

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ATTACK ON THE USS COLE

ADEN, YEMEN—Jamal Al-Badawi had been waiting to kill and to die for almost two years. Now, in June 1999, his moment had come.

The Yemen native had given his *bayat*—his solemn oath of loyalty—to bin Laden at a training camp in eastern Afghanistan in 1997.¹ Badawi admired the mujihideen, the larger-than-life jihadis who humbled the Soviet Union. His own role in the Afghan war had been minor. Serving bin Laden was a way to capture some reflected glory.

In Afghanistan, Badawi grew close to Tawfiq al-Attash, a veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad. Attash was a hardened man who had seen blood and bombs in the frontiers of Islam, from Afghanistan to Chechnya to Bosnia. Badawi's friendship with Attash may not have been as accidental as it seemed to Badawi. Al Qaeda's camps are divided along ethnic lines; Saudis train Saudis, Yemenis train Yemenis, and so on. And each ethnic camp has its own talent spotter. Attash was the spotter for the Yemeni unit and he would have a use for this ambitious, naïve young man.

Badawi was sent home to Aden, Yemen, and told to wait. He waited and waited, all but giving up hope. But his mission would come.

In June 1999, two men visited Badawi's home. They carried a letter from Attash asking Badawi to go to Saudi Arabia and buy a

boat.² Later, another letter—this one from bin Laden—was delivered by courier. In flowery Arabic, the arch-terrorist provided detailed advice on how to sink American warships along the Yemen coastline.³ The plot to sink the USS *Cole* was underway.

It soon grew to include some sixty people, many of whom had little idea about the ultimate objective. A welder made the housing for the bomb; a carpenter built a false bottom in the white fiberglass boat to conceal it. Another cell, composed of corrupt policemen in Lajeh, Yemen, created or purchased false identity cards and other documents.⁴ The terror infrastructure included five safe houses, a late-model four-wheel-drive truck, a boat trailer, and a collection of cell phones.⁵

It was planned along classic bin Laden lines. The attack group was organized into cells of no more than three men each. Many of the terrorists were Arab Afghans, who had been trained in bin Laden's Afghanistan camps.⁶ The bomb was sophisticated and designed to kill many people. And the plan had been patiently prepared. Indeed, in September 2000, weeks before the attack, two of the bombers took their boat on a test run, according to a Yemeni security service interrogation of a fisherman who had helped the men put their craft into the water.⁷

In a classified report, the FBI later described Attash as “the intermediary between bin Laden himself and the attack planners.”⁸ Like Ramzi Yousef in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Attash would be the mastermind who would assemble the team and get away. By contrast, Badawi would be treated as a “disposable”—and was easily arrested within days of the *Cole* attack.⁹

Aden harbor was an ideal place for bin Laden's organization to attempt a seaborne attack. The harbor is essentially U-shaped, making it easy to watch the movements of ships from almost any point in the city. No inside information about shipping schedules was necessary; an apartment window would supply all the intelligence any terror cell needed.

Nor would port security pose a problem. The port makes up but a small fraction of the harbor. Beyond the port area, a broad, rocky arm of land offers many coves, inlets, and docks to launch boats for fishermen. Any one of these would be ideal for launching a covert attack.

Even the small craft, powered by a whining outboard motor, would not attract attention. Every day a swarm of nearly identical boats emerged from the far rocky shore, sliced through the port's sea-lanes, and skirted oil tankers and naval cruisers on their way to the fishing grounds. It was a perfect cover.

So once the explosives and the boat were prepared, the cell simply had to wait. A target would soon steam in.

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Throughout the summer of 2000, counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke became increasingly concerned about bin Laden's next strike on American targets. Intelligence chatter had picked up. Something was happening, but what?

In July 2000, a CIA informant revealed that a terror group based in Sidon, Lebanon, and long affiliated with bin Laden was planning to attack a U.S. naval vessel somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Most likely the attack would occur off the Lebanese coast. Clarke confirmed to the author this never-before-reported information.¹⁰

Bin Laden had never plotted to attack a hardened military target, let alone an American warship. Clarke was alarmed.

