplified in the SROE, will form the basis for the judgement of the on-scene commander (OSC) or

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 93.

²⁵⁸ Stavridis and Mack, 184.

individual as to what constitutes an appropriate response to a particular hostile act or demonstration of hostile intent.²⁵⁹

Every member of the USS *Cole* was authorized to use deadly force, if necessary, to protect themselves or their ship.

According to Measure 2 of the Force Protection plan, the Inport Watch was supposed to be briefed on local threats as well as the Standing Rules of Engagement. This briefing never occurred. Thus, the USS *Cole*'s last line of defense was effectively operating under their own initiative. Although there was a litany of deficiencies onboard the USS *Cole* following its arrival at Aden harbor, confusion over the Standing Rules of Engagement does not appear to be a major factor on Oct 12th. Even though the Inport Watch team had not been properly briefed on the THREATCON in Yemen, there was no evidence that the group was unmindful of their legal rights to protect the ship. Most of the sentries never spotted the approaching boat, and the ones who did were not concerned with the moral dilemma of using lethal force. Still, this fact should not exonerate the leadership team for failing to accomplish basic force protection.

Other significant problems evident in after-action reviews of the USS *Cole* attack were the failures in sentry training and experience. Each rover, who was armed with a 12-gauge shotgun or 9mm on October 12, would have brought with them varying degrees of combat experience. Like all naval vessels, the *Cole*'s crew had participated in weapons qualification with small arms. In a report filed a day before the attack, sailors had been tested for proficiency with 9mm handguns, 12-gauge shotguns, hand grenades, M-14 rifles, M-60 machineguns, 25 mm chain gun, M-79 grenade launcher, and the .50 caliber machinegun. Onboard weapons training had continued as the USS *Cole* made its way from the Atlantic seaboard to the

²⁵⁹ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 90.

Mediterranean, but the Executive Officer was not sure of the most recent testing prior to entering the port of Aden. Per naval protocol, these sentries would have only been weapons tested once a year.

At 0930 on October 12, 2000, Inport Duty Section Three took control of the USS *Cole*'s watch. The team included,

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Watch</u>
Lieutenant	Command Duty Officer
Operations Specialist, Sr. Chief Petty Officer	Section Leader
Store Keeper, 1 st Class	Officer of the Deck
Ship's Serviceman Officer	Petty Officer of the Watch
Seaman	Messenger of the Watch
Torpedoman's Mate Petty Officer 3 rd Class	Topside Rover/Backup Alert Force
Fire Controlman, Petty Officer 2 nd Class	Topside Rover (Fantail)
Sonar Technician, Petty Officer 3 rd Class	Internal Rover/Backup Alert Force
Fire Controlman, Petty Officer 1 st Class	Security Action Team
Fire Controlman, Petty Officer 1 st Class	Security Action Team
Sonar Technician, Petty Officer 2 nd Class	Backup Alert Force
Fire Controlman, Petty Officer 3 rd Class	Backup Alert Force
Gunner's Mate, Petty Officer 3 rd Class	Backup Alert Force ²⁶⁰

The almost random composition of this team reflected the lack of commitment to having the most qualified coherent group standing guard. The Inport Watch was a rotating duty aboard the *Cole*, and the individuals responsible for protecting the ship were not trained as a cohesive unit.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 50.

The Lieutenant assigned as Command Duty Officer was merely fulfilling his shift as ranking officer of the Inport Watch on the morning of the attack.

The rovers' specialized training illustrated a major problem in force protection. One of the rovers primary training was work with torpedoes while another specialized in sonar. Because neither of these skills pertained to security, these were not the individuals who should have been responsible for protecting the ship, particularly when the USS *Cole* was known to be entering a BRAVO-level threat zone. The destroyer needed sentries who specialized in making decisions at the tactical level, who could recognize threats, and who possessed the skills to handle the situation. This required specialized training and consistent practice with small-arms on the water. Level I of the Anti-Terrorism and Force Protection training, the basic requirement for everyone onboard the *Cole*, was utterly deficient in meeting these demands.

Experience can only be gleaned in the field, but this has not prevented all the branches of the American military from attempting to simulate combat. Even with modern technology, it is impossible to replicate the adrenaline rush from battle or duplicate the pressure associated with a life-or-death decision. The USS *Cole* needed veteran units who specialized in force protection guarding the ship. These sentries should have received special training, have been certified in advanced weaponry, and worked with familiar counterparts. A sonar technician never should have been standing guard.

Pushing Information

Although the 1998 comprehensive review which focused on security issues in Aden was considered outdated by the fall of 2000, CENTCOM had just completed an assessment of the medical facilities in the city. This concise report titled "Medical Assets and Capabilities, Vicinity of Aden, Republic of Yemen" was submitted to the Force Surgeon on October 1, 2000,

less than two weeks before the USS *Cole*'s entrance into Tawahi harbor. The review of the city's hospitals might have only been preliminary in its scope, but it could have proved a valuable piece of research in the weeks that followed. Not only was the USS *Cole* unprepared for the actual attack, the American destroyer did not possess adequate information for dealing with the aftermath of the bombing.

The Corpsman responsible for drafting and submitting the report traveled to Aden to evaluate Ras Morbat Medical Clinic, Aden General Hospital, Al Gamhooria Teaching Hospital, and Saber Hospital. The report was grim. It described patients waiting three or four days for emergency air evacuation, blood banks infected with AIDS and hepatitis, as well as an overall substandard of basic medical practice. The report warned, "only under dire account should an expatriate have a local blood transfusion" and "universal precautions are not always followed."²⁶¹ The exception to the group was Saber Hospital, a small, private medical facility for the city's elite citizens. Most of the medical practitioners at Saber were fluent in English and their facility met modern standards, but the hospital was impractical in the case of a large-scale emergency because there were only thirty beds. The next closest and most reliable facility was the Baptist Hospital at Jibla, which employed American and other foreign doctors. Because Jibla was a four-hour trek by road, the report specified that its proximity could not be trusted for the US Navy.

Reports like "Medical Assets and Capabilities, Vicinity of Aden, Republic of Yemen" are at times given lower priority because they are not combat-based assessments. Yet, the value of this type of report becomes vital once emergency care is needed. The information found in this brief report could have been invaluable to the officers of the USS *Cole*. With this evaluation, the

²⁶¹ U.S. Navy, COMUSNAVCENT Force Independent Duty Corpsman, *Medical Assets and Capabilities, Vicinity of Aden, Republic of Yemen*, To Force Surgeon, October 1, 2000, 1.

CO and his crew would have known the most competent hospitals to send the wounded, as well as which facilities the Americans needed to avoid. Unfortunately, the leaders aboard the USS *Cole* were unaware of the medical assessment of Aden. Even the best assessments are useless if the results are never communicated to those who might need this critical information.

The military prides itself on working through contingencies, and one of the best methods for preparing its officers is by providing data to its leaders in the field. In the aftermath of the bombing, Commander Lippold sent Lt. Ann Chamberlain, a navigations officer, to shore to oversee the transportation and security of the ship's wounded. She was joined by approximately forty crewmembers who assisted in this effort.²⁶² Neither Lippold nor Chamberlain had any specifics for the logistics of this crucial mission. The information Lippold and Chamberlain desperately needed was available at CENTCOM, but it was not accessible to the USS *Cole* at this most dire time. At the very least, a protocol for transportation of the injured should have been established and instantaneously available.

With limited local knowledge and language skills, the wounded were transported to Saber Hospital and Al-Gamhooria. According to the CENTCOM report, the choice of Saber Hospital was the best possible location in terms of surgery and sanitation practices. Al-Gamhooria, a teaching hospital, was evaluated as more mediocre. The CENTCOM report had positively asserted that, "It has the most experience medical/surgical staff and some up to date equipment," but also warned of "its mid to low level of sanitation."²⁶³ As concern grew over the safety of the wounded, the US-led relief effort eventually evacuated the injured sailors from the Yemeni hospitals, but not before one of the Americans succumbed to his wounds. In spite of this loss,

²⁶² Winkler, 170.

²⁶³ U.S. Navy, COMUSNAVCENT Force Independent Duty Corpsman, *Medical Assets and Capabilities, Vicinity of Aden, Republic of Yemen*, To Force Surgeon, October 1, 2000, 3.

the Navy later concluded that the medical teams at the Aden hospitals probably saved the lives of three sailors.

With limited confidence in Aden's medical capabilities and growing concerns over a secondary al-Qaeda attack on land, most of the USS *Cole*'s wounded were evacuated out of Yemen. One group was flown to a facility in Djibouti which specialized in military trauma. The one-hundred bed facility was run by French doctors and contained a modern ICU and emergency room. According to after-action assessments completed by the United States Navy, the French military medical air evacuation team that picked up the injured saved the lives of two Americans, and the Military Medical Center in Djibouti "prevented significant complications" for four others.²⁶⁴ The decision to accept the French support proved correct, as evidenced by the number of lives saved. If a less competent medical staff had been selected to care for the wounded, the number of fatalities might have risen.

In the summary of the Navy's JAG report on the USS *Cole*, the officer recommended that one of the institutional changes that the Department of Defense needed to initiate as a result of the *Cole* incident was that pertinent information needed to be "pushed" to individual ships rather than forcing them to "pull" from the theater command. The medical recommendations for Aden were not specifically listed in this critique, but the scope of this problem was certainly applicable. The hospital assessment should have already been sent to the USS *Cole* prior to the ship's entrance into Tawahi harbor.

Conclusion

The Department of Defense's use of the term "seam" in Yemen does not fully convey the level of negligence which transpired in Aden harbor. The USS *Cole* was not prepared to protect

²⁶⁴ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, Appendix B.

itself on October 12, 2000 for several reasons. The Anti-Terrorism and Force Protection training was inadequate to meet the demanding needs required to defend a ship. The Navy failed to provide the Inport Watch of the USS *Cole* with overwhelming firepower, a problem which was easily correctable. The USS *Cole* possessed heavier weapons such as .50 caliber machineguns, but its ammo remained locked up, and no one was assigned to man these guns. This example, and many others, showed that the USS *Cole* also had serious issues with command leadership and communication.

Moreover, the Inport Watch team was not prepared to face external threats, a situation which originated from a lack of training and was compounded by a void of direction from the Force Protection team. With no specific briefing on Yemen, the group deviated from several important measures required in the force protection plan. Perhaps most detrimental to the ship's overall security was the failure to deploy RHIBs to guard the vessel's perimeter. The USS *Cole* was not an anomaly in this oversight. Fifth Fleet had unintentionally created a culture of complacency by refusing to reprimand ships which failed to implement force protection. All of these problems mitigated the USS *Cole*'s defensive capabilities, thus enabling the attack to occur without so much as a shot being fired. The DOD's portrayal of a "seam" was really more of a cavernous chasm.

To this day what keeps me awake at night is the disgraceful way that so many in the U.S. government treated the memory of the sailors. I cannot understand the lack of support for our investigation. For reasons unknown, both Democrats and Republicans in the White House and in senior government positions tried to ignore what had happened to the USS *Cole*.²⁶⁵

-Ali Soufan, FBI special agent assigned to investigate the bombing of the USS *Cole*

Our ability to defend U.S. interests, including military assets, depends on our recognition that we have been drawn into an undeclared war. This was not a purely criminal act. The attack on USS COLE was an asymmetric act of war by an elusive enemy.²⁶⁶

-Admiral C.W. Moore, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command

The Consequences: The Repercussions of the Bombing of the USS Cole

The bombing of the USS *Cole* was a transformative event in the escalating conflict between the United States and al-Qaeda. For Osama bin Laden and his followers, the near-sinking of an American destroyer and the killing of military personnel was their crowning achievement to date. Although the “boats” mission did not manage to retire the ship, the bombing attracted new donors and recruits into the al-Qaeda fold. These assets were essential for al-Qaeda’s growth, and allowed bin Laden to plan for future wars. Perhaps more importantly, the attack solidified al-Qaeda as a foremost international terrorist organization. In spite of these successes, Osama bin Laden’s strategy ultimately failed because the USS *Cole* attack did not provoke the United States into a protracted war. He would have to find another way to accomplish that goal.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Moore, 131.

While al-Qaeda reaped the recruiting and fundraising windfall from its attack, the United States government never viewed the USS *Cole* incident as a transformative event. The bombing of an elite warship should have been the wakeup call the White House and United States Congress needed to take the fight to al-Qaeda. The USS *Cole* disaster was also an opportunity for the intelligence community to address the infighting plaguing its agencies. The USS *Cole* attack should have demonstrated without a doubt that al-Qaeda would never retreat from its war against the United States, and that future attacks against American targets were inevitable so long as the organization operated freely. Unfortunately, Capitol Hill did not apply pressure on the White House to act against bin Laden, and the US intelligence community did not repair the intelligence sharing issues. These mistakes left the U.S. vulnerable in the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks.

Al-Qaeda After the USS *Cole* Attack

Following the USS *Cole* bombing, the al-Qaeda members of the Yemeni cell were immediately hailed as both heroes and villains. The suicide bombers, Ibrahim al Thawar who went by Nibras, and his fellow accomplice Hassan al-Khamri, realized their dreams of dying on behalf of their cause. To honor their memory and encourage others to follow their example, Osama bin Laden named two of his guesthouses after the suicide bombers.²⁶⁷ Although Nibras and Khamri were not alive to see it, the success of the bombing inspired new recruits to join al-Qaeda camps.

