

president who fakes a war to distract public attention from a domestic scandal. Some Republicans in Congress raised questions about the timing of the strikes. Berger was particularly rankled by an editorial in the *Economist* that said that only the future would tell whether the U.S. missile strikes had “created 10,000 new fanatics where there would have been none.”⁴⁹

Much public commentary turned immediately to scalding criticism that the action was too aggressive. The Sudanese denied that al Shifa produced nerve gas, and they allowed journalists to visit what was left of a seemingly harmless facility. President Clinton, Vice President Gore, Berger, Tenet, and Clarke insisted to us that their judgment was right, pointing to the soil sample evidence. No independent evidence has emerged to corroborate the CIA’s assessment.⁵⁰

Everyone involved in the decision had, of course, been aware of President Clinton’s problems. He told them to ignore them. Berger recalled the President saying to him “that they were going to get crap either way, so they should do the right thing.”⁵¹ All his aides testified to us that they based their advice solely on national security considerations. We have found no reason to question their statements.

The failure of the strikes, the “wag the dog” slur, the intense partisanship of the period, and the nature of the al Shifa evidence likely had a cumulative effect on future decisions about the use of force against Bin Ladin. Berger told us that he did not feel any sense of constraint.⁵²

The period after the August 1998 embassy bombings was critical in shaping U.S. policy toward Bin Ladin. Although more Americans had been killed in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack, and many more in Beirut in 1983, the overall loss of life rivaled the worst attacks in memory. More ominous, perhaps, was the demonstration of an operational capability to coordinate two nearly simultaneous attacks on U.S. embassies in different countries.

Despite the availability of information that al Qaeda was a global network, in 1998 policymakers knew little about the organization. The reams of new information that the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit had been developing since 1996 had not been pulled together and synthesized for the rest of the government. Indeed, analysts in the unit felt that they were viewed as alarmists even within the CIA. A National Intelligence Estimate on terrorism in 1997 had only briefly mentioned Bin Ladin, and no subsequent national estimate would authoritatively evaluate the terrorism danger until after 9/11. Policymakers knew there was a dangerous individual, Usama Bin Ladin, whom they had been trying to capture and bring to trial. Documents at the time referred to Bin Ladin “and his associates” or Bin Ladin and his “network.” They did not emphasize the existence of a structured worldwide organization gearing up to train thousands of potential terrorists.⁵³

In the critical days and weeks after the August 1998 attacks, senior policymakers in the Clinton administration had to reevaluate the threat posed by Bin