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Sudan: Don't Forget the Past Follies

by James Bovard

Many politicians and much of the media are hollering for a U.S. military intervention into Sudan to stop the growing carnage in that nation's civil war. However, few Americans clearly recall the debacle from the last time the United States attacked Sudan. Operation Infinite Reach was a farce of the first order — and may have helped pave the way to the September 11 attacks. And the fact that the false statements surrounding the operation proved cost-free for the Clinton team may have encouraged the Bush administration's creativity on Iraq.

On August 7, 1998, two trucks loaded with explosives detonated nearly simultaneously, wrecking U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing 224 people, including 12 Americans, and wounding more than 4,000.

The U.S. government quickly concluded that the embassy attacks had been an al-Qaeda operation. Twelve days later the Clinton administration launched Operation Infinite Reach. In a failed attempt to kill Osama bin Laden, scores of Tomahawk cruise missiles struck al-Qaeda terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. Thirteen cruise missiles launched from U.S. ships in the Red Sea destroyed the El Shifa factory in Khartoum, Sudan.

President Clinton announced that “our goal was to destroy, in Sudan, the factory with which bin Laden's network is associated.” Clinton declared that the attack on the “chemical weapons-related facility” was an “exercise of our inherent right of self-defense ... to prevent and deter additional attacks by a clearly identified terrorist threat” and that the “terrorist-related facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan” were hit “because of the imminent threat they presented to our national security.”

In Washington press conferences on the day of the attack, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger continually referred to the “so-called pharmaceutical plant.” When a “senior intelligence official” speaking at a Pentagon briefing was asked, “What is this pharmaceutical facility supposed to make?” he replied,

We have no evidence — or have seen no products, commercial products that are sold out of this facility. The facility also has a secured perimeter and it's patrolled by the Sudanese military.

But the plant was actually wide open to visitors and had been visited by U.S. government officials, World Health Organization officials, and foreign diplomats in the months before the U.S. attack. There was no Sudanese military presence near the plant.

Earlier in 1998, El Shifa had been awarded (with U.S. government approval) a UN contract to ship a hundred thousand cartons of a veterinary antibiotic medicine to Iraq under a special exemption to the UN embargo on that country. In the days after the attack, journalists reported that the factory grounds were littered with “melted packets of pain relievers and bottles of antibiotics.” Before the smoke had ceased rising from the rubble, it was undeniable that El Shifa was the largest pharmaceutical producer in the Sudan.

Another CIA misjudgment

The factory was destroyed in part because, when CIA whiz kids searched the Internet for information on it, the El Shifa website did not contain a list of drugs the factory manufactured. This supposedly proved the factory was a chemical-weapons site that must be destroyed.

Defense Secretary William Cohen announced, “We do know that [bin Laden] has had some financial interests in contributing to the — this particular facility.” Salah Idris, a Saudi Arabian banker and industrialist, bought the plant five months before the United States destroyed it, but the U.S. government was unaware that the factory had changed hands. After Idris approached the U.S. government to seek to correct its mistaken assumptions about bin Laden's ownership, the U.S. government responded by notifying the Bank of America to freeze \$24 million in Idris's bank accounts in the United Kingdom under a U.S. regulation covering “pending investigations of interests of Specially Designated Terrorists.” U.S. government officials claimed to possess secret evidence linking Idris to bin Laden. Yet, though the freeze was based on suspicions that Idris was a terrorist financier, the U.S. government never bothered to officially list him as such.

Cohen announced that “the facility that was targeted in Khartoum produced the precursor chemicals that would allow the production of a type of VX nerve agent.” Administration officials stressed that the “only known use [of the precursor chemical discovered] is as a precursor ingredient in the nerve gas VX.” In reality, the precursor ingredient — known as EMPTA — is also used in pesticides.

The Clinton administration's smoking gun was little more than a cupful of dirt that a “CIA operative” had scooped up in December 1997 across the street from the factory — 60 feet from the factory entrance and on someone else's property. The CIA did not bother to test the soil sample until July 1998. Former CIA official Milt Bearden later observed, “Never before has a single soil sample prompted an act of war against a sovereign state.”

The Clinton administration possessed a much stronger case for attacking the terrorist training camps in Afghanistan than the factory in the Sudan. But, especially with a name like “Operation Infinite Reach,” hitting only one country simply would not do. National Security Council official Richard Clarke later explained that since bin Laden showed his “global reach” by bombing U.S. embassies in two countries, President Clinton “obviously decided to attack in more than one place.”

In his August 20 announcement, Clinton declared,

Afghanistan and Sudan have been warned for years to stop harboring and supporting these terrorist groups. But countries that persistently host terrorists have no right to be safe havens.