Although reticent in their action, the Yemeni government had political reasons for finding the al-Qaeda members responsible for the USS *Cole* attack. President Saleh and other officials did not want to address the fact that transnational extremist groups were operating freely

²⁶⁷ Soufan, 266.

inside their borders. Concerned with what the investigation might unearth and facing an angry constituency, Yemen's government wanted to expedite the conclusion of the Aden investigation as quickly as possible so the Americans would depart the country. Their effort led to the capture of Fahd al-Quso and Jamal al-Badawi, two of the cell's logistics operatives who failed in their effort to elude the authorities. Both men had been captured shortly after the USS *Cole* bombing, but their incarceration in a Yemeni prison did not last long. In April 2003, Badawi, Quso, and eight other inmates escaped from Yemeni custody by digging under a wall.²⁶⁸ Quso was recaptured in September 2004 and received a ten-year sentence in Yemen for his role in the al-Qaeda plot. Astonishingly, Quso escaped again, this time avoiding detection for several years until May 2012 when he was killed by a U.S. Predator drone attack in southern Yemen.²⁶⁹

Americans involved in the investigation had argued against allowing the perpetrators to remain in Yemen's prison system, and this trepidation proved warranted during the series of jailbreaks in the early 2000s. Following the escape in 2003, Badawi had been recaptured by the Yemeni authorities in March of 2004.²⁷⁰ In September 2004, a Yemeni court sentenced Badawi to the death penalty, a punishment which was reduced a year later to only fifteen years. In February 2006, he escaped from prison yet again along with twenty-three other al-Qaeda prisoners through a fifty-yard underground tunnel dug mostly with spoons and plates.²⁷¹ This second major jailbreak also freed the high-ranking operative Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who rose to become al-Qaeda's second-in-command until his death in 2015 during an American drone

²⁶⁸ Edmund Hull, *High Value Target: Countering al-Qaeda in Yemen* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), 84.

²⁶⁹ National CounterTerrorism Center, "Other Resources, Captured or Killed," <http://www.nctc.gov/site/other/capture.html>.

²⁷⁰ Hull, 98.

²⁷¹ Gregory Johnson, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 191-195.

strike.²⁷² NCIS Special Agent Robert McFadden summarized the American frustration as, “Professionally, if not personally, it's difficult. For example, some of the key Yemeni cell members escaped not once but twice from prison. Those things are very, very frustrating and disappointing on any given day for me. I can't even begin to imagine what it's like for the family members.”²⁷³ Unwilling to stay on the run, Badawi turned himself in in October 2007, swore allegiance to Yemeni President Saleh, and was officially released. At present, Badawi remains at large in spite of a \$5 million reward offer from the FBI.²⁷⁴

For the group's in-theatre leader, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the bombing of the USS *Cole* brought him notoriety in the Middle East. Reluctant to abandon his cause, Nashiri commenced with the planning of new missions undeterred by a death sentence in absentia from a Yemeni court. When American investigators eventually pieced together his destructive résumé, Nashiri was believed to have been involved in over a dozen unfulfilled al-Qaeda schemes against Western targets. These plans for future attacks included trying to block sea-lanes at the Straits of Hormuz with a sunken ship, crashing a plane into an American warship, bombing the US embassy in Sana'a, and attacking NATO or British ships in the Straits of Gibraltar.²⁷⁵ His would-be maritime targets ranged from oil tankers to submarines to aircraft carriers.

Nashiri was promoted by the al-Qaeda leadership structure for his work in Aden, and he proved his mettle with a second successful naval strike against another western target. Two years to the month that the USS *Cole* was attacked, he masterminded a suicide mission in

²⁷² When Osama bin Laden was alive, Ayman al-Zawahiri was al-Qaeda's second-in-command. Once bin Laden was killed in 2011, Zawahiri became the leader of the organization. Nasir al-Wuhayshi would eventually become the new second-in-command.

²⁷³ America Abroad Media, “Remembering the Cole,” <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Reflections%2010%20years%20later.pdf>

²⁷⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Most Wanted Terrorists, Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali Al Badawi,” http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists/jamel-ahmed-mohammed-ali-al-badawi/view.

²⁷⁵ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 7.

October 2002 against a French tanker called the *Limburg* as the ship was traveling through the Gulf of Aden carrying 400,000 gallons of oil.²⁷⁶ However, Nashiri's work with al-Qaeda ended a month later with his capture in the United Arab Emirates. He was held at "black sites" before being transferred to the American naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba on September 4, 2006.²⁷⁷ In 2008, the CIA publicly acknowledged having waterboarded three high-profile detainees, one of whom was Nashiri.²⁷⁸ The CIA defended its actions against Nashiri and the others who had been waterboarded by alleging that these high-level al-Qaeda prisoners provided life-saving intelligence while under duress. Critics have argued that the use of waterboarding constituted torture and refuted the CIA's claim that the prisoners offered actionable-intelligence during these sessions.

The incarceration of Nashiri was a major victory for Washington in the post-9/11 war. He was responsible for expanding bin Laden's war to the sea, a tactic which had taken both the U.S. intelligence community and the U.S. Navy by surprise. Nashiri was in the midst of numerous other active operations against the United States military and its allies, and his arrest removed an experienced al-Qaeda leader from the field. Al-Qaeda was always in search of exploitable seams in American defenses, and its leaders like Nashiri were always pushing to make each operation more sensational than the last.

Khallad, the man who had once requested that bin Laden make him a suicide bomber, filled the hierarchical void left by Nashiri's arrest in November 2002. With Nashiri locked up, bin Laden's former bodyguard and courier became the head of al-Qaeda operations in Arabia. America's serious commitment to removing al-Qaeda leaders in the years after 9/11 did not bode

²⁷⁶ Johnson, 117-119.

²⁷⁷ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 6.

²⁷⁸ *New York Times*, "The Guantanamo Docket, Abd al Rahim al Nashiri," <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/10015-abd-al-rahim-al-nashiri>.

well for Khallad. His brief command ended with his captured in April 2003.²⁷⁹ Like several other high-value detainees, he was handed over to the American authorities and flown to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. There seemed to be some irony that the men responsible for the USS *Cole* bombing ended up being incarcerated at the same military base that the American warship had visited just prior to its ill-fated deployment to Yemen.

An Economic Victory

Fighting an asymmetric war against a clearly superior military power, bin Laden always understood that his best opportunities for creating victories against the American superpower involved maximizing al-Qaeda's limited resources. In this endeavor, the organization was relatively successful. Bin Laden's upbringing in one of the richest families in the Middle East provides an interesting story, but it is important to remember that this did not entitle him to unlimited funds. Facing a superpower which spends more on its defense budget than the next twenty countries combined, bin Laden's network had a finite amount of money and manpower to allocate for each of its missions. In the case of the USS *Cole*, the Yemen cell was comprised of only a handful of men who succeed in nearly-sinking a warship protected by nearly three hundred American sailors. From the al-Qaeda point of view, the casualty list for the boats mission was short. Two of bin Laden's foot soldiers had martyred themselves, but this loss had been anticipated. Two other operatives had been captured shortly after the bombing by agents of the Yemeni government. This "collateral damage" would have been considered slight when weighed against the enormous triumphs of the mission.

A month after the attack in Aden harbor, al-Qaeda decided to publicize the cost of their Yemen operation. Rifai Ahmed Taha, who had attended a meeting in Afghanistan with bin

²⁷⁹ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9YM-010014DP(S), 8.

Laden and other high-ranking al-Qaeda members a few days before the USS *Cole* attack, claimed that the total expenditure for the boats mission had been between five and ten thousand dollars.²⁸⁰ Taha did not go into further detail about the specifics of what had been purchased with the money. During subsequent interrogations of the Yemeni cell members, it was discovered that bin Laden had originally provided Nashiri with \$2,000 in the spring of 1999 as seed money to the mission moving.²⁸¹ It would be difficult to support the cell members on a daily basis, pay for their international travel, purchase and modify a boat, as well as buy a truck, trailer, and explosives for this price. However, the mission probably was in the tens of thousands of dollars and was sustained by Nashiri and his companions operating frugally in a country with a low cost of living.

By attempting to create the appearance that the USS *Cole* attack occurred at virtually no cost to bin Laden, Taha might have been trying to expand on the mythical narrative that pitted a superpower with endless resources against a small band of dedicated Muslim fighters. Regardless of the exact amount al-Qaeda spent for the Yemen mission, Osama bin Laden and his operatives maximized the money allocated to sinking an American warship. The cost benefit of the USS *Cole* bombing paled in comparison to al-Qaeda's greatest triumph on September 11th when the group proved that a handful of angry civilians armed with only crude knives could strike a blow to the world's greatest power. For the estimated cost of \$400,000 to \$500,000, al-Qaeda caused over a trillion dollars in damage to the United States.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Jacquard, 84, 230.

²⁸¹ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *Detainee Assessment*, ISN:US9SA-010015DP(S), 3.

²⁸² The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 169.

A Political Victory

Bin Laden's attack on the USS *Cole* created a public relations victory in spite of one of the mission's largest shortcomings. On the morning of the bombing, Fahd al-Quso had overslept after morning prayers and consequently failed to record the harbor explosion. This oversight was a major failure in the operation because Quso was privy to the intimate details of the plan and had plenty of time to prepare the camera beforehand. Quso's mistake must have frustrated the al-Qaeda leader, who had a grander vision for the videotape than simply documenting the martyrs last moments to the masses. Bin Laden, who understood the importance of marketing from his time in Afghanistan in the 1980s, had hoped to release the video to the world as a way to draw other Muslims to join his cause. The tape also could have been used to taunt Washington into action.

Neither Quso's blunder nor the lack of footage stopped the ambitious bin Laden. In the spring of 2001, his public relations team put together a recruitment video called "Destroying the Destroyer *Cole*" which included a celebratory poem by the al-Qaeda leader.²⁸³ During his special guest appearance, bin Laden praised, "In Aden, they charged and destroyed a destroyer that fearsome people fear, one that evokes horror when it docks and when it sails. We give you the good news that the forces of Islam are coming and the forces of Yemen will continue in the name of God."²⁸⁴ The video production even had a background tune during a montage commemorating the USS *Cole* attack. The song included, "We thank God for granting us victory the day we destroyed the *Cole* in the sea."²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Benjamin and Simon, 154.

²⁸⁴ Gutman, 250.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

The tape was similar to other al-Qaeda propaganda in that it inveighed against America as an imperialistic conqueror of foreign lands, conveyed expressions of solidarity with the people of Palestine, and showcased an appearance by bin Laden. Of course, the video lacked the dramatic punch that might have come from having actual footage from the morning of October 12. The video was distributed throughout the Arab world, and its anti-American rhetoric resonated with many disgruntled Middle Easterners. According to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the propaganda piece was successful in bringing new recruits to the al-Qaeda ranks.²⁸⁶

The USS *Cole* bombing had the additional impact of establishing al-Qaeda as a first-rate organization headed by a serious leader. By circulating the “Destroying the Destroyer *Cole*” video, al-Qaeda publicized its role in the bombing and shared its message to possible recruits and donors. A number of Islamic groups were competing for prestige and creditability throughout the Middle East, and al-Qaeda wanted its unique brand to stand alone. The successful attack on a naval warship endorsed al-Qaeda’s credentials among the elite community of terrorist organizations. Personally, the video only enhanced bin Laden’s credentials as a leader, and his mystique as an anti-Western figure grew as the tape circulated through parts of the Muslim world. With the creation and growth of independent news organizations in the Middle East, such as al-Jazeera, bin Laden’s exploits were showcased to wider audience than had been possible during the invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The USS Cole as Part of Al-Qaeda’s Strategy

The near demise of the USS *Cole* was a transcendent moment for al-Qaeda. In the East African Embassy attacks of 1998, al-Qaeda had accomplished nearly simultaneous bombings in two separate countries. Striking two targets at the same time was itself a unique twist, but bin

²⁸⁶ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 191.

Laden's operatives had exploded a pair of truck bombs, a weapons system often utilized in asymmetrical warfare. By using a boat filled with explosives, al-Qaeda was taking the war in a different direction. The USS *Cole* mission was escalatory in nature because the target was an American warship. There was a substantial difference between attacking what was essentially a floating military base and targeting a sparsely-guarded diplomatic compound. Although the al-Qaeda leadership structure had a vague standard for what constituted a combatant versus a non-combatant, bin Laden chose a warship because there was no way that the fatalities would not be military personnel. An exuberant bin Laden claimed, "I knelt to thank God for this heroic operation that damaged the prestige of the United States and served as a warning for them to leave the Arab world and the [Arabian] Peninsula according to the Prophet's hadith."²⁸⁷

Even though Osama bin Laden publicly heralded the attack in Yemen as a great success, the bombing did not achieve all of its goals. The al-Qaeda leader had hoped that the bombing of a crowded American warship would produce an immense body count. This aspect of the plot never materialized. Additionally frustrating for bin Laden, the Americans had managed to save the destroyer from a watery grave in Aden bay. But perhaps the biggest failure for al-Qaeda was that the attack had not been devastating enough to coerce the United States into invading a Muslim country.

