

Chasing terrorists: Misguided missiles

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 9, 1998](#) issue

According to one White House spin doctor, President Clinton didn't want to appear too contrite in his Monica speech because he knew he would soon be back on center stage as commander in chief, defending the U.S. strike against terrorism. The inspiration for that judgment could have come from John Wayne's advice to a young army officer: "Never apologize, mister. It's a sign of weakness." The U.S. struck back at the group responsible for the attacks on our embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, by sending cruise missiles at sites in Sudan and Afghanistan. No doubt there were many retaliation options floating around the military and intelligence agencies. The one Clinton chose reflects badly on his judgment. Not since Ronald Reagan sent the Marines to save a medical school in Grenada so he could look tough after slinking out of Lebanon has a president been so open to the criticism that he used military might to bolster his image. Clinton's attacks were unwarranted, ineffective and did more for Osama bin Laden's anti-American cause than it did for American security.

Osama bin Laden is no stranger to American military strategists. He was one of many young Muslims brought in by the CIA in 1979 to fight Soviet troops in Afghanistan. A charismatic young man from a wealthy Saudi Arabian family, bin Laden has emerged over the past two decades as a leader among veterans of that war against communism who now refer to themselves as "Afghan Arabs." Bin Laden turned against his former sponsors during the 1991 gulf war, when he became enraged over the "invasion" of Saudi Arabia by more than 500,000 U.S. troops. (At the time, critics of the war warned that our presence there could lead to a Muslim reaction.)

A wealthy man--he inherited as much as \$300 million from his father, who made his money in construction--bin Laden has many business holdings throughout the Middle East, including, according to one report, "trading companies in Kenya, a ceramic manufacturing company in Yemen, and a bank, construction company and

investment firms in Sudan." One of his major holdings is a near monopoly on gum Arabic, Sudan's "leading export and a staple of much fruit juice production in the United States." This raises the question, Have we asked U.S. juice companies to stop buying his gum Arabic?

The U.S. has been following bin Laden's activities for some time, and some U.S. officials claim they have been able to tie him to both of the embassy attacks. He has made many threats against the U.S. since the gulf war. His dislike for the U.S. is also related to what he considers a bias toward Israel and against the Palestinians.

For a time bin Laden lived in Sudan, but under U.S. pressure was forced to leave; he currently lives in Afghanistan, whose leaders criticized his outbursts against the U.S. following the missile attacks. He is estimated to have around 3,000 followers scattered from North Africa to Pakistan, and he is greatly admired among younger Muslims who share his anger at the U.S.--a political reality that makes Islamic governments reluctant to be seen as criticizing him, even though most are on record as opposing terrorist activity.

Clinton has signed an executive order designed to curb bin Laden's financial dealings, a largely symbolic gesture since most of his money is well hidden in sympathetic banks and businesses. The U.S. has also put pressure on the rulers in Afghanistan, the Taliban, to oust bin Laden from the country--a request not likely to be received warmly by a nation recently attacked by U.S. missiles.

The U.S. claims that the attack against bin Laden was designed to weaken his ability to train his "Afghan Arabs" in terrorist activities. Subsequent reports indicate that a meeting of bin Laden's lieutenants--another reason given for the timing of the attacks--probably did not take place. However, the report that such a meeting was planned leaves the U.S. open to criticism that it may have been specifically targeting bin Laden, which would violate a presidential order against assassinating foreign leaders. In any event, bin Laden is still around, and remains a threat to American interests and security.

The pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum was also linked by U.S. officials to bin Laden. He is believed to have financial ties to the Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant, which, according to the Associated Press, makes painkillers and malaria medicine. (Later reports discount that financial connection, though bin Laden is financially involved in other Sudanese businesses.) The U.S. rationale for the attack in Sudan was based on

intelligence reports that a chemical found in traces of soil at the plant is known to be a "precursor" used in the manufacture of nerve gas.

The world is a dangerous place, filled with people angry with the U.S. for many reasons, especially for our pro-Israeli stance, our wealth, our secularity and the corrupting influence of modernity transmitted through U.S. television, music and movies. Clinton's missile attacks reflect the assumption that we can punish the people we don't like--hardly a way to build bridges to the world.

The cost of the two missile attacks, by the way, has been estimated at over \$75 million, considerably higher than the \$40 million that, as the Democrats have complained, Kenneth Starr spent over the past four years chasing what James Carville calls "a failed Arkansas land deal." That comparison might keep Carville from continuing to use that figure in his attacks on Starr.

Both Sudan and Afghanistan are Muslim states caught up in long-term civil wars, and both are among the poorest nations in the world. The U.S. attacks violated the sovereign space of countries that have Islamic fundamentalist governments. Our strikes further damaged our image in the 55 nations that are predominantly Islamic and that number between one-quarter and one-third of the world's population. These nations do not condone terrorism, and many have reason to fear religious extremists like bin Laden, but they know that U.S. retaliatory attacks against Islamic states serve more to recruit terrorists than to curb them.

Osama bin Laden is the terrorist of the hour. Abu Nidal, recently captured in Egypt, was sought in the 1980s, as was Hussein Musawi, who claimed responsibility for bombing the U.S. embassy and a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. President Reagan retaliated against Musawi by bombing suspected terrorist sites in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, an action that, according to a report in the Chicago Tribune, elevated Musawi to the status of "mastermind terrorist." Martin Kramer, a terrorism expert in Tel Aviv, told the Tribune that the Bekaa Valley shelling "was indiscriminate, and it created new recruits for the movement." Musawi is no longer active, but he has never been captured.

The war against terrorism could become President Clinton's Vietnam, a struggle against shadowy figures who don't fight with conventional methods. Terrorism will not be defeated until we begin eliminating the factors that contribute to the anti-Americanism that generates so much anger. A major step in addressing root causes

of terrorism would be a more even-handed approach to the Middle East. And we should end the economic blockade against Iraq, which is punitive and ineffective.

We also need to make a concerted effort to correct the popular and mindless anti-Islamic attitudes in the U.S. In *Shattering the Myth*, Bruce Lawrence writes: "Whether one picks up a popular book claiming to represent 'Western cultures and values' under attack from Islam, or lead articles of the *New York Times*, such as the recent 'Seeing Green: The Red Menace Is Gone. But Here's Islam,' the message is the same: Islam is one, and Islam is dangerous."

It is too easy to accept violence as a quick solution when what we desperately need is to understand that those who pursue and worship God through a different path are not our enemies. "Jihad" is a term often misunderstood as Islamic armed conflict against infidels. Actually, jihad, says Lawrence, refers to hope that "the real-world struggles of Muslims for social justice and peace may bear fruit." That is a goal we can all embrace. And doing that will guarantee much greater security than the use of cruise missiles.