But the CIA and Defense Department officials discounted the threat, Clarke told the author. Clarke was told that the U.S. Navy had no ships in the area and no plans to deploy ships to the eastern Mediterranean. It was just another piece of "intelligence chatter."

What Clarke and apparently no one in the White House knew at the time was that bin Laden's operatives had tried and failed to attack the USS *The Sullivans* in Aden, Yemen, in January 2000. And, Clarke said, no one in the upper echelons of the Clinton Administration knew that CENTCOM, which supervised the

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deployment of Navy ships across the Middle East, had begun monthly refueling operations in Aden.

ADEN, YEMEN—The USS *Cole*, a 505-foot-long Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer with a complement of 249 men and 44 women, had left Norfolk Naval Station on August 8, 2000. Proudly painted on its hull was its Navy ship number: DDG-67. It was on its way to a six-month deployment¹¹ with the U.S. Fifth Fleet, currently on station in the Persian Gulf.

The \$1 billion ship boasted an impressive array of armaments: anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles, including Tomahawk cruise missiles, torpedoes, guns that fire five-inch-wide shells, and a 20-mm Phalanx Close-In Weapons System, which fires multi-barrel cannons that will rip a man or a small boat to pieces at a distance of almost one mile in a matter of seconds. But all that weaponry would turn out to be of little use. Even the sentries standing “fore and aft held unloaded shotguns,” *Newsweek* noted, “the shells still in ammo belts slung around their waists.”¹²

As the *Cole* passed through the Suez Canal and into the Red Sea in October 2000, Lieutenant Commander Chris Peterschmidt, the ship’s second-in-command, (known as the “XO” or executive officer) radioed the U.S. embassy in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen. Following standard procedure, the warship was planning to refuel in Yemen in ten days.

Peterschmidt and the senior officers saw it as a routine operation. U.S. Navy ships had been regularly refueling in Aden for the past two years.

The bomb had been carefully prepared for weeks. It was made from C-4, a plastic explosive long used by the U.S. military. The bomb was the equivalent of seven hundred pounds of TNT. The C-4 was packed in heavy steel to direct the blast and magnify its force.¹³ The use of C-4 shows sophistication and suggests the involvement of a hostile government. The U.S. sold large amounts of C-4 to Iran in the days of the Shah, and Iraq is believed to have

captured some of the plastic explosive during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

One of the lessons apparently learned by the terrorists from the previous aborted attack on the USS *The Sullivans* was that the bomb needed to be a “shaped charge,”¹⁴ which would cause more damage per pound of explosive and allow the attackers to carry a lighter-weight, more effective bomb. This time, the bomb would not sink the boat.

The USS *Cole* was in Aden harbor, 1,800 feet off shore in a body of water known as the Bandar al-Tawahi, attached to a floating refueling station. The fueling station was owned by Arab Investment and Trading, a private company controlled by a wealthy Yemeni living in London along with some Saudi investors.¹⁵ It wouldn't take long; at 2,200 gallons per minute, the entire fuelling would take less than six hours. The fuelling began at 10:30 A.M.

Forty-seven minutes later, at 11:18 A.M. local time, disaster struck.

A small craft gunned its motor toward the *Cole*. The two men aboard seemed to be aiming dead center between the two towers that rose from the deck of the destroyer. On board the speeding boat was Abd al-Muhsin al-Taifi, a Yemeni man wanted in connection with the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.

As the outboard raced toward the *Cole*, telephone records later revealed that the suicide bombers repeatedly phoned Jamal Ba Khorsh, a cell member who was recruited to videotape the attack on the unsuspecting warship. The bombers repeatedly called Khorsh from their cell phones—right up until seconds before the attack. But Khorsh apparently slept through their calls. The suicide bombers desperately tried to get their final moments memorialized on videotape. They were frustrated—they kept getting voicemail.