The USS *Cole* mission did not produce the result that bin Laden sought from the attack. Osama bin Laden calculated that the boats mission might cost him his life, but he had claimed in interviews that he was willing to die. Bin Laden was convinced that America would retaliate for the attack in Aden Harbor, and the al-Qaeda leader took precautions to ensure the future of his organization. Concerned over the sustainability of al-Qaeda should he be killed in an American

²⁸⁷ Scheuer, Osama bin Laden, 118.

reprisal, bin Laden split up key lieutenants and sent them to different locations to prevent the complete beheading of the leadership structure by a single strike. Bin Laden was so confident that the Americans would retaliate that he began rotating from safe-house to safe-house as a defensive countermeasure against U.S. surveillance. But, the Americans utterly failed to respond. *The 9/11 Commission Report* outlined bin Laden's frustration,

Back in Afghanistan, Bin Laden anticipated U.S. military retaliation. He ordered the evacuation of al-Qaeda's Kandahar airport compound and fled – first to the desert area near Kabul, then to Khowst and Jalalabad, and eventually back to Kandahar. In Kandahar, he rotated between five and six residences, spending one night at each residence. In addition, he sent his senior advisor, Mohammed Atef, to a different part of Kandahar and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to Kabul so that all three could not be killed in one attack. There was no American strike. In February 2001, a source reported that an individual whom he identified as the big instructor (probably a reference to Bin Laden) complained frequently that the United States had not yet attacked. According to the source, Bin Laden wanted the United States to attack, and if it did not he would launch something bigger.²⁸⁸

The attack on the USS *Cole* had not accomplished the opening salvo that bin Laden's grand strategy required.

The Ship and Crew

The Navy's *Command at Sea* was created to help prepare officers for the daily activities, responsibilities, and perils that naval commanders faced each day. It declared, "In navies in general, and in the U.S. Navy in particular, strict accountability is an integral part of command. Not even the profession of medicine embraces the absolute accountability found at sea. A doctor may lose a patient under trying circumstances and continue to practice, but a naval officer seldom has the opportunity to hazard a second ship."²⁸⁹ Although the USS *Cole* survived the al-Qaeda attack eventually returning to the fleet after substantial repair, *Command at Sea's* prognostication proved accurate for the ship's commanding officer, Kirk Lippold.

²⁸⁸ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 191.

²⁸⁹ Stavridis and Mack, 5.

Commander Lippold remained in the US Navy after the incident in Yemen. Starting in August 2002, Commander Lippold spent the ensuing four years at the Surface Warfare Officer School in Newport, Rhode Island teaching courses on CO/XO command as well as one on damage control.²⁹⁰ In addition to his role as an educator, the former USS *Cole* commander worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff until November 2004 when he was relocated to the office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information, Plans and Strategy.²⁹¹ For his contributions in keeping the USS *Cole* afloat, Lippold was awarded the Legion of Merit, the second highest honor bestowed by the Navy during times of peace.²⁹² This recognition marked the professional pinnacle of Lippold's career. There were, however, other ramifications from his time in Aden Harbor.

In the days following the USS *Cole* explosion, Commander Lippold commented to members of the FBI investigation team that, "The navy eats its own."²⁹³ Although Lippold was never court-martialed, the near-sinking of the destroyer had unofficial repercussions for the ship's commanding officer. On a number of occasions commencing from 2002, the Navy put Lippold up for promotion only to have his name removed from the candidate pool each year. Lippold asserted that these promotions were halted by angry colleagues who were embarrassed by the bombing, or by Senator John Warner of Virginia who contended the Navy had not properly assessed the fault of its personnel in the aftermath of the attack. After twenty-six years in the US Navy, Lippold retired in May 2007.²⁹⁴ His promotion never materialized.

²⁹⁰ Lippold, 302-303.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 317.

²⁹² Ibid., 310.

²⁹³ Soufan, 174.

²⁹⁴ Lippold, 333.

Even though the ship was ultimately salvaged, the USS *Cole* attack had serious implications for the American Navy and the ship's crew. Seventeen American sailors lost their lives as a result of the suicide attack, and young men and women like Signalman Seaman Cherone Lewis Gunn and Mess Specialist Seaman Lakeina Monique Francis returned to the United States in caskets. The ripples from the incident in Aden were keenly felt stateside by the families and loved ones who would never see their sons and daughters again. A high percentage of the all-volunteer military force has been filled with the children of those who formerly served. Lakeina Monique Francis was one of those who had followed in her father's example, even choosing to join the same branch of service as her dad. A Navy veteran, Ronald Francis, like many of the families who had loved ones on the USS *Cole*, had felt betrayed by the handling of the attack. Francis stated, "My daughter died on the USS *Cole*, October 12, 2000. Hopefully, one day, justice will prevail. But that's just a low part because nothing is going to bring back the 17 sailors that made the ultimate sacrifice for their ship."²⁹⁵ Other families, like the Gunns, shared an all too similar pain. Anton Gunn lost his brother, Cherone, in Aden harbor. While dealing with the loss of his brother, Anton struggled with understanding why the bombing had occurred. Gunn recalled,

What was going through my mind is, "Why?" I mean we were at peace. This was before 9/11. This was before anybody in America knew who Osama Bin Laden or al-Qaeda was. Why would somebody kill my brother? I was angry. I was hurt. I was in extreme pain because my brother and I were very close. I couldn't imagine that he was gone. I have so many fond memories of him. I wish I could hold him now. I wish I could touch him now. I wish I could be with him somehow. I know he is in a better place. I know he is smiling down on us and I love him.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ America Abroad Media, "Remembering the Cole," <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Reflections%2010%20years%20later.pdf>.

²⁹⁶ America Abroad Media, "Remembering the Cole," <http://americaabroadmedia.org/sites/default/files/Anton%20Gunn.pdf>.

The USS *Cole* bombing also had painful consequences for the ship's survivors. Many of the surviving crewmembers were forced to deal with the effects of the life-threatening injuries suffered as a result of the explosion. Not all scars from war can be seen by the naked eye, and everyone onboard the USS *Cole* that day had to face the psychological trauma experienced from being in a hostile combat attack. Known historically as "shell-shock" or "battle fatigue," Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has always affected combat veterans, but it has only been in the last half-century that militaries have begun medically treating PTSD with some regularity. At the time of the USS *Cole* attack, the US Department of Defense had not started emphasizing specialized care for all personnel in this capacity. This left the survivors of the Aden attack to handle PTSD on their own. The results were not positive.

Long-term effects of the attack remained with the USS *Cole*'s crew. One indicator of PTSD is a withdrawn state, a symptom Christopher Peterschmidt recalled suffering from after he returned stateside. The USS *Cole*'s former second-in-command had no desire to talk about the incident in Yemen, and he began actively avoiding interactions with others. Peterschmidt described what made PTSD an especially difficult disorder to treat. He stated, "Unlike physical injuries, post-traumatic stress doesn't heal over time. It tends to build over time if you don't get the help you need."²⁹⁷ Twelve years after the USS *Cole* attack, Peterschmidt finally found some solace in 2012 during group meetings he led for Marines veterans who had experienced similar trauma stemming from their combat tour in Fallujah.

PTSD can be particularly rough on relationships, and a number of marriages failed once the USS *Cole*'s crew tried to return to their former lives. Master Chief James Parlier, the corpsman who had been forced to triage his injured crewmates in the wake of the bombing, felt

²⁹⁷ David Larter, "After 15 years, USS *Cole* Crew Reflects on Terror Attack," *Navy Times*, October 11, 2015, <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/10/11/cole-peterschmidt-parlier-carlson-2000-terror-attack/73607718/>.

his personality and behavior changed in the years after the attack in Yemen. This led to a divorce. Like Peterschmidt, Parlier found comfort in talking with others who understood his unique pain. A decade after the bombing, Parlier extended his role as a corpsman, in an unofficial capacity, by offering to talk with his former crewmates about their shared experience.

The crew's heroic response to the attack was the primary reason the USS *Cole* did not sink to the bottom of Aden harbor after suffering a devastating breach to its hull, and it was their determined response that provided the ship a second life. To mark their accomplishment, the Secretary of the Navy awarded the entire USS *Cole* crew the Navy Unit Commendation. After the USS *Cole* returned to American waters, the Navy had the option of either scrapping the ship or investing in the refurbishment of the destroyer. Following fourteen months of work, the USS *Cole* returned to active duty in April 2002 after \$250 million worth of repairs that included 550 tons of steel, the replacement of two, twenty-seven-ton main engines, the instillation of three gas turbine generators, and the construction of a brand-new galley.²⁹⁸ With the completion of upgrades and repairs at the shipyard where it had been built, the USS *Cole* continued to operate as part of the Fifth and Sixth Fleet. As of 2010, the renovated destroyer had participated in eight training exercises and four deployments.²⁹⁹

In July 2006, the USS *Cole* deployed once again to the Gulf of Aden. America's war with al-Qaeda looked very different than the last the time the Arleigh Burke destroyer had travelled through the Red Sea. Crowned as a symbol of the Navy's fortitude, the USS *Cole* was refitted to memorialize the bravery of its sailors in Tawahi harbor. Seventeen shining gold stars

²⁹⁸ David Nagle, "USS Cole Rejoins the Fleet," Naval Sea Systems Command Public Affairs, NNS020419-03, April 2, 2002, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=1415.

²⁹⁹ U.S. Navy, Office of Information, "USS *Cole* Attack - 10 Years Later," *Rhumb Lines*, October 5, 2010, <http://www.navy.mil/navco/speakers/currents/Rhumb%20Lines%20101005%20--%20USS%20Cole%20Attack%2010%20Years%20Later.pdf>.

had been laid against a deep-blue backdrop on the floor of the galley, one star to represent each of the deceased. As a reminder to all its sailors, the ship's valor was reflected by three plaques accompanied by three American flags, each of which had been folded into a tight triangle and enclosed in glass and wood. The first flag was blackened and worn, a clear indicator that it had seen battle. It was the Stars and Stripes that had been flying on the mast the morning of the attack. Much cleaner in appearance, the second flag had been draped over the coffin that had held the unidentifiable remains of those who had perished in the blast. The remains of these sailors had been buried at sea with full military honors. The final encased flag had flown over the USS *Cole* on the day the destroyer had returned to the Gulf of Aden. The USS *Cole*'s journey had come full circle.



On September 14, 2001, USS *Cole* returns to the water after massive repairs³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Naval History and Heritage Command, “Cole – (DDG-67),”
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/c/cole--ddg-67--1996-.html>.

Dereliction of Duty

While the Department of Defense explored means for preventing future attacks like the one against the USS *Cole*, the Navy was responsible for assigning culpability for the events that transpired in Aden Harbor on October 12, 2000. Released to the public in January 2001, a JAG report titled *Command Investigation into the Actions of the USS COLE (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000* attempted to answer this question. The investigation followed the Navy's Manual for Judge Advocates that allowed for a single investigator, a board, or a court of inquiry to be assigned to an incident. The decision was made under the recommendation of Admiral C.W. Moore, the Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, for the review to be handled by a solo JAG officer.³⁰¹ Selecting one person in lieu of a larger body seemed to be a strange way to handle such a high-profile attack. The JAG findings were particularly personal for the crew of the USS *Cole*. If the inquiry concluded that individual members of the USS *Cole* had acted inappropriately, the Navy would be forced to hold a trial or trials for dereliction of duty.

The JAG officer presented an exhaustive examination of the crew's actions both before and after the ship's arrival at Tawahi harbor. Clearly concerned with the ship's overall state, the report outlined multiple deficiencies in planning, force protection, situational awareness, and supervision. In the conclusion of the inquiry, the JAG officer stated that, "Commander Kirk S Lippold's performance as Commanding Officer did not meet the standards set forth in Navy

³⁰¹ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy's Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

Regulations.”³⁰² Lippold was not the only member of the USS *Cole* singled-out in the report, and the ship’s Executive Officer, Force Protection Officer, and Duty Officer were also accused of failing in their overall performances on the day of the attack.

In spite of the condemning findings of the JAG officer, the Navy refused to take any punitive action against members of the USS *Cole*. In his review of the JAG report, Admiral Moore contended, “It is clear, however, that had USS COLE implemented the THREATCON BRAVO Force Protection Measures appropriately, the ship would not have prevented the attack. I am convinced THREATCON BRAVO Force Protection Measures were inadequate to prevent the attack.”³⁰³ During his endorsement of the JAG report, the Command-in-Chief of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet Robert Natter questioned whether an escalated state of readiness such as THREATCON CHARLIE would have provided enough protection to thwart the attackers.³⁰⁴ Admiral Natter additionally asserted that the bombers’ willingness to commit suicide meant that the attack could not have been thwarted. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark later explained his thought process for avoiding a trial. He stated,

We haven’t discussed it here yet today, but in my endorsement, I make reference to the point that I have reviewed every piece of intelligence that would exist on the subject. At no time, since we’ve been conducting operations in Yemen, were there ever any intelligence assessments about this kind of threat. I say specifically, that I see nothing that would have caused the commanding officer to take steps above what the measures that were prescribed for him. In other words, there was no trip wire, there was not bit of information that he missed, in my opinion, that would have caused him to take additional steps and measures.

Clark continued,

I want COs who will take independent action. They’re on the point. They have to be ready to do that. And so part of my judgment is driven by this test. The first test is, Did

³⁰² *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000*, 105.

³⁰³ Moore, 127.

³⁰⁴ Natter, 137.

he act within the range of acceptable performance that meets our standards? And I conclude that he does. And second, Was there something he didn't do that, if he had done it, it would have precluded this attack? And I conclude that if he had done everything perfectly it would not have stopped this attack. And so that leads me to the conclusion of no punitive action.³⁰⁵

Admiral Natter argued that the actions aboard the USS *Cole* were justifiable given the situation, and thus the officers were not derelict in their duty on the morning of October 12.³⁰⁶ Admiral Clark's review of Commander Lippold's performance was not as forgiving as Admiral Natter's, but he agreed that there was no need for disciplinary action.³⁰⁷

The influential opinions of the Admirals prevented the USS *Cole*'s leadership structure from facing a trial for dereliction of duty. These endorsements seemed somewhat questionable considering the USS *Cole*'s force protection team had failed to accomplish all of its mandated measures under THREATCON BRAVO, an action the commanding officer had committed to achieving in the force protection plan filed with NAVCENT. How Admiral Clark could have plausibly concluded that the CO had acted "within the range of acceptable performance that meets our standards," when according to the JAG report, the ship "executed a total of 31 of the 62 Force Protection measures required under THREATCON BRAVO," remains unanswered.

