



Did Saudis know of 9-11 plot?

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By RICHARD PYLE, Associated Press Writer

New York -- A top al-Qaida operative in U.S. custody has revealed that key Saudi Arabian and Pakistani figures had prior knowledge of the Sept. 11 terrorist plot against the United States, according to a new book.

In "Why America Slept: The Failure to Prevent 9/11," author Gerald Posner also says three Saudi royal princes who had contacts with the terror network died unexpectedly within a week last year, and a Pakistani military officer was killed seven months later.

While he concedes that the deaths could be "coincidences," Posner says, they occurred after the CIA had passed along to Saudi and Pakistani officials information it had obtained from Abu Zubaydah, a key associate of al-Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden.

"My gut tells me that if Zubaydah's information was accurate, our error was telling the Saudis what we had," he said in an interview. "People did not want them to talk, and took them out. Can I prove it? No."

Two of the subjects, Saudi Prince Ahmed bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz and Pakistani Air Marshal Mushaf Ali Mir, "knew that an attack was scheduled for American soil" on Sept. 11, 2001, but did not know where, when or any other details about which to warn U.S. officials, Posner writes.

Nor could they expose Bin Laden without revealing their own ties to al-Qaida, he adds.

"The followup question is, does that information from Zubaydah mean anything? Did the (Saudi) government know?" Posner said in the interview.

"It's hard for me to imagine that King Fahd's nephew, who runs the largest publishing empire in Saudi Arabia, and the air force chief in Pakistan could operate with anybody in al-Qaida and not have higher-ups in the governments know it."

The book says the Saudi government funneled money to al-Qaida and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers in return for a promise not to impose Islamic fundamentalism on the kingdom. The Saudi princes were conduits for the funds, it says.

Zubaydah, who was captured in Pakistan in March 2002, was duped by U.S. interrogators masquerading as Saudis and using painkillers and sodium pentathol, sometimes called "truth serum," to befuddle him into divulging secrets, Posner says. Zubaydah, he writes, thought he was in a Saudi prison, when in fact he was in Afghanistan.

Posner is a lawyer and author whose previous books include "Case Closed" and "Killing the Dream," which sparked controversy by debunking conspiracy theories in

the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

He said his information came from a "high level source in the executive branch" of the U.S. government, who is "absolutely in a position to know the details of this interrogation of Zubaydah." A second, CIA source confirmed some aspects, he said.

While he has been unable to get "independent verification" in the form of videotapes or transcripts, Posner said, "I have to make my own judgment as to whether the sources are credible or have an ax to grind against the Saudis. I am convinced that this information is absolutely accurate."

Some U.S. officials have expressed suspicion that Saudi rulers, despite a professed alliance with the United States, have privately supported al-Qaida. The Saudis vehemently deny the allegations.

Calls to the Saudi embassy press office on Monday were not returned. A White House duty officer did not return calls seeking comment.

Zubaydah has been described by U.S. officials as a terrorist mastermind who plotted millennium bombings and the 2000 boat-bomb attack on the destroyer USS Cole.

In the book, published this month by Random House, Posner says Zubaydah, "relieved" to find he was being quizzed by people he thought were Saudis, provided them with phone numbers for a senior member of the Saudi royal family who would "tell you what to do."

He says the U.S. interrogators were stunned when the numbers were traced to Prince Ahmed, a nephew of King Fahd and publishing magnate, best known to Americans as the owner of the 2002 Kentucky Derby winner War Emblem.

When the agents accused Zubaydah of lying, he revealed more details of Saudi and Pakistani ties to bin Laden, the author says, and in the space of one week, three of the four were dead.

Prince Ahmed, 43, died of a heart attack on July 22, 2002. The next day, a car crash killed Saudi Prince Sultan bin Faisal bin Turki al-Saud, 41. A week later, Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Saud al-Kabir, 25, reportedly died "of thirst" while traveling east of Riyadh.

Seven months later, a plane crash "in clear weather," Posner says, killed Mushaf Ali Mir, his wife and several aides in Pakistan.

Posner said that despite his skepticism about conspiracy theories, he was all but convinced the deaths were planned.