In the last moments, one American sailor recalls, the two suicide bombers stood stiffly and saluted. It was their bid at a legacy.

Then, the bomb exploded. The explosion smashed its way through the half-inch reinforced steel plating and ripped a forty-

by-forty-foot hole in the hull. Within minutes, seventeen sailors were dead or mortally wounded and another thirty-nine severely injured. The *Cole* was taking on water. It was the most devastating attack on an American warship since World War II.

Moments before the blast, Lieutenant Commander Peterschmidt was running a meeting to discuss the crew's morale. The idea on the table was to buy a new thirty-two-inch television set. Then the explosion rocked the ship, snatching the crew's break-room television out of its wall brackets and smashing it on the floor.¹⁶

In the cramped corridors, Peterschmidt stepped over men and women moaning for help, their legs broken, their jaws bleeding. If he tarried to help the wounded, the whole ship might be consumed by fire and flooding, and then sink—possibly killing the entire crew.¹⁷ It was the cruel triage of battle, a grim utilitarianism that Navy officers must learn to live with. Navy corpsmen raced to treat the wounded as Peterschmidt rushed to save the ship.

The stench of the high-test fuel, now pooling on the decks and floating on the water, was overwhelming.¹⁸ The number-one engine room was flooded. The pumps worked overtime, but the seals kept springing leaks.

The ship's power was out. For the next three days, there was little fresh water, no hot food, and no rest. Only one flush toilet remained in operation and at least seventy of the crew soon developed diarrhea. The heat was overpowering: 113 degrees in the open and as much as 130 degrees below decks.¹⁹

The first night after the attack, a senior officer from the headquarters of the Navy's Fifth Fleet phoned Peterschmidt on his mobile phone. (The ship's communications were out.) The staff officer didn't waste words. "You're sinking, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."²⁰

Peterschmidt went to Commander Kirk Lippold, and told his calm commanding officer that he wanted to cut another hole in the hull—to save the ship.

The commander listened silently as Peterschmidt explained the problem. Water was roaring in faster than the pumps could push it up and out. The ship's pumps were straining to force the water up three stories out of the number-one engine room. Cutting another hole, slightly above the waterline, might do the trick. But high-test fuel floated on the water in the engine room—one spark from a welder's cutting torch could touch off an inferno.²¹

It was a risk they would have to take. A seaman carefully cut the hole. The hoses were moved lower. The pumps resumed their vital work. By midnight on October 15, after three days of struggle, the USS *Cole* was saved.

Impressed by the dogged determination of the crew, Peterschmidt told the *Navy Times*, "Their performance answers critics who say that modern sailors don't measure up to those of yesteryear."²²

NEW YORK—Within hours of the attack on the USS *Cole*, FBI agents from the New York field office boarded commercial flights bound for Yemen.²³ Soon after they landed, the FBI declared war—on the State Department.

FBI counterterrorism chief John O'Neill arrived two days later. He pulled up to the Movenpick Hotel; it was the same hotel that bin Laden's men had bombed eight years earlier. Still wearing his suit and tie in the 100-degree heat, O'Neill marched down the hotel hall to the room that the U.S. ambassador to Yemen was using as an office.

Barbara K. Bodine was worldly and tough. She had served in Baghdad during the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War and had served as counterterrorism coordinator at the State Department. She had worked in Yemen—perhaps the most terrorist-infested place in the Middle East—for three years.

For O'Neill and Bodine, it was hate at first sight. She was barefoot, in a polo shirt and blue jeans.²⁴ "You'd better get rid of that suit," she told O'Neill. "You'll die from the heat."

O'Neill told Bodine that he believed that bin Laden was behind the bombing of the USS *Cole*. "He's out to get me," he added.

"Who's out to get you?" she asked.

"Bin Laden. He wants to kill me," he said.

"Excuse me," Bodine said. "He's after all of us. He wants to kill any American. Besides, I have a slightly higher profile here than you."