Additionally damning, the final pages of the report summarized major breakdowns in command such as,

Execution. There was no deliberate execution of the ship's Force Protection Plan. Neither the Command Duty Officer nor Force Protection Officer, both of whom were

³⁰⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, The Federal News Service, Inc. News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, and Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, "USS Cole Briefing," January 19, 2001.

³⁰⁶ Natter, 141.

³⁰⁷ V.E. Clark, Third endorsement of *Investigation to Inquire Into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG67) in Preparing For and Undertaking a Brief Stop For Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen On or About 12 October 2000* from January 9, 2001 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Dept. of the Navy, 2004), 155.

critical to the ship's security posture, were involved in ensuring there was an active identification and control of boats coming alongside.

Supervision. During the Brief Stop for Fuel in Aden, Yemen, there was a notable absence of supervision by the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, Command Duty Officer, and Force Protection Officer in implementation of the Force Protection Plan. There was little interest in whether the ship's force was executing applicable Force Protection measures.

Preventative Force Protection Measures. Nineteen (19) measures could possibly have prevented the suicide boat attack or mitigated its effect. Of those 19 measures, the ship accomplished 7.³⁰⁸

These were serious allegations. The JAG report was clear in its assessment that naval protocol had been broken, thus endangering the crew and their ship. The evidence found in the JAG investigation appeared incriminating enough to bring about a trial for dereliction of duty, but the Navy refused to take further action against Commander Lippold or his crew.



In 2011, Lippold (R) ran for U.S. Congress in Nevada's 2nd Congressional District Special Election and was defeated³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ *Command Investigation into the Actions of USS Cole (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000, 97-98.*

Changes for the DOD

As the Navy evaluated the performance of its officers and the FBI continued its criminal investigation, the Department of Defense started the process of examining how to prevent, discourage, or defeat similar seaborne attacks in the future. The Secretary of Defense William Cohen stated, “Immediately after the attack, we took additional steps to improve force protection worldwide. Now we must review all of our policies and procedures in light of that attack, and take every step possible to improve our responses to the threat of terrorism. Our goal must be continued vigilance to identify potential vulnerabilities and to appropriately strengthen our defenses.”³¹⁰ To identify these problems, Cohen created a commission led by two retired officers, Army General William Crouch and Navy Admiral Harold Gehman. On January 9, 2001, the Crouch-Gehman commission offered its formal report which concluded the USS *Cole* attack had, “demonstrated a seam in the fabric of efforts to protect our forces, namely in-transit forces.”³¹¹ To close this “seam,” the commission provided thirty unclassified findings and forty-four recommendations that included changes to the military’s organization, antiterrorism/force protection, intelligence, logistics, and training. Most of the Crouch-Gehman’s recommendations called on the Secretary of Defense to instigate a major overhaul of how the military prepares for, assesses and communicates about threats, and how it protects personnel while they were in-transit.

³⁰⁹ Nevada Secretary of State, “Elections – 2011 Special Election Filed Candidates,” <http://nvsos.gov/sos/elections/election-information/previous-elections/2011-special-election/2011-special-election-filed-candidates>.

³¹⁰ William S. Cohen, *Review of USS Cole (DDG-67) Attack Reports and Suggestions for Additional Recommended Actions*, A memorandum from the Secretary of Defense for the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 9, 2001.

³¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *DoD USS Cole Commission Report* (9 January 2001) by U.S. Army Gen. (Ret) William Crouch and U.S. Navy Adm. (Ret) Harold Gehman, Open-File Report, U.S. Department of Defense (Washington, D.C., 9 January 2001).

Cohen began instituting his own changes even as General Crouch and Admiral Gehman were immersed in their research. The Secretary of Defense created the Navy-Marine Corps Task Force on Antiterrorism and Force Protection to initiate immediate changes.³¹² The US government also adopted measures to address the problem of smaller craft operating around its warships. It enacted the Naval Vessel Protection Zone which outlawed unidentified boats from coming within one-hundred yards of naval ships and forced all vessels within five-hundred yards to slow down.³¹³ While this legislation was aimed at preventing small vessels from nearing warships, it would not prevent a determined attack.

Hours before the Clinton administration came to a close in January 2001, Secretary of Defense William Cohen endorsed the findings of both the JAG investigation and the Crouch-Gehman report.³¹⁴ Cohen's decision before leaving office allowed the military to officially begin implementing changes. The Fifth Fleet, which had been responsible for the USS *Cole* once it chopped at the Suez Canal, created a Maritime Ship Security Augmentation Force. This team was designed to arrive in port prior to CENTCOM ships to secure the area, vet locals who would be assisting the American presence, and meet with local agents for last-minute intelligence. The Maritime Ship Security Augmentation Force was a versatile group which could include pier and patrol boat sentries, Explosive Ordnance Disposal technicians, Naval Criminal Investigative

³¹² U.S. Department of Defense, The Federal News Service, Inc. News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, and Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, "USS Cole Briefing," January 19, 2001.

³¹³ Naval Vessel Protection Zone, 33 C.F.R., Part 165, Subpart G (2001), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2010-title33-vol2/pdf/CFR-2010-title33-vol2-sec165-2015.pdf>.

³¹⁴ William S. Cohen, *Assessment of Accountability Arising from the Attack on USS COLE (DDG-67) on 12 October 2000*, A memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., Department of Defense, January 19, 2001.

Services, physical security specialists, military working dog teams, corpsman, and a command and control element.³¹⁵

Providing newer, more powerful weapons to the fleet seemed a logical outcome in force protection after the USS *Cole* attack, particularly with the military's long history of addressing problems with technology. This change at the tactical level did not happen after the USS *Cole* bombing. Instead, the Navy mandated that more sailors become qualified with the M-60 and .50 caliber machine guns as a defensive countermeasure against smaller boats and aircraft.³¹⁶

Ordering additional weapons training was a positive step, but it also important to note that both of these weapons had been available to the crew in Aden harbor.

The USS *Cole* caused the military to make changes at the operational level as well. These modifications addressed the issue of whether the warship should have been refueling in Yemen in the first place because terrorist groups were known to occupy ungoverned areas of the country. The four major operational changes included,

First, some ships were re-positioned within their assigned areas of responsibility away from higher-threat areas. Second, despite increasing cost by 15-20 percent, some in port maintenance periods have been re-scheduled to lower-threat areas. Third, some port visits have been canceled or postponed until the information to support a proper risk assessment is available. Finally, the risk-management procedures implemented via in port security plans (submitted by the ships and involving their operational chain-of-command for approval) have been emphasized and reinforced.³¹⁷

To ensure the implementation of the Crouch-Gehman recommendations, the Department of Defense established a Working Group led by the DOD's Antiterrorism Coordination

³¹⁵ Vern Clark, *Statement of Admiral Vern Clark, U.S. Navy Chief of Naval Operations Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Force Protection*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³¹⁶ With the technological advances and mass production of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), the Navy needs to once again update its force protection policies to prevent attacks from a new type of threat.

³¹⁷ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy's Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

Committee (ATCC) and the ATCC Senior Steering Group.³¹⁸ A number of the recommendations were specific to the Navy which implemented the following measures,

- Initiated fleet level exercises for AT/FP on an annual basis
- Increased security forces to installations
- Training, starting from boot camp, on how to deal with Damage Control, including role-playing exercises on a model of the USS *Cole*
- Created an eponymous “Cole Lessons Learned Kit” filled with items that the *Cole* crew needed after the bombing but were not available onboard at the time³¹⁹

By May 2001, the DOD Working Group had completed thirty-one of the fifty-three recommendations from the Crouch-Gehman report, and it committed to completing all of the commission’s suggestions within one year.³²⁰ Admiral Clark summarized the changes in the Navy as,

We have made antiterrorism/force protection (AT/FP) a daily part of every sailor’s life. We have developed a new warfare doctrine publication and prepared standardized tactics and doctrine for combating terrorism. We conduct training at every level, from the individual sailor to the entire battle group. Every individual is required to receive Level One AT/FP training on a reoccurring basis. Every command is required to have an AT/FP officer who has been through advanced training and is certified to provide Level One training to his or her command. Commanding and executive officers receive intense AT/FP training during their training pipelines. We will be requiring individual commands to report AT/FP readiness status on their Status of Readiness and Training reports. Ships are required to meet immediate superior in command-based AT/FP standards of readiness and demonstrate them as an individual unit and as a part of a battle group during pre-deployment operations. Individually manned watches are receiving more intense weapons training as well as improved equipment and oversight to better enable them and increase the level of vigilance.³²¹

³¹⁸ Harry Shelton, *Prepared Statement of General Henry H. Shelton Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³¹⁹ U.S. Navy, Office of Information, “*USS Cole Attack – 10 Years Later*,” *Rhumb Lines*, October 5, 2010, <http://www.navy.mil/navco/speakers/currents/Rhumb%20Lines%20101005%20-%20USS%20Cole%20Attack%2010%20Years%20Later.pdf>.

³²⁰ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

The bombing of the USS *Cole* had motivated the Department of Defense, particularly the United States Navy, to undertake universal modifications costing a significant amount of time, energy, and money. Al-Qaeda's leadership most likely did not calculate these types of long-term repercussions from its attack. What is now known, however, was that while the U.S. military was working to institute improved port security, al-Qaeda was refocusing its tactics away from sea attacks to waging war from the sky.

Politics as Usual

Senators and Representatives, Democrats and Republicans alike did not understand the complex possibilities arising from bin Laden's organization, and consequently Congress refused to act with the conviction or expediency necessary to suppress an organization dedicated to killing Americans until after 9/11. During bin Laden's time in Khartoum in the early 1990s, there were cries on Capitol Hill to put an end to the Sudanese civil war, but there was no unified voice demanding that Sudan expel their Saudi guest. When bin Laden was finally forced out of Sudan, there was no U.S. effort to extradite him to American soil for his involvement in the Yemen hotel bombings, his assistance to Somali warlords, or his training of international fighters. Following the East African embassy bombings, the White House pursued limited military action as a response for the attack against its diplomatic corps. It did not take long for the intelligence community to verify that bin Laden had not been harmed in the Tomahawk strike and yet no follow-up campaign occurred. Even the attack on the USS *Cole* evoked little reaction from Congress.

The United States Congress opened its hearings on the attack in Yemen one day after the USS *Cole* memorial service was held on October 18, 2000 in Norfolk, Virginia. Senator John Warner (R), a former Secretary of the Navy in the early 1970s, returned to his home constituency

in Virginia to attend the service before returning to Washington to lead the Senate Armed Services Committee hearings the following day. This marked the beginning of a series of open and closed hearings which took place in both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees in the late fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001. Warner's committee received testimony from a select group of military officers and Washington officials including General Anthony Zinni, the former Commander in Chief of U.S. Central Command. A week later on October 25, the Senate and House examined Zinni's CENTCOM successor, General Tommy Franks, as well as Walter Slocombe, Defense Undersecretary for Policy, and Edward Walker, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.³²² During the public portions of the hearings, the dialogue in the Senate and House ignored the need for retribution for the USS *Cole* attack. Instead, Congress spent much of the October hearings discussing whether petroleum tankers could refuel individual naval vessels during their transits, an act that the United States Navy does not practice.

Congress returned to their discussion of the USS *Cole* with more fervor in May of 2001. This second set of hearings was designed to explore culpability for the attack, a goal that was aided by the completion of the Navy's JAG report and the DOD's Crouch-Gehman report earlier in the year. The Department of Defense's plans for moving forward were also on the docket. Chairperson John Warner opened the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing by endorsing the findings levied by the JAG investigating officer against the performance of the USS *Cole*'s leadership in the days and hours leading up to the bombing. The former Secretary of the Navy turned Senator was clearly angered that not a single disciplinary action had been taken by the United States military following the USS *Cole* attack.

³²² The House Armed Services Committee also received testimony from Admiral Vern Clark, Chief of Naval Operations and Admiral Thomas Wilson, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, in a closed session.