Two weeks after the bombing, the Sudanese ambassador to the United States, Mahdi Ibrahim Mahammad, declared that in May 1998 he had “delivered a formal letter of invitation to a senior official in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, offering to establish a joint effort between our two countries to see the possibilities, to explore them, of working together against international terrorism.” The United States scorned the Sudanese offer. Mahammad was angry that the U.S. government blocked a Sudanese request for a UN investigation of the bombing.

When State Department Undersecretary Thomas Pickering was asked why the U.S. government opposed a Sudanese request for an independent investigation headed by former President Jimmy Carter, Pickering replied,

I’ve just presented the evidence very clearly, I think, on why this was a target. I don’t believe that an international investigative committee needs to have an additional role. The evidence, in our view, is clear and persuasive.

But the primary evidence presented was the assertion by a government official that the U.S. government possessed secret evidence — which, of course, it could not reveal.

The Monica factor

The cruise missile attack came three days after President Clinton, in a deposition with Independent Counsel Ken Starr’s legal team, finally admitted he had had an “inappropriate” relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Clinton gave a brief television address on August 17 during which he seemed nearly out of control with rage. Lewinsky was returning to the grand jury for additional testimony on the day that Clinton bombed Afghanistan and Sudan — giving rise to the nickname “Monica’s Missiles” for the attacks.

In a speech eight days after the attack, Clinton bragged to an audience about how he had sacrificed himself to protect innocent Sudanese:

The night before we took action against the terrorist operations in Afghanistan and Sudan, I was here on this island [Martha's Vineyard], up until 2:30 in the morning, trying to make absolutely sure that at that chemical plant there was no night shift.... I didn't want some person, who was a nobody to me but who may have a family to feed and a life to live and probably had no earthly idea what else was going on there, to die needlessly.

One factory watchman was killed and ten other people were injured in the attack.

Clinton did not have a second thought about destroying the largest pharmaceutical factory in one of the poorest nations on Earth. The Sudanese, like many others in the Third World, cannot afford the more-expensive drugs produced in Western countries. El Shifa was the largest producer of malaria tablets in Africa. In the months after the attack, Sudanese government officials blamed the U.S. attack for a severe malaria epidemic.

Twelve days after the bombing, Defense Secretary Cohen "insisted that the incomplete intelligence was irrelevant to President Clinton's decision to destroy" the factory, the *New York Times* reported. Cohen told reporters that the U.S. government "did not learn until at least three days after the attack on the plant that it made medicine." This raises questions about government officials' reading speeds, considering that the news was splashed all over the world's media within hours of the attack.

Idris, the factory owner, hired one of the most respected law firms in Washington to file suit to have his assets unfrozen. On the day before the U.S. government was obliged to respond to his claims in federal court, it threw in the towel and permitted Idris to reclaim his \$24 million. When Idris filed a second lawsuit to receive compensation for the destruction of his factory, the U.S. government effectively invoked sovereign immunity, refusing its permission to the lawsuit and thereby eliminating any chance for recompense.

The U.S. attack on the Sudanese factory exemplified a fatal mixture of bad intelligence and crass politics. When the operation turned out to be a fiasco, there was a total evasion of responsibility. Instead, the Clinton administration preferred to repeat banalities about the evil of terrorists. Clinton portrayed the destruction of the factory as a triumph of American idealism:

Terrorists must have no doubt that in the face of their threats, America will protect its citizens and will continue to lead the world's fight for peace, freedom, and security.... America is and will remain a target of terrorists precisely because ... we act to advance peace, democracy, and basic human values; because we're the most open society on Earth.

Despite the lofty rhetoric, Clinton's action, at best, did nothing more than protect Americans from Sudanese horse pills.

That Clinton shot at and missed bin Laden in the wake of the 1998 embassy bombings may have been the best thing that ever happened to bin Laden. At the time of the embassy bombings the Taliban were on the verge of expelling him from Afghanistan; they considered him to be a rude, trouble-making, publicity-hungry guest. But as a *Wall Street Journal* analysis concluded, the U.S. retaliation

turned Mr. bin Laden into a cult figure among Islamic radicals, made Afghanistan a rallying point for defiance of America and shut off Taliban discussion of expelling the militants. It also helped convince Mr. bin Laden that goading America to anger could help his cause, not hurt it.

The *New York Times* concurred, noting that the failed U.S. counterstrike converted bin Laden into a “hero” and a “revered figure” among many Muslims.

Bombing a foreign country is not simply an exercise in moral aesthetics. The issue is not what Washington politicians and newspaper editorials proclaim. Killing foreigners usually causes far more complications than America’s best and brightest wish to admit.

James Bovard is author of [The Bush Betrayal](#) as well as [Lost Rights](#) (1994) and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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