It was the first of many daily confrontations. Every day brought another showdown over a small issue. Bodine and O'Neill argued over the kind of guns his men could carry. He wanted to issue sub-machine guns to every one of his men. She thought that would eliminate any hope of help from the government of Yemen. Eventually Bodine struck a compromise: A contingent of twenty-four FBI agents would carry guns to protect 150 other agents, who would bear concealed pistols.

After the Nairobi embassy bombing, O'Neill had been in charge of the investigation. The Kenyans were eager for American help. They had lost hundreds in the embassy bombings. Kenyan investigators were impressed by the FBI's scientific methods, technologies, and demeanor.

But Aden was not Nairobi. Years of Soviet and militant Muslim propaganda had made Yemen's police and internal security services skeptical of America. They were not about to allow the FBI to run a criminal investigation on their turf.

Still, the Yemenis were making some progress. On October 16, Yemeni police made a breakthrough. They located an apartment overlooking the harbor that had been rented by two Arabs who had disappeared on the morning of the attack. The landlord recalled seeing a fiberglass boat stored in the backyard, which also disappeared on the morning of October 12.²⁵

At another apartment, police found a corrugated metal wall constructed by some of the bombing suspects to shield these boat-building efforts from view. Neighbors complained about incessant

banging and work on a boat. On the morning of the bombing, one neighbor saw the boat towed away on a trailer pulled by a truck.

But from the FBI's point of view, the investigation soon stalled. The Yemeni security services refused to allow the FBI to interview the suspects they had taken into custody. Instead, the Americans could submit written questions and receive briefings on the answers. O'Neill did not hide his anger or frustration.

About the only place where the FBI made headway was in the small piece of the "crime scene" that they controlled—the USS *Cole* itself. Inside the *Cole*, the crew found pieces of evidence, including a propeller from the outboard motor of the attack craft and some of the terrorists' teeth.²⁶ These molars later enabled the FBI to positively identify the suicide bombers.

After three weeks, Ambassador Bodine asked the State Department to have O'Neill recalled. Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Pickering delivered the message to Attorney General Janet Reno, a strong O'Neill supporter. Reno considered the request for two weeks. Then, after just five weeks in Yemen, O'Neill was ordered home. He would never be able to return.

O'Neill tried to run the investigation from New York, but the time difference and the distance only made his diplomatic banishment feel worse. For a veteran investigator who liked to be on the streets with his men, it was humiliating. When the ambassador eventually signed a protocol with the Yemenis that would allow the FBI to directly interview the suspects, O'Neill was desperate to get back to Yemen. But Bodine refused to give O'Neill "country clearance"—a kind of permission that any federal employee must receive from the resident U.S. ambassador before traveling overseas. She had barred him from Yemen and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"In my view, Bodine may have been too protective of the Yemenis," said one former State Department official, who knew both of them well. "And O'Neill probably was over the top in pushing."

Whatever the cause, the investigation dragged on inconclusively until the end of the Clinton Administration.²⁷

THE WHITE HOUSE—Hours after the attack on the USS *Cole*, Clarke chaired a meeting in the Situation Room in the White House. Around the table were Michael Sheehan, the State Department’s coordinator for counterterrorism; Cofer Black, the CIA’s point man on counterterrorism; Brian Sheridan, assistant secretary of defense for special operations; and Dale Watson, head of counterterrorism at the FBI. Over a late lunch,²⁸ these four men debated what action to recommend to the principals, who would in turn recommend a policy to the president.

Both Clarke and Sheehan told the author that they had little doubt that bin Laden was behind the attack on the USS *Cole*. Within minutes of the attack, Clarke had ordered his staff to review existing intelligence to see if there were any clues about possible attackers. While the evidence was fragmentary, as it usually is, it seemed to point to bin Laden. The arch-terrorist had at least once before launched attacks on U.S. military targets in Yemen, in December 1992. And the threat to a Navy ship from a bin Laden-affiliated group in Lebanon took on new importance. Other intelligence also seemed to link bin Laden to the attack. (Al Qaeda’s failed attack on the USS *The Sullivans* on January 3, 2000, was not yet known inside the White House in October 2000.)