Senator Carl Levin (D), Warner's colleague across the aisle, also voiced disillusionment. The Senator from Michigan was troubled that the high-ranking admirals, who had shielded the USS *Cole*'s officers from facing a court martial, had also absolved themselves by refusing to commission a study to review the possibility that mistakes had been made at the top of the Navy's chain of command. During the Senate hearing, Levin stated, "One important way of learning the lessons involved in this or any other incident is to conduct a comprehensive investigation to ascertain what was done and what was not done at each level of command and to determine accountability as appropriate. In that regard, I am concerned that in this case, despite a high-powered commission and a Navy investigation, that there was no comprehensive effort to look at the actions or inactions of several layers of command above the ship itself."³²³

Levin's protests were not without warrant. His call for further investigation was rooted in the Navy's explanation of why the USS *Cole*'s commanding officer was not put on trial for dereliction of duty. One of the reasons presented by the endorsing admirals had been that THREATCON BRAVO and possibly THREATCON CHARLIE would have been insufficient to ward off the suicide bombers. The other major explanation provided in the conclusion of the JAG report involved failures outside the responsibilities of the *Cole*'s CO. During a press interview, Admiral Vern Clark contended, "The investigation clearly shows the commanding officer of the *Cole* did not have the specific intelligence, the focused training, the appropriate equipment and on-scene security support to effectively prevent or deter such a determined, such

³²³ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy's Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

a pre-planned, assault on his ship.”³²⁴ The admiral had also conceded during his endorsement of the JAG report that, “We further conclude that the system – all the chain of command – bear collective responsibility for this incident because we did not equip the skipper for success in the environment in Aden Harbor that fateful day.”³²⁵ Clark’s statements appeared to provide credence to Senator Levin’s call for additional findings. Secretary of Defense Cohen shared a similar sentiment in a January 19 memorandum, “all of us who had responsibility for force protection of U.S.S. *Cole*. . .did not do enough to anticipate possible new threats.”³²⁶

Senators Warner and Levin’s objections in the Senate Armed Services Committee remained purely academic in nature. The military never held a court trial to determine how the USS *Cole*’s executive officers had acted nor did they establish a commission to examine the Navy’s highest-ranking admirals. Rather than placing blame on the command structure, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig developed a different theory to explain why the USS *Cole*’s crew had failed to repel the advancing boat. Danzig rationalized that too much specialized training was the culprit. During a press conference, Danzig stated,

When this commanding officer underwent his training program, and the *Cole* as a whole did, it was commended for its work in countering land-based attacks on the ship. When it went to Slovenia, the CO instituted particular force protection measures that were highly successful, again, against land attack, and were substantially beyond what may be the norm. Going through the Suez Canal, he was diligent with respect to a number of issues. And when he was in Aden, in my view, he vigorously protected against attack that might come from the dolphin at which he was refueling. The problem, I think, is that by

³²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, The Federal News Service, Inc. News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, and Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, “USS *Cole* Briefing,” January 19, 2001.

³²⁵ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³²⁶ William S. Cohen, *Assessment of Accountability Arising from the Attack on USS COLE (DDG-67) on 12 October 2000*, A memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., Department of Defense, January 19, 2001.

focusing so intently on that particular set of scenarios that he had been specially trained for, he may have lost some situational awareness with respect to other kinds of scenarios, like attack from the sea.³²⁷

The Secretary of the Navy's contention that the USS *Cole*, one of the Navy's finest warships, had "lost some situational awareness" and overlooked an "attack from the sea," seems an incredibly weak claim.

The May hearings on the "Lessons Learned from the *Cole*" reviewed the findings of the various commissions and reports. This could have been a seminal moment for members of Congress to ask difficult and incisive questions of the Department of Defense. However, the members showed no desire for taking action. The recommendations from JAG, the Crouch-Gehman commission, and the House Committee on Armed Services were almost entirely focused on security. The Armed Services Committees appeared appeased by this strategy. During the May 3rd hearing, the phrase "not if, but when," was repeated by different Senators. Yet, no elected officials in Congress were exploring how to appropriately respond to the al-Qaeda attack on the USS *Cole* through a series of offensive measures.

The events of October 12, 2000 should have propelled lawmakers to institute policy changes in Washington, but unfortunately business continued as usual. Many on Capitol Hill seemed to view the suicide bombing in Yemen as just another isolated terrorist attack in a long series of terrorist actions. Few recognized it as an intensification of al-Qaeda's determination to kill Americans. While Congress held multiple hearings and expressed its sympathies to the families of those who had fallen in Aden Harbor, the legislature did not even discuss the possibility of invoking its constitutional power of declaring war on those responsible for blowing up an American destroyer.

³²⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, The Federal News Service, Inc. News Transcript, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, and Chief of Naval Operations Vern Clark, "USS *Cole* Briefing," January 19, 2001.

The Intelligence Gap Continued

During his final press conference on his final Friday in office, Secretary of Defense William Cohen took the opportunity to comment on the JAG and Couch-Gehman reports. Like others who were privy to the classified details surrounding the surprise attack in Yemen, Cohen was particularly concerned about Washington's ability to collect, disseminate, and analyze the vast quantities of intelligence its agencies were receiving each day. He warned, "And we need better, more specific intelligence to prepare commanders for new and uncertain locations."³²⁸

On the morning of October 12, 2000, the USS *Cole* had been operating under THREATCON BRAVO. This warning level was not self-determined aboard the ship but instead provided by the Fifth Fleet as part of Central Command. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which supports the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and geographic military commands, was responsible for establishing the overall threat levels for all US military institutions worldwide. Unified combatant commanders, such as the head of CENTCOM, possessed the ability to raise the threat level based on their own localized intelligence, but these leaders can never lower the level below what the DIA had deemed appropriate. As part of its findings after the USS *Cole*, the Crouch-Gehman commission recommended that combatant commanders should be able to determine their own threat levels. This argument was based on the fact that commands, like CENTCOM, receive intelligence reports from a larger pool than the DIA has access to, including the CIA, Joint Staff Intelligence, friendly governments, and American embassies.³²⁹ The Department of Defense ultimately rejected this new approach and continued performing their threat level determinations in a pre-*Cole* method.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

Before the USS *Cole* began its voyage to join its battle group in the Middle East, the United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) would have been involved in the ship's movement from Naval Station Norfolk to its final destination. According to protocol, TRANSCOM, which oversees the movement of the Armed Forces ships and planes, would have checked with the, "DIA, CIA, NIMA and the National Security Agency" to ensure the USS *Cole*'s voyage was clear of immediate danger.³³⁰ If TRANSCOM had discovered a particular threat from one of these intelligence agencies, it would have reported this to the Joint Intelligence Centers and Joint Intelligence Analysis Centers in the geographic commands around the world. In the case of the *Cole*'s movement, it would have notified EUCOM if the danger was in the Mediterranean or CENTCOM if the threat was posed after the ship chugged at the Suez Canal.

Even with all these protocols in place, the Americans had no warning that the *Cole* attack was imminent. The utter lack of warning prior to the USS *Cole* bombing demonstrated yet another failure by the United States intelligence community in its war with al-Qaeda. More importantly, the attack in Yemen should have signified to the American agencies that their unreliable methods of assessing threats posed by unconventional groups and aggressors were overdue for restructuring. While some military officials like the Secretary of Defense spoke out about the dearth of actionable intelligence, al-Qaeda continued its preparations for its next attack against the continental United States.

Even before the USS *Cole*, the United States intelligence community had a substandard history for predicting or disrupting al-Qaeda missions in the pre-9/11 years. In August 1998, the

³³⁰ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy's Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

agencies were caught completely off guard by the East African Embassy bombings. In January 2000, the failed attack on the USS *The Sullivan's* went unnoticed in Aden Harbor. Al-Qaeda's botched attempt at blowing up an American naval vessel was not discovered until the FBI's investigation on the USS *Cole* bombing revealed that the October 2000 attack had actually been the second bid by the cell operating in Yemen.

After the USS *Cole* bombing, rumors swirled that members of the US intelligence community had possessed information which could have prevented the al-Qaeda attack. Adding confusion to the situation, the *Washington Times* published an article claiming that American intelligence had become aware of an impending threat in the Middle East hours before the warship was hit. This claim could never be substantiated. The newspaper story was partially based on the fact that US embassies throughout the Middle East had closed the weeks before the explosion in Yemen. For example, the embassy in Aden was shut down from October 5th through October 8th.³³¹ However, these closures were unrelated to al-Qaeda. The State Department had halted activity at its embassies throughout the region as a protective countermeasure to a violent outbreak taking place inside Israel and because an angry mob had already swarmed the U.S. embassy in Damascus breaching the outer walls.³³²

What actually transpired inside the American intelligence collection agencies appears less dramatic but just as condemning; officials had no idea the attack in Yemen was forthcoming. General Tommy Franks, who was in charge of Central Command on the day of the attack, stated,

The threat situation was monitored regularly in Yemen and throughout the AOR. The intelligence community and USCENTCOM consider this AOR a High Threat environment, and our assessment of the regional threat and the threat in Yemen were

³³¹ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 11.

³³² House Committee on Armed Services, *Attack on the USS Cole in Yemen*, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess., October 25, 2000.

consistent in their evaluation. We had conducted a number of threat assessments in the port, and throughout the area. However, leading up to the attack on USS COLE on 12 October, we received no specific threat information for Yemen or for the port of Aden that would cause us to change our assessment. Had such warning been received, action would have been taken by the operating forces in response to that warning.³³³

There is little reason to doubt Franks' testimony. If just one of the United States various intelligence agencies had detected a specific al-Qaeda threat, CENTCOM most likely would have postponed refueling operations in Aden harbor. The Navy had acted timely and cautiously in similar situations in the past. At the very least, the detection of a threat would have forced CENTCOM to raise the defensive level for all military personnel operating inside its geographic responsibility, an action which would have included the crew aboard the USS *Cole*.

Just like the Defense Intelligence Agency, the State Department's intelligence gathering services additionally failed to predict the Aden bombing. Edward Walker, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, explained, "When the Cole was – suggested that the Cole would be coming in for refueling, the country team met; they reviewed the situation. There were no specific threats that raised the specter that anything would be different in this refueling than has happened in 25 refuelings before. Therefore, they did not choose or see the need to advise the CENTCOM commander that there was a specific or new threat that would affect his decision."³³⁴

Part of the reason that the Department of Defense and Department of State had been unsuccessful in detecting the al-Qaeda threat in Yemen was a void of human intelligence (HUMINT) within all of the intelligence agencies. During his testimony in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Anthony Zinni discussed his deepest concerns from his

³³³ Tommy Franks, *Opening Remarks of General Tommy R. Franks Commander in Chief U.S. Central Command before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee 25 October 2000*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 25, 2000.

³³⁴ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 25, 2000.

time leading Central Command. He stated, “I am worried about the lack of HUMINT, human intelligence, in the region. I think certainly, on the technical side, I had everything I needed and could ask for. I was wanting on the HUMINT side, and I think that’s a case throughout any command – that that’s an area we need to redevelop.”³³⁵ General Zinni’s apprehension was well founded. The deficiency of human intelligence was a significant factor in America’s inability to understand, track, or fight al-Qaeda before the September 11th attacks.

By the end of the Cold War, the United States had grown dependent upon signal intelligence, an industry in which Washington had no peer. America’s HUMINT, which had peaked during the Cold War, began to abate without Moscow’s antagonism, and the US simply did not possess the necessary human sources in Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Yemen in the years before the USS *Cole* began transiting from the Atlantic to the Middle East. Intelligence on Aden harbor, for example, was so poor that Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig estimated, “While more than a dozen people participated over eighteen months in a plot against naval ships in Aden, focused intelligence resources in that port amounted to less than a man per year, contributing to poor insight about the actual threat.”³³⁶ The American overreliance on technology-based spying over human intelligence was specifically mentioned as an area that demanded immediate change in the after-action reports, including the House Armed Services Committee report and the Crouch-Gehman report. Looking to balance American resources, the

³³⁵ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 19, 2000.

³³⁶ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 9.

unclassified portion of the Crouch-Gehman commission recommended the “Secretary of Defense reprioritize terrorism-related human intelligence and signals intelligence.”³³⁷

The military has historically had a cultural reliance on technology. At various times, the Armed Forces have been notorious for attempting to remedy complex problems with advanced weapons systems such as the U-2 or SR-71 Blackbird. This tech-heavy approach occurred to some degree after the bombing in Yemen. Rather than seriously addressing the gap in HUMINT which had allowed al-Qaeda’s mission to go undetected in the first place, the Navy began searching for innovative ways to identify attackers from a longer distance. One force protection innovation involved using thermal imaging and intrusion detection systems for merchant ships carrying DOD inventory.³³⁸ Additionally, all Navy vessels became equipped with new technology which included body armor, handheld searchlights, riot control agents, collapsible batons, explosive detection kits, and water-filled barriers following the USS *Cole* attack.³³⁹ Providing quality material to frontline servicemen and women is almost always good policy, but these technologies could only compliment and not replace invaluable ground intelligence gathered from human sources.

Even members inside the intelligence world were frustrated with how its agencies were operating in the lead-up to the USS *Cole*. Kie Fallis, an analyst in the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Office of Counterterrorism, resigned the day after the USS *Cole* bombing over

³³⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *DoD USS Cole Commission Report* (9 January 2001) by U.S. Army Gen. (Ret) William Crouch and U.S. Navy Adm. (Ret) Harold Gehman, Open-File Report, U.S. Department of Defense (Washington, D.C., 9 January 2001).

³³⁸ Charles Robertson, *Prepared Statement of General Charles T. Robertson, USAF Commander in Chief United States Transportation Command*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³³⁹ Vern Clark, *Statement of Admiral Vern Clark, U.S. Navy Chief of Naval Operations Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Force Protection*, to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

“significant analytical differences.”³⁴⁰ Fallis provided an angry copy of his resignation letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee, which discussed the matter during a closed meeting. Senator Pat Roberts was particularly interested in the validity of this speculation. Fallis contended that the Yemen attack had gone undetected not because of a lack of information on al-Qaeda but because analysts faced institutional compartmentalization and bureaucratic hindrances that restricted a breakthrough from occurring prior to the attack.³⁴¹ The details surrounding Fallis’ account with the DIA remain classified, but his dissent concerning the institutional constraints over how analysts handled and shared information resonated loudly.

Positing that progress was being made, Admiral Vern Clark testified, “We did not have a clear and unambiguous warning that this attack would occur. The only way to get this type of warning is to expand our intelligence collection efforts and that is being carried out.”³⁴² He also called for “increased interagency cooperation with the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the FBI and the CIA.”³⁴³ After his review of the US intelligence community’s handling of the USS *Cole*, Clark could see that problems existed concerning the intelligence agencies’ unwillingness or inability to work in unison. In spite of Clark’s recommendation, the intelligence community never resolved provincial matters, such as the agency’s aversion to sharing information, in the months after the Aden bombing.