But Black and Watson, representing the CIA and the FBI, wanted to reserve judgment until more evidence came in. America has many terrorist enemies. Their respective agencies wanted to investigate before drawing any conclusions.

Clarke reminded the participants that the Pentagon had drawn up “target decks”—on-the-shelf, regularly updated and detailed strike plans that specified aim points throughout specific target buildings—for both bin Laden’s training camps and strongholds in Afghanistan as well as key Taliban buildings in Kandahar and Kabul. The plans, based on satellite photographs, included GPS

coordinates and preferred attack mode (cruise missile type, bomber type, bomb type, and so on). They were designed to be put immediately into action, at the president's command. But Clarke's small group could not agree on a course of action. "At the CSG that day, my staff and I were convinced that the attack was from al Qaeda. CIA and FBI deferred judgment pending their investigation," Clarke told the author.²⁹ They were deadlocked.

Later, Clarke attended a meeting with Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Attorney General Janet Reno, and others. Several others were in the room, including Leon Fuerth, Gore's national security advisor; Jim Steinberg, the deputy National Security Advisor; and Michael Sheehan, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism. An American warship had been attacked without warning in a "friendly" harbor—and, at the time, no one knew if the ship's pumps could keep it afloat for the night. Now they had to decide what to do about it.

Clarke had no doubts about whom to punish. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had compiled thick binders of bin Laden and Taliban targets in Afghanistan, complete with satellite photographs and GPS bomb coordinates—the Pentagon's "target decks." The detailed plan was "to level" every bin Laden training camp and compound in Afghanistan as well as key Taliban buildings in Kabul and Kandahar. "Let's blow them up," Clarke said.³⁰

There was some policy basis for Clarke's position. The Clinton Administration had publicly announced a new policy, months before, to hold the Taliban accountable for any future bin Laden attack. This was similar to the Bush post-September 11 policy of punishing nations that harbor terrorists as if they were terrorists themselves.

But to many of the participants Clarke's plan for a retaliatory strike was old hat. He had been recommending such a strike for months. Clarke wanted to attack the training camps, in his words, as a "bolt out of blue,"³¹ without waiting for another bin Laden

attack. Now that there had been another terrorist attack, it seemed that Clarke was pushing his policy with a new justification.

Around the table, Clarke heard only objections—not a mandate for action. “All of the principals wanted to do something about bin Laden,” Clarke insists.³² “They had signed off on findings to use covert lethal force against him [in 1998]. They were ready to approve an additional cruise missile attack if he could be located. They were pressuring the Taliban and Pakistan diplomatically.” But their conditions of the use of force were numerous and difficult to meet.

This is how Clarke remembers the meeting, which has never before been described in the press. Attorney General Janet Reno insisted that they had no clear idea who had actually carried out the attack. The “Justice [Department] also noted, as always, that any use of force had to be consistent with international law, i.e. not retaliation but self protection from future attack,” Clarke told the author.³³ Reno could not be reached for comment.

Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet³⁴ joined Reno in insisting on an investigation before launching a retaliatory strike. Tenet “did not want a months-long investigation,” CIA spokesman Bill Harlow said. “He simply believed that before the United States attacked, it ought to know for sure who was behind the *Cole* bombing.” While Tenet noted that the CIA had not reached a conclusion about what terror group was behind the surprise attack on the USS *Cole*, “he said personally he thought that it would turn out to be al Qaeda,” Clarke recalls.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was also against a counterstrike—but for diplomatic reasons. “We’re desperately trying to halt the fighting that has broken out between Israel and the Palestinians,” Albright said.³⁵ Clarke recalls her saying, “bombing Muslims wouldn’t be helpful at this time.” Some two weeks earlier, Ariel Sharon had visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which touched off a wave of violence known as the “second Intifada” and threatened to completely destroy the Clinton Administration’s hopes for Middle East peace settlement.