³⁴⁰ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *The Attack on the USS COLE*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., October 25, 2000.

³⁴¹ Kie Fallis, *Lessons Learned and Actions Taken in Past Events*, to the Joint House/Senate Committee on Intelligence, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess., October 8, 2002.

³⁴² Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

³⁴³ Ibid.

The intelligence community's dysfunction could be seen in the USS *Cole* investigation. The CIA and FBI had both sent agents to Yemen immediately after the October attack. These teams had remained in-country with the exception of a short period when they were forced to leave for security reasons. As the group worked to further the case against Osama bin Laden and his organization, the FBI contingent started encountering a lack of cooperation from their CIA counterparts. FBI agent Ali Soufan, who was on the ground in Yemen during the investigation, described the situation as, "Information sharing began to be a one-way street. We didn't retaliate; that would have been doubly absurd – punishing not the CIA but our country by making us less safe."³⁴⁴

The root of this problem could be traced to the organizational structure of the two agencies. Historically, the Central Intelligence Agency has been responsible for gathering intelligence outside the United States, while the Federal Bureau of Investigation has traditionally been tasked with gathering domestic intelligence. During the USS *Cole* investigation, CIA agents refused to share intelligence reports with the FBI on the premise that their organization was a domestic law enforcement agency and therefore not privy to classified information pertaining to individuals or situations outside the United States. DCI George Tenet later described the dichotomy between the jurisdictions of the two agencies. He stated, "But you also had systemically a wall that was in place between the criminal side and the intelligence side. What's in a criminal case doesn't cross over that line. Ironclad regulations. So that even people in the Criminal Division and the Intelligence Divisions of the FBI couldn't talk to each other, let alone talk to us or us talk to them."³⁴⁵ Although the CIA was unwilling to share during the USS

³⁴⁴ Soufan, 206-207.

³⁴⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 24, 2003.

Cole investigation in Yemen, the FBI was equally guilty of withholding pertinent domestic information from the larger intelligence community in the months leading up to 9/11.

The reluctance of the CIA and FBI to work in unison after the USS *Cole* attack proved catastrophic. In the period between the Yemen attack and those inside the United States on 9/11, multiple American intelligence agencies intercepted al-Qaeda communications leading analysts to believe that bin Laden's organization was preparing for a major strike. The al-Qaeda chatter peaked in the late summer of 2001. Although unsure of the location, date, or target, some members of the intelligence community concluded that the surge meant an attack was imminent. This nearly unprecedented state of concern that permeated through multiple organizations within the US intelligence community should have compelled information sharing, but resistance within the system worked against the various agencies from cooperating.

The lack of communication between government agencies enabled the al-Qaeda operatives who had infiltrated the country over the spring and summer months to execute their mission with near precision. Unbeknownst to intelligence officials at the highest level of the Bush administration, the FBI was conducting a nationwide investigation that had discovered al-Qaeda members living inside American borders.³⁴⁶ The investigation had led agents to arrest Zacarias Moussaoui, an al-Qaeda sleeper cell member who was later believed to be the missing twentieth hijacker on September 11th. Because the FBI investigation was an open case, the surveillance of suspected al-Qaeda members and the capture of Moussaoui were not shared with other intelligence agencies.

The division between the FBI and the American agencies operating internationally had been designed to preserve secrecy and to protect individual liberties at home, but the system's

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

design allowed the September 11th plot to unfold without detection. Unbeknownst to the wider intelligence community, the FBI had been making inroads into uncovering al-Qaeda's plan. Agents were aware that al-Qaeda cells had already infiltrated the country, and their continuing investigation had led to the capture of one of the would-be hijackers in Minnesota. The FBI held back all of this critical information from its fellow agencies who could have assisted in the effort. *The 9/11 Commission Report* summarized the breakdown as, "The September 11 attacks fell into the void between the foreign and domestic threats. The foreign intelligence agencies were watching overseas, alert to foreign threats to U.S. interests there. The domestic agencies were waiting for evidence of a domestic threat from sleeper cells within the United States. No one was looking for a foreign threat to domestic targets. The threat that was coming was not from sleeper cells. It was foreign – but from foreigners who had infiltrated into the United States."³⁴⁷

Conclusion

The bombing of the USS *Cole* did not produce the American invasion that Osama bin Laden had hoped for, but it had a galvanizing effect on his organization. Al-Qaeda's brazen attack against an American naval vessel demonstrated the length to which the atypical group was willing to go in order to drive the United States from the Middle East. The nature of the attack validated al-Qaeda as a top-tier militant organization, and this dynamic brought in new recruits and donors. Because the group's attack was met with no retaliation or show of force whatsoever, it might have appeared to some in the Muslim world as though al-Qaeda was goading the mighty superpower. In spite of all the political and economic successes tied to the bombing, the USS *Cole* attack did not accomplish bin Laden's primary objective of drawing the United States into a prolonged war. Bin Laden's strategy had not worked.

³⁴⁷ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 263.

In his endorsement of the JAG report, Admiral C.W. Moore wrote, “The attack on USS COLE should forever and fundamentally change the way we do business in the United States Navy.”³⁴⁸ The Navy initially responded to the USS *Cole* bombing with an investigation endorsed by three of the highest-ranking Admirals in the fleet who ultimately concluded nothing could have been done to avert the attack. To prevent similar strikes from occurring in the future, the Navy instituted a series of force protection programs and increased training exercises and drills. The ship itself managed to be saved in spite of the gaping hole in its side, and after costly repairs stateside, returned to active duty. The USS *Cole*’s commanding officer, on the other hand, did not return to the sea and retired from the Navy after being unable to secure a promotion.

The United States Congress did not recognize the bombing of the USS *Cole* as a transformative event, but instead, viewed the attack as a narrow, isolated incident and allowed yet another al-Qaeda attack to go unpunished. Although politics played a crucial role in this miscalculation, political affiliation did not. There was no pressure from elected officials on either side of the political aisle to go after bin Laden, and members of both the Clinton and Bush administrations were culpable of neglect and inaction against al-Qaeda after the USS *Cole* attack. Having sustained multiple bombings in Africa and Yemen, the United States government should have appreciated the growing danger of al-Qaeda and recognized that bin Laden’s group would never stop in its quest to kill Americans until U.S. forces had completely withdrawn from the Middle East. If there had been a chance to disrupt the 9/11 attack before that fateful morning, an American military response to the USS *Cole* bombing was it.

³⁴⁸ Moore, 133.

Having failed to detect and thwart prior al-Qaeda strikes, the US intelligence community once again foundered in its effort to uncover the plot against the USS *Cole*. Blame for this collapse of intelligence could be shared among the Department of State, Department of Defense, and virtually the whole intelligence community. Missing the USS *Cole* attack should have provided the impetus for instituting systemic changes to the bureaucracies controlling the American intelligence effort. The problems emanating from a lack of communication sharing between agencies was never adequately addressed, and individual agencies such as the FBI and CIA remained parochial in their pursuit and analysis of data. This system-wide breakdown provided al-Qaeda a new “seam” to successfully complete its 9/11 attack inside the United States.

Being killed for God's cause is a great honor achieved by only those who are the elite of the nation. We love this kind of death for God's cause as much as you like to live. We have nothing to fear...It is something we wish for.³⁴⁹

-Osama bin Laden, interview with CNN

I want to continue to focus on the intelligence aspects of the Cole attack, because it seems to me that if we fail to solve the intelligence problems and challenges that face us in this asymmetric threat environment, we are going to be back again trying to figure out why we missed the signals available to us following some other attack on our forces. This is not a simple problem. It is very complex. It is very difficult, but solutions must be found.³⁵⁰

-Senator Pat Roberts, Senate Hearing on the USS *Cole*

Summary and Conclusion

The Making of Osama bin Laden

For Osama bin Laden, the path to 9/11 was heavily influenced by Islamic ideology and historic events. His personal ideology developed over decades with various Muslim teachers and role models molding him throughout his life. Growing up in a turbulent time in the Middle East, regional geopolitics certainly influenced his myopic worldview. However, sociological contributors like poverty and unemployment were never factors for the son of a millionaire. Money was never an issue. Neither were educational opportunities. He could have followed in his siblings' footsteps and selected from among the best institutions of higher education in the world, but instead bin Laden chose to stay in Saudi Arabia to attend King Abdul Aziz University. Contrary to the youth of his Palestinian-idol Abdullah Azzam, bin Laden was not born in an occupied area or a war-torn environment that could have easily poisoned his outlook. He did not

³⁴⁹ Kepel and Milelli, 51.

³⁵⁰ Senate Committee on the Armed Services, *Lessons Learned from the Attack on U.S.S. Cole, On the Report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy's Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation Into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability For U.S. Military Services*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 2001.

suffer any religious persecution, and in fact, bin Laden's Wahhabism was widely practiced in his native Saudi Arabia. Thus, bin Laden did not conform to the West's stereotypical notion that terrorism is a pathological response to individual hardships or economic inequality. Rather, bin Laden firmly believed that his beloved Islam and the worldwide Muslim community were under internal and external attack by imperialistic, apostate forces.

Those closest to bin Laden remember him as a pious child. Only ten-years old when disaster struck his family, he was profoundly affected by the death of his famous father, Mohammad bin Laden. From his own accounts, the younger bin Laden clearly harbored great admiration for his deceased father. Like many young men, Osama bin Laden was in the process of exploring his personal philosophies during his collegiate experience. At King Abdul Aziz University, bin Laden spent time with members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni fundamentalist groups. During this time, the university proved to be an incubator for these groups which in turn created a unique culture for the campus. Bin Laden was influenced by this, as well as by professors and fellow students. According to his closest college friend, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden embraced the principles of Sayyid Qutb, which he studied and also heard during lectures from Sayyid's brother, Mohammad. Bin Laden's education continued after leaving college, and he fell under the influence of his former professor, Dr. Abdullah Azzam. Bin Laden's fundamentalist ideas and aspirations narrowed under the tutelage of this Palestinian-born exile.

While Azzam and Qutb provided an intellectual framework for bin Laden's views at King Abdul Aziz University, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan offered the ideal outlet for bin Laden's theoretical education. In 1979, the Middle East witnessed a number of significant historical events, including the Iranian revolution and the hostage takeover of the Grand Mosque.

For bin Laden, the most pivotal event occurred when the Soviet Union deployed military units into Muslim-dominated Afghanistan on Christmas Eve in 1979. The invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan created an environment that compelled bin Laden to action, and he left college to join the war effort.

Aligning himself with the older and more experienced Abdullah Azzam, bin Laden gained practical insight from a master philanthropist and motivational speaker. Later during the Afghan war, bin Laden began crossing the border from Pakistan into active combat zones. The invasion of Afghanistan permitted bin Laden to practice the art of war, even though his efficiency in the field as a fighter and tactical leader remains a point of debate. Regardless of his true success as a mujahedeen, bin Laden became legendary for his role in the Battle of Jaji. The Saudi millionaire used this notoriety as a springboard for building his reputation throughout the Middle East. He once told CNN, “I have benefited so greatly from the jihad in Afghanistan that it would have been impossible for me to gain such a benefit from any other chance.”³⁵¹ Bin Laden learned how to maximize his financial capabilities, utilize his family’s construction business, raise large amounts of capital, and connect with wealthy Muslims in the Gulf all while gaining valuable field experience.

Bin Laden’s perspective was also impacted by the continuing conflict between the Arab world and Israel. His hatred traces back to his childhood home where his father Mohammad openly expressed his loathing of Israel. While many of his fellow Arabs were preoccupied with the destruction of Israel, bin Laden decided the United States had to be weakened first. However, he always maintained an uncompromising stance against Israel, and his rhetoric against the tiny nation only became more vociferous in later years, probably as a tool for

³⁵¹ Gutman, 16.

recruiting. Still, bin Laden never allowed himself to be distracted by Israel. Instead, he was dedicated to the destruction of America in the Middle East for its defilement of sacred Muslim soil. He wanted to remove the far enemy first.

In terms of individual influence, Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri were instrumental in shaping bin Laden's ideology. Azzam was a central figure in his life, and he would become the father-figure and mentor bin Laden had always wanted. The close-knit bond between the professor and student extended from their time together at King Abdul Aziz University until Azzam's assassination in 1989. While working together in Afghanistan, the Saudi protégé learned first-hand from Azzam the indispensable abilities of fund-raising, networking, and organizational leadership. Ironically, bin Laden benefited the most from the unsolved death of his mentor, friend, and tutor as he assumed leadership over Azzam's network.

Ayman al-Zawahiri became the next prominent figure in bin Laden's life. The two did not share a teacher-apprentice relationship like the one between bin Laden and Azzam. Instead, the relationship between the Egyptian doctor and Saudi millionaire was more symbiotic, and both individuals contributed ideas to their ideological kinship. Although the exact date of bin Laden and Zawahiri's initial meeting remains unsubstantiated, they first became acquainted in the mid-to-late 1980s. As partners in the late 1990s, bin Laden provided organizational expertise, financial means, and a charismatic demeanor. These were attributes Zawahiri lacked. In return, the Egyptian physician shared his significant field experience gained from the Afghan war and from his years of resisting Islamic authorities. Later, the medically-trained Zawahiri helped disseminate al-Qaeda's ideology through his writings. Bin Laden's attacks against the United States became larger in scale resulting in more bloodshed after Zawahiri joined his organization.

Al-Qaeda's Strategy

From the time of the American troop build-up in 1990 until his eventual demise in 2011, Osama bin Laden searched for the right strategy to force the United States out of the Middle East, most notably Saudi Arabia. After his smaller attacks caused peripheral damage in Yemen and Africa, he modified his grand strategy to focus on drawing the American military into an armed intervention in an Islamic country. This was exactly the mistake which Russia had made with devastating and humiliating consequences in the 1980s. Bin Laden chose Afghanistan as the place to make his stand, primarily because the Taliban was one of the few regimes willing to allow him sanctuary. The al-Qaeda leader assumed there would be no way for Washington to remain embedded in the Middle East once the United States experienced the same disastrous pitfalls Moscow had suffered after its ill-fated time in Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden contended that if he was able to coerce a US invasion, the global Muslim population would rise up to expel the intruding force under the belief that non-Muslims had entered the Dar-al-Islam. For some Muslims, this constituted a defensive jihad which was a religious obligation. In his writings, bin Laden preached that the defending force should engage in a protracted war of attrition slowly wearing down their enemy. He hoped to exhaust the Americans, thus causing such economic degradation that the war would erode the United States' position as a world superpower.

The al-Qaeda leader had not always harbored such loathing for America. He considered the United States to be imperialistic in nature and was angered by Washington's increased involvement in the region following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. However, his hatred smoldered with each passing year that U.S. military personnel remained in Saudi Arabia. The housing of Christians, Jews, and foreign women in Islam's holiest lands was a personal slight for

the Saudi-born bin Laden. Based on the teaching of the Prophet Mohammad, bin Laden believed it was his religious obligation to expel these foreigners from the land of Mecca. The collusion of the royal family with the Americans and their abject failure to rid the country of their presence only added to bin Laden's rage. Over the years, his conviction grew to the point that bin Laden was willing to risk his own life to accomplish this goal.

Osama bin Laden hoped that once his guerrilla war had accomplished its goal of ending American influence in the region, the Muslim masses would be inspired to rise up against the ruling families of the Middle East who had failed to maintain purity within their borders. For a multitude of reasons, bin Laden considered the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq unworthy of ruling over Muslims. The head of al-Qaeda planned to establish a modern-day caliphate to govern over all Islam after these apostate governments had fallen. In bin Laden's mind, the resurrected caliphate would create a unified Islamic theocracy that would finally be capable of challenging Israel's military prowess. Bin Laden's goals were to set in motion a series of dominos, but his plan was contingent on al-Qaeda's ability to first banish the United States from the Middle East, a task which the Saudi government had no serious ambition of achieving.

Before settling on his grand strategy of drawing the United States into a war, bin Laden launched smaller missions aimed at needling America. These operations occurred in peripheral locations in Africa and the Middle East and started off modestly. Al-Qaeda's first mission occurred in Yemen in 1992 during which American military personnel were targeted but not killed. While sponsoring these early attacks, bin Laden also invested his fortune to build an infrastructure for training his future fighting force. During the 1990s, he established training facilities on multiple continents. These camps were to provide the bulk of the manpower al-

Qaeda would need for its future wars, most specifically the anticipated battle against the United States. Bin Laden was more than just a financier, and he visited the camps to personally oversee the curriculum, evaluate his fighters, inspire the men, and plan future missions.

The East African Embassy bombings in 1998 were a successful tactical escalation for al-Qaeda and received global media coverage even though the mission had not been as devastating as anticipated. The attacks targeted civilian buildings and killed few Americans, two outcomes bin Laden was determined to change. Neither bin Laden's declarations of war in 1996 and 1998, nor the bombing of two American embassies, had any effect on America's military presence in the Middle East. The targeting of an American warship in 2000 was designed to change this.

By the time of the USS *Cole* attack in October 2000, Osama bin Laden's strategy was clearly focused on forcing the United States into a ground war with a Muslim country. This was a strategic evolution for bin Laden. He calculated that the United States would be compelled to respond with force to the sinking of one of the Navy's prized ships. Because al-Qaeda was targeting the U.S. Navy, all the casualties would be American military personnel. The selection of this target solved two of bin Laden's perceived problems stemming from the East African Embassy attack.

Considering President Clinton's military actions after the African bombings, bin Laden was caught off-guard by Washington's complete failure to respond to the USS *Cole* attack. Instead of recognizing the USS *Cole* attack as a pivotal event in the larger plan to destabilize a superpower, the United States viewed the attack as an unfortunate, unforeseen isolated event. With al-Qaeda's longevity in mind, bin Laden went into hiding and separated his key lieutenants in anticipation of the U.S. response to the USS *Cole*. Bin Laden had not properly prepared for an American invasion of Afghanistan after the East African attacks as evidenced by the fact that he

continued his normal travel routine, a mistake which almost cost him his life. By the time of the USS *Cole* attack, the al-Qaeda leader was prepared for an American invasion, and he alerted his top-tier lieutenants to prepare for the impending retaliation. According to the 9/11 Commission, bin Laden complained to his followers when the United States did not invade.

By the end of October 2000, bin Laden and his operatives were responsible for targeting American soldiers and sailors in Yemen in 1992 and 2000 and the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. However, bin Laden's attacks were not sufficient to produce an atmosphere which would compel an American invasion. He had thoughtfully modified his strategy before the bombing of the USS *Cole* hoping that the attack would be sufficiently overwhelming to compel a large-scale military response. This strategy was summarized by an al-Qaeda member during an FBI interrogation. He stated, "You [the United States] brought 9/11 on yourselves; you didn't respond to the *Cole*, so bin Laden had to hit harder."³⁵² When the USS *Cole* did not garner bin Laden's desired response, he authorized al-Qaeda cells to hit the American homeland, a mission which killed 3,000 civilians. Following the 9/11 attack, Osama bin Laden finally got his invasion. In fact, he got two.

Bin Laden's Failed Strategy

A month after the Twin Towers fell, the United States invaded Afghanistan just as bin Laden had anticipated. Unfortunately for him, his plan underestimated the power of the U.S. military, and the global Muslim population did not rush to defend Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, or Jalalabad. Instead, bin Laden's allies in the Taliban were swept across the Afghan countryside, and the remnants of al-Qaeda prepared to make a last stand at the cavernous outpost of Tora Bora. Instead of leading his men into a final battle, Osama bin Laden saved himself and

³⁵² Soufan, 265.

retreated through the White Mountains where he vanished. This was not the war he had envisioned.

Osama bin Laden's grand strategy succeeded in coercing America into a series of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but his plan ultimately failed. Only months after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban lost control of the country, al-Qaeda lost its base of operations, and bin Laden was on the run. The unnecessary American incursion into Iraq fulfilled bin Laden's goal of drawing the U.S. into Muslim lands, and the prolonged occupations of both countries created dangerous small wars that the Americans attempted to suppress. Still, the United States never faced an existential threat in spite of the astronomical costs accrued from the Iraq war and the two insurgencies. Washington remained fully capable of imposing its will on the Middle East, and Osama bin Laden was powerless to change it.

Al-Qaeda failed in its quest to drive the United States from the Middle East, and bin Laden's goals for transforming the world were never realized. The U.S. has continued to have a sizable footprint in the Middle East since 9/11, and bin Laden's wars only increased Washington's military presence throughout the region. Bin Laden's dream of unifying Islam by resurrecting the caliphate never came to fruition, and the global Sunni population remains decentralized and partite. Although it faces constant terrorist attacks, the state of Israel remains as strong as ever and maintains a hegemonic state over its Muslim neighbors. Regime change did occur in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring, but these uprisings had little to do with bin Laden's call for a caliphate. However, two Muslim countries eventually experienced new governance as a result of bin Laden's war with West. With Washington's support, two governments based on democratic principles were established in Baghdad and Kabul.

The Historical Contingency of the Cole Attack

In his last memo before leaving office in January 2001, Secretary of Defense William Cohen provided his summation of the *Cole* affair. He wrote, “An attack of this sort, although unprecedented, should not have been a surprise.”³⁵³ Cohen’s assertion that the United States government had been unprepared for the bombing of the USS *Cole* was hardly groundbreaking. Yet, the Secretary of Defense’s introspective conclusion that the United States should have anticipated the attack touches on aspects of historical contingency.

A series of seemingly unrelated factors ultimately contributed to the attack of the USS *Cole*. After the bombing, the Navy’s JAG report assessed that Osama bin Laden’s organization had exploited a “seam” in American defenses. This was a fatal miscalculation of al-Qaeda’s larger plan. The US intelligence community justly deserves part of the culpability for this, but there were several other contributing factors that enabled the attack to occur unimpeded. In addition to the intelligence community’s failure to identify the al-Qaeda threat, this “seam” existed because government agencies ignored known dangers in Yemen and because the USS *Cole*’s leadership team did not complete its list of required defense actions. These decisions, which were made at both the macro and micro levels ranging from government agencies to those aboard the USS *Cole*, were all instrumental in the Yemen attack on October 12, 2000.

The al-Qaeda mission devised by bin Laden and Nashiri for sinking an American warship traversing through the Middle East was not an overly complicated plot. The operation did hinge upon their ability to find men willing to undertake an operation knowing that the plan’s culmination required that they die in an explosion triggered by their own hands. Just as

³⁵³ William S. Cohen, *Assessment of Accountability Arising from the Attack on USS COLE (DDG-67) on 12 October 2000*, A memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., Department of Defense, January 19, 2001.

importantly, the al-Qaeda planners correctly predicted that the suicide bombers would only be successful if they possessed the element of surprise on the morning the explosive-laden boat entered the water. Designed to defeat other conventional ships of war as well as aircraft, the USS *Cole* possessed immense firepower. Stopping two unarmed men in a small craft should not have been a problem for any United States destroyer.

There were a number of ways this attack might have been prevented or averted. For instance, officials at the Department of State and other government agencies were aware that terrorist groups had been operating freely in Yemen since the country's unification in 1990, and it was common knowledge that the actions of these groups went undisturbed by President Saleh's government. These hazards were recognized and outlined in the Department of State's annual publication, *Patterns of Global Terror*, in its 1996-2000 editions. Clearly aware that anti-American groups existed in Yemen in 2000, the State Department could have lobbied for the United States Navy to secure Aden port before refueling operations began.

America's largest and most powerful intelligence agencies including the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency collectively failed to predict or intercept information about the al-Qaeda attack against the USS *Cole*. The intelligence agencies also missed the previous al-Qaeda attempt in Aden harbor which almost hit another American warship, the USS *The Sullivan's*, months before the *Cole*. The House Armed Services Committee report summarized the breakdown after al-Qaeda's successful attack observing "There was clearly a shortage of intelligence information with respect to the specific attack on the *U.S.S. Cole*. In spite of the fact that the intelligence community had known of general and ambiguous planning activities for an unspecified action or actions for some time, the lack of specific information led to a failure to provide 'tactical' warning to the *U.S.S.*

Cole.”³⁵⁴ This “shortage of intelligence” was distressing but should not have proved critical on the day of the attack.

The responsibilities assigned to the men and women of the American intelligence community in the late 1990s and early 2000s could be considered prodigious by any measure. Yet, the workload shouldered by these services should not exonerate these agencies for their ineptitude in their handling of the conflict against al-Qaeda. Tribulations within these agencies created problems for policymakers who were hindered by a lack of actionable intelligence because of a series of systemic breakdowns by the U.S. intelligence community. The most glaring issues included a continued overreliance on SIGINT, a complete lack of HUMINT inside al-Qaeda circles, a dearth of understanding about their enemy, a failure to accurately predict al-Qaeda attacks, an inability to locate Osama bin Laden for extended lengths of time, and a collapse of interagency cooperation in terms of communication and shared information.

These failings damaged the ability of the US military to respond effectively to threats. The US intelligence community had multiple opportunities to adapt to al-Qaeda’s modus operandi over a period of years. The neglect in the early-to-mid 1990s could best be explained by the fact that most government agencies were not cognizant of bin Laden activities, and those who were investigating the Saudi’s actions had identified him as merely an outside financier of terrorist groups. This ignorance should have been rectified after al-Qaeda leveled two American embassies in East Africa in 1998. The synchronized attacks, which killed members of the US diplomatic corps, marked a major opportunity for the intelligence community to address the changing international landscape as well as its failures in producing solid reporting on bin Laden. Although al-Qaeda did receive more covert attention in the period following the Embassy

³⁵⁴ House Committee on Armed Services, *The Investigation Into the Attack on the USS Cole, Report of the House Armed Services Committee* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, May 2001), 9.

bombings, the Americans missed the failed attempt at the USS *The Sullivan's* in January 2000 and were caught off-guard once again by the USS *Cole* bombing ten months later.

Even before the USS *Cole* bombing, the intelligence community was plagued with institutional inertia. Each successive attack revealed American unwillingness to encourage action in the face of calculated risk. This was not universally true, and there were individuals inside the Clinton and Bush administrations and the intelligence community who vigorously advocated for military action over the continued reliance on diplomacy. This minority was never able to convince upper echelons of the government of the need for action. The opportunities were there. Although the exact number of occasions can be debated, it is irrefutable that the United States government had several chances to kill or capture bin Laden in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Every proposed mission was ultimately rejected over worries about collateral damage, speculation that the intelligence originated from untrustworthy sources, or concerns that Americans might be killed-in-action.

The United States government was haunted by an inherent conservatism. By their nature, sizable bureaucratic systems, such as the country's military and intelligence agencies, fail to produce or promote risk-takers. This transpires because systems often reward individuals who do not make mistakes. Perfection becomes more important than innovation. Thus, decision-makers ranging from generals to presidents choose non-action over risk-taking out of fear of the possible repercussions that might occur from failure.