Clarke remembers other objections from the State Department. “State noted that we had been bombing Iraq and Serbia and were getting the reputation internationally as a mad bomber nation that could only address its problems that way.”³⁶ “It would be irresponsible,” a spokeswoman for Albright told the author, for the Secretary of State, as America’s chief diplomat, not to consider the diplomatic impact of a missile strike that might try but would quite likely fail to kill bin Laden.

Albright urged continued diplomatic efforts to persuade the Taliban to turn over bin Laden. Those efforts had been going on for more than two years and had gone nowhere. It was unlikely that the Taliban would ever voluntarily turn over its strongest internal ally. Clarke summed up the diplomatic efforts in a conversation with the author as amounting to “lots of cups of tea.”

Secretary Albright remembers the principals’ meeting somewhat differently. Albright wrote the following to the author:

Between the time of the Africa embassy bombings on August 7, 1998, and the day I left office, the administration was actively considering military strikes directed at Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. Following the initial strikes against a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and a facility linked to bin Laden in Sudan, the president directed the Pentagon and our intelligence community to stay alert for opportunities to kill or capture bin Laden. The State Department fully supported this effort and signed off on several planned strikes that were ultimately aborted due to the shortage of reliable real-time intelligence. After the bombing of the Cole, our law enforcement authorities required approximately four months, until after the new [Bush] administration was in office, to definitively link al Qaeda to the attack. The logical time to strike militarily would have been after that connection had been established, and a public explanation justifying the attacks could have been made. To strike without

evidence or any expectation of hitting bin Laden would have turned world opinion against the United States at the very moment we were seeking maximum cooperation in tracking down the terrorist network responsible for the murders. I certainly do not recall the Pentagon or CIA confirming that we had reliable information concerning the whereabouts of bin Laden in the days after the Cole tragedy.

Albright later added that if there was “definitive” proof that bin Laden was behind the USS *Cole* blast and if there was reliable intelligence about his current whereabouts, she would have taken a different view at the meeting.

Secretary of Defense Cohen also did not favor a retaliatory strike, according to Clarke. The attack “was not sufficient provocation,” Clarke remembers Cohen saying, or words to that effect. Cohen thought that any military strike needed a “clear and compelling justification,” Clarke recalls. (Cohen, despite repeated phone calls over more than one week, failed to respond to interview requests.) Cohen also noted that General Anthony Zinni, then head of CENTCOM, was concerned that a major bombing campaign would cause domestic unrest in Pakistan (where bin Laden enjoyed strong support among extremists) and hurt the U.S. military’s relationship with that nation.

Cohen’s views were perfectly in accord with those of the top uniformed officers and Clinton’s political appointees at the Pentagon, Sheehan told the author. “It was the entire Pentagon,” he added. The chief lesson that the Defense Department seemed to draw from the assault on the USS *Cole* was the need for better security for its ships, what was invariably called “force protection.” Listening to Cohen and later talking to top military officers, Sheehan, a former member of special forces before joining the State Department, told the author that he was “stunned” and “taken aback” by their views. “This phenomenon I cannot explain,” he

said. Why didn't they want to go hit back at those who had just murdered American servicemen without warning or provocation?

The issue was hotly debated. Some of the principals were concerned that bin Laden might somehow survive the cruise-missile attack and appear in another triumphant press conference. Clarke countered by saying that they could say that they were only targeting terrorist infrastructure. If they got bin Laden, they could take that as a bonus. Others worried about target information. At the time, Clarke said that he had very reliable and specific information about bin Laden's location. And so on. Each objection was countered and answered with a yet another objection.

In the end, for a variety of reasons, the principals were against Clarke's retaliation plan by a margin of seven to one against. Clarke was the sole one in favor. Bin Laden would get away—again.