The period after the USS *Cole* bombing presented the most pressing opportunity for those leading clandestine operations to reevaluate their systems and their culture. The USS *Cole* marked the second major al-Qaeda attack in two years, and government agencies had no reason to believe that bin Laden was finished in his effort to kill Americans. The intelligence

community did report to both the Clinton and Bush White Houses that there was a high probability al-Qaeda was the group responsible for the American deaths in Yemen. This was a minor success, but identifying the perpetrators failed to motivate any response.

One of the most debilitating issues occurred because parochial agencies refused to share information within the wider intelligence community. This lack of communication was prevalent between the CIA and FBI during the USS *Cole* investigation and continued in the months leading up to 9/11 even as analysts came to conclude that a major al-Qaeda strike was imminent. During this period, the FBI initiated investigations of al-Qaeda cells inside the United States, and the Bureau captured one of the would-be attackers in August. Rather than alerting the wider intelligence community that al-Qaeda had infiltrated the continental United States, the FBI remained silent with these most crucial pieces of evidence.

The numerous failings by the US intelligence community limited American defensive preparedness, thus enabling al-Qaeda's master strike against the continental United States. One of the commissioners on the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States summarized, "One of the constant refrains we've had in the over a thousand interviews that we've done and through the documents that we have been studying is that there was a considerable dysfunction in the intelligence community, particularly with regards to sharing of information."³⁵⁵ Even after government agencies had failed to predict al-Qaeda's high-profile attacks in 1998 and 2000, the intelligence community refused to adapt to the post-Cold War world.

Unlike the USS *Cole* bombing, the September 11th attack had a transformative effect on the US government. Yet even after this historic event, the US intelligence community continued

³⁵⁵ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Formation and Conduct of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, The Eighth Public Hearing, Panel I, March 23, 2003.

to prove unreliable on issues of national importance. Supported by other covert branches, a select team of CIA operatives tasked with initiating the war in Afghanistan delivered an initial blow to the Taliban in 2001. This accomplishment, which forced Osama bin Laden to flee Tora Bora and disrupted his organization's primary base of operations, was arguably the intelligence service's greatest victory against al-Qaeda during the period from 1992-2003. However, this achievement was soon mitigated by intelligence breakdowns about Iraq that came to jeopardize national security. After successfully running a small war in Afghanistan, the intelligence agencies inaccurately assessed the weapons of mass destruction occurring under Saddam Hussein, thereby providing the Bush administration with a justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. George Tenet, who resigned because he felt the White House had unfairly made the intelligence community a political scapegoat, took responsibility for the failed assessments on Iraq. He stated, "No doubt, the uncertain road to war was paved, in part, by flawed performance from the U.S. intelligence community, which I led. The core of our judgments on Iraq's WMD program turned out to be wrong, wrong for a hundred different reasons that go to the heart of what we call our 'tradecraft' – the best practices of intelligence collection and analysis. It is no comfort to know that other intelligence services made the same misjudgments. In the case of Iraq, we fell short of our own high standards."³⁵⁶

Like the State Department, United States Central Command was also aware of the perils associated with operating in the Middle East years before the United States Navy had officially started refueling in Aden. CENTCOM had been facing threats in the region since its official inception in 1983, and the Command had already witnessed al-Qaeda's inaugural attack in 1992 aimed at killing military personnel staying in Aden hotels. Growing safety concerns within

³⁵⁶ Tenet, 493.

CENTCOM forced the Americans to eliminate their refueling activities in Djibouti, thereby requiring the Navy to begin the process of searching for friendlier ports of call along the Red Sea. Aden was not the Navy's unequivocal first choice, and CENTCOM had discussed using ports along the Saudi shoreline until the 1996 bombing of US military personnel living in the Khobar Towers made Saudi Arabia appear an unsound option. From a purely geographic standpoint, CENTCOM's options for refueling south of the Suez Canal became limited after their refusal to utilize ports along the African side of the Red Sea as well as those along the lengthy stretch of the Saudi coast. These self-imposed limitations left CENTCOM few ports from which to choose, and the minor bi-lateral successes occurring between the US and Yemen militaries made Aden appear safer than it really was.

As articulated by naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, one of the primary roles of the United States Navy is to project national power on a global scale. The USS *Cole* was acting in this capacity by deploying from the eastern seaboard to the Mediterranean, and finally, to the Arabian Sea in the summer and fall of 2000. The Arleigh Burke destroyer had stopped in Aden, Yemen to refill its petroleum tanks to over 50% capacity as naval protocol dictated before entering a warzone. The destroyer was sailing to join an aircraft carrier battle group as part of an embargo effort that had been operating off the coast of Iraq since its invasion of Kuwait.

At the tactical level, the Navy personnel onboard the USS *Cole* did not have the small-arms weapons necessary to provide overwhelming firepower. Even without advanced notice from intelligence reports, the commanding officer and crew were not naïve about the chance that danger could be awaiting them in Aden harbor. They recognized this before the destroyer deployed from Norfolk. The Navy had attempted to instill the importance of force protection upon all of its sailors, regardless of rank. The USS *Cole*'s leadership and Force Protection team

had completed courses specifically designed for protecting the ship. The entire USS *Cole* crew had participated in mandated force protection training and practiced in drills that simulated terrorist attacks during the preparation for their Middle East deployment. This training was ineffective, particularly at Level I which was required for all sailors. The Navy seemed to be checking the proverbial box in terms of force protection as a way for senior commanders to protect their careers rather than ensuring that all members of the fleet were properly educated on how to defend a ship.

Just as detrimental, the USS *Cole* did not follow force protection protocol in Aden harbor. As described at length in the Navy's official JAG report, the USS *Cole* failed to deploy all of the necessary protective measures required during THREATCON BRAVO operations. In the Navy, the commanding officer is ultimately responsible for the actions of the ship, and the lack of preparation of the ship ultimately falls on Commander Lippold. However, his leadership team, particularly the Force Protection team, shared in the botched effort to complete all aspects of THREATCON BRAVO. This negligence proved catastrophic.

Circumstance also played a part in the bombing of the USS *Cole*. The commanding officer's last-minute order to offload the vessel's trash provided an unexpected and additional distraction that aided the approach of the al-Qaeda attackers. The decision was not out of the ordinary, and the crew should have been able to continue protecting the ship even while the trash was being unloaded. Sentries aboard the USS *Cole* later testified that they had visual confirmation of the al-Qaeda suicide bombers as they approached the ship but were operating under the impression that local trash boats might arrive to remove the last of the ship's waste. This confusion hindered the last line of defense against the attackers. Stationed high above the waterline, the sentries were also mired by the short length of time it took the enemy to cross the

harbor. The USS *Cole*'s best chance might have been for those atop the ship to communicate with small patrol boats in the water which could have attempted to intercept the al-Qaeda craft. Small unknown crafts were never supposed to have direct access to the hull of the ship. With patrol boats in the water, the Americans would have been able to examine each trash vessel individually, at a distance of their choosing, before granting access to their ship.

The Legacy of the USS Cole

The bombing of the USS *Cole* was a touchstone where two political and military entities collided. It was a point where alternative political objectives, strategies, operations, and tactics met resulting in the near destruction of a United States destroyer. This engagement occurred as a pushback to American imperial ambition which had started over a century earlier and because of U.S. global security obligations accepted after the Second World War. The USS *Cole* attack provided the United States government an opportunity to examine its foreign policies and reactive stance on al-Qaeda.

The bombing of the USS *Cole* was a pivotal event in the United States conflict with al-Qaeda and ongoing struggle in the Middle East. The premeditated killing of American sailors should have provided the impetus for the United States government to transition the confrontation with bin Laden from the defensive to the offensive. Rather than address this dire need for an innovative approach to an unorthodox adversary, the government continued with reactionary policies against al-Qaeda while refusing to demonstrate a sense of urgency toward the elimination of this dangerous enemy. The government's aversion to risk and the public's intolerance of sustaining military casualties also proved detrimental. The unwillingness to resolve these significant problems or take action dishonored those who died in Aden harbor, and they proved to be major factors in al-Qaeda's calamitous attack on 9/11.

Perhaps the most crippling miscalculation the United States government made in the late 1990s was its refusal to re-evaluate policies concerning the growing al-Qaeda threat. Throughout multiple departments and agencies, Washington followed a reactionary course of action towards bin Laden and his organization instead of formulating more proactive policies. Too often, it was al-Qaeda action which spurred American reaction. This practice of waiting for a committed and asymmetrical enemy to strike proved disastrous. The executive branch was ultimately responsible for creating and guiding national policy. The White House, which is influenced by and in turn influences the direction of the country's intelligence agencies, never ordered an attack against bin Laden after August 1998. From the early 1990s until September 2001, multiple presidential administrations consistently refused to demonstrate the conviction necessary to eliminate Osama bin Laden or his organization. This was not a partisan issue so often endemic to American politics. The Clinton and Bush administrations each refused to make al-Qaeda a top priority, and neither the political right nor the political left were pressing for military action against an organization with a proven record of killing Americans. The tepid American policies endorsed by two presidential administrations allowed al-Qaeda to thrive relatively unimpeded by American forces.

While the executive branch failed to create strong policies toward Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, or the Taliban, the legislative branch was absent in demanding policy change from the Commander in Chief. No significant political pressure was applied upon President Clinton or President Bush from either the Senate or the House of Representatives to create innovative or proactive policies against bin Laden. After President Clinton retaliated for the Embassy bombings in August 1998, Republican members of Congress speculated that the military response had been ordered only to distract the public from Clinton's extramarital affair. Rather

than focusing on al-Qaeda's potential for future attacks, Capitol Hill became embroiled over the impeachment of the president. Following the USS *Cole* bombing, Congress initiated a series of hearings, but bipartisan committees lacked the will to call for military action against bin Laden or al-Qaeda even after being confronted with the facts surrounding the deaths of American sailors. The Vietnam Syndrome was still alive. Instead, Congress offered its sympathies to the families who had lost loved ones in Aden harbor and presented its recommendations for the Navy and the intelligence community at the conclusion of the hearings. The legislative branch, which has the constitutional power to declare war, allowed al-Qaeda free reign to burgeon and fester in the years preceding 9/11.

After the USS *Cole* attack, President Clinton needed to act and not allow the 2000 presidential election, peace negotiations in the Middle East, or intelligence that was less than absolute prevent him from ordering some-form of retaliatory strike. Taking action inside Afghanistan should not have been a political concern since the Department of State had already warned the Taliban leadership on multiple occasions that they would be held accountable for any international incidents tied back to bin Laden. Furthermore, the United States government had never officially recognized the legitimacy of Taliban sovereignty, and President Clinton had already ordered one attack inside its borders. He should have returned to the offensive following the USS *Cole* attack.

Unwilling to learn from the mistakes and omissions of their predecessors, President Bush and his cabinet demonstrated no urgency in targeting al-Qaeda after taking office in January 2001. Although Bush criticized Clinton's handling of the USS *Cole* bombing on the campaign trail, the new president initiated no offensive action, covert or otherwise, against bin Laden after entering the Oval Office. This inaction was not from a lack of options because plans for rolling

up al-Qaeda had been developed during the final years of the Clinton presidency. These contingencies were well-known inside the new cabinet because key intelligence leaders had been retained from the previous administration. In spite of vocal concerns from some of these individuals, the Bush White House continued the previous administration's attempts at diplomatic resolution. As pointed out by NSA Condoleezza Rice, the cabinet was fearful of the political impact of another failed bombing run at bin Laden. After eight months of inertia, the new administration finally settled on a plan to undermine the Taliban and al-Qaeda that was discussed at the highest levels of government on September 4, 2001. The Bush administration's new policies invoked no urgency as evidenced by its timeline that was designed to work in three to five years.

At all levels and throughout multiple administrations, there was a profound failure to understand the great exigency that al-Qaeda presented in the pre-9/11 years. Decision-makers needed to be willing to take the fight to an untraditional enemy in a non-conventional war. Both parties controlled the White House within months of the Yemen attack, and the bombing of the USS *Cole* should have been the motivation that prompted the United States government to finally commit to serious offensive action against Osama bin Laden and his organization. The USS *Cole* bombing was one in a series of escalating attacks by al-Qaeda, an organization that had openly declared war against the United States on two separate occasions. The USS *Cole* attack was unquestionably aimed at killing American sailors and sinking an American warship. However, Washington treated the near-sinking of a destroyer with a mix of malaise and indifference, and no retaliatory effort was ever undertaken after the attack in Yemen. The Clinton and Bush administrations each selected diplomacy as their preferred method for handling the situation in Afghanistan. These policies had little impact on bin Laden or his al-Qaeda cells,

which were able to continue planning their 9/11 mission unimpeded by the US military or intelligence agencies.

In the weeks after the USS *Cole* attack, the bodies of the American men and women who died in Aden were returned to the nation that they had proudly served. In the following months, family and friends gathered for memorial services and burials at places like Mount Hope Cemetery in San Diego, California, Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas, and Antietam National Cemetery in Boonsboro, Maryland. Three of the deceased were interred next to their brothers and sisters in arms at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, their graves adding to the rows of white marble headstones.

Eleven months passed before the crew of the USS *Cole* was finally awarded their medals in early September 2001. The decorations that were bestowed upon the sailors did not reflect a specific conflict because the United States was considered to be at peace at the time of the bombing. That fact must have been a haunting irony to the grief-stricken loved ones of the seventeen sailors who had only recently been laid to rest. Within a week of the USS *Cole*'s medal ceremony, nearly 3,000 more Americans would be dead and the rest of the country would soon know what the survivors of the USS *Cole* already knew. The United States was already at war.

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