After the meeting, Sheehan told the author that he sought out Clarke. He could not believe the Pentagon's weak response to the attack on the *USS Cole*. He was incredulous and frustrated. "What's it going to take to get them to hit al Qaeda in Afghanistan? Does al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon?"³⁷

Instead, the Clinton Administration focused on the investigation and improving the cooperation with Yemen. Clinton phoned the president of Yemen twice, demanding better cooperation between the FBI and the security services of Yemen to determine who was behind the attack on the *Cole*. To some senior Clinton officials, the president's forceful phone calls to Yemen were a positive sign. "The calls were about as forceful as you could expect from one head of state to another," one official, who was in the Oval Office for both Clinton calls, told the author. But, in the end, his calls did little good.

The president did even less to clear the roadblocks inside his own government. Less than one month after the attack, in November 2000, CIA analysts had fingered bin Laden as the culprit—even if senior CIA officials had not yet made up their minds. While John

O'Neill immediately (and correctly) suspected that bin Laden was behind the attack, the FBI team in Yemen continued to believe that the arch-terrorist had nothing to do with the bombing. That curious belief may have been driven by the frustrations of their investigation in Aden. What little the FBI knew came from sixty suspects arrested or questioned by Yemeni police. These suspects were minor figures: a corrupt policeman who supplied false papers, a man who sold the bombers a boat. All were Yemeni nationals. Still, the FBI didn't appear to have read all of the translated transcripts that the Yemeni police provided. These interview transcripts included hundreds of pages of the interrogation of Jamal al-Badawi, a key player in the Cole attack. Badawi, according to *Veterans of Foreign Wars* magazine, said "he was led to believe—but never directly told—that bin Laden was giving the orders."³⁸

Some CIA officials were apoplectic. Bin Laden had all but claimed credit. Standing beside members of the Taliban elite, bin Laden rose to read a poem that he had composed in January 2001.³⁹ It was no love sonnet. Even the opening verses, translated from Arabic, read like a boast:

*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 dinghy awaits her, riding the waves.⁴⁰*

A few months later, an al Qaeda recruiting videotape was obtained by a Middle Eastern intelligence service. A copy was given to the CIA and another copy was obtained by a Kuwait City newspaper. The tape included news footage of the *Cole* attack and called on Muslim men to wage jihad against the Jews and the "Crusaders," Americans and Europeans. The voiceover includes a boisterous song with the lyrics, "We thank god for granting us victory the day

we destroyed the Cole in the sea.”⁴¹

Finally, the CIA was able to trace the \$5,000 sent by bin Laden to the cell in Yemen that carried out the attack on the *Cole*. Bin Laden “specifically allocated funds to videotape the attack, a task that could not be accomplished.”⁴²

But with Clinton trying to broker a peace settlement in Israel, a presidential election imminent, and the two-term Clinton administration ending, serious plans to retaliate went nowhere.

In the last days of his administration, Clinton decided not to fire a parting shot at bin Laden. The terrorists of the world were left with another lesson: even American warships could now be attacked with impunity. The world’s sole superpower would not dare to strike them.

During the Clinton Administration, fifty-nine Americans were killed by bin Laden’s operations. And while almost fifty terrorists had been tracked and captured, and dozens of plots had been foiled and six terror cells smashed, the administration had waged no real war against its overt enemy. Instead, the administration reacted in fits and starts—half-measures that frustrated those who knew what needed to be done.

What was needed was a full-fledged war on terror to kill bin Laden and destroy al Qaeda. But that would be left for the next administration, the administration of George W. Bush, which took on an overt war against the terrorists.

As the Clinton Administration wound down, its challenge to defeat al Qaeda and bin Laden unmet, the planning for bin Laden’s most spectacular attack was already well underway.

In his last night in office as president of the United States, Clinton was at his desk past midnight. He wasn’t issuing last-minute orders to smash al Qaeda or capture bin Laden. He was signing pardons for dozens of well-connected friends. He and the world did not know that September 11, 2001, was less than nine months away.