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CIA reveals Clinton administration was warned in 1998 of potential bin Laden plane attack

Newly released documents show US intelligence repeatedly warned of al-Qaeda threats before 9/11, including a scenario involving a plane “loaded with explosives” being flown into an American city.



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US President Bill Clinton meets with his National Security team on April 7, 1999, in the White House Cabinet Room. From left: Clinton, Steve Ricchetti, Gen. Donald Kerrick, CIA Director George Tenet, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Samuel Berger, and Gen. Hugh Shelton.

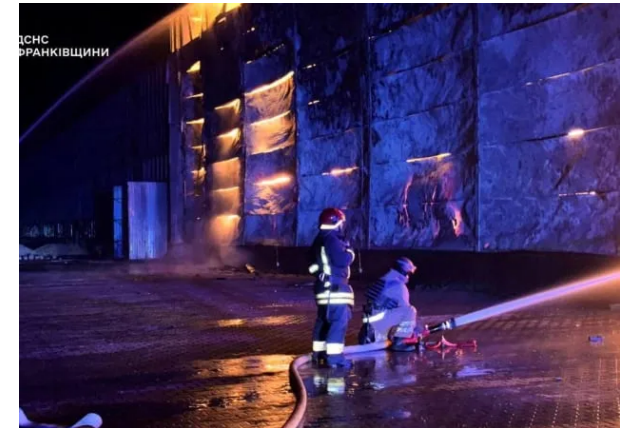
(photo credit: AFP/AFP via Getty Images)

Nearly three years before the September 11 attacks, US intelligence officials warned then-US president Bill Clinton and the administration that [Osama bin Laden](#) was planning to attack the United States using a plane “loaded with explosives” that would be flown into an American city, according to classified documents declassified and released by the CIA on Friday.

The documents, released ahead of the 25th anniversary of the attacks, show that US intelligence agencies repeatedly warned senior officials about bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s intentions to strike inside the United States in the years leading up to [September 11, 2001](#).

The document, dated September 10, 1998, was titled “Bin Laden’s Location and Intentions” and was prepared for senior administration officials with access to the President’s Daily Brief, or PDB, one of the most highly classified intelligence documents provided to the

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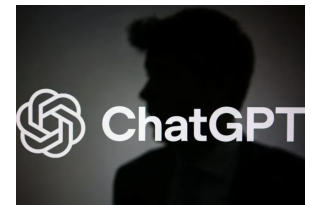
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president and a small group of national security officials.

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The document did not contain definitive intelligence about how bin Laden planned to carry out an attack or where it would occur. However, it noted that his attention had turned toward Washington.

The document does not indicate that US intelligence had advance knowledge of the specific aircraft hijacking plot carried out on September 11, 2001. Rather, it shows that a scenario involving the use of a plane against a target inside the US had emerged within the intelligence community years before the attacks.



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The World Trade Center south tower (L) is engulfed in flames after being struck by hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 as the north tower burns following an earlier attack by a hijacked airliner in New York City September 11, 2001. (credit: REUTERS/Sean Adair)

CIA released 71 documents tied to 9/11 intelligence warnings

The document was among a collection of 71 documents released by the CIA to mark the 25th anniversary of the attacks, 69 of which are being made public for the first time.

The documents show that in the years before the attack, the [CIA](#) issued a series of warnings about bin Laden and al-Qaeda to senior officials across multiple US administrations. In 2001 alone, at least 18 presidential intelligence briefings mentioned bin Laden.

One question remains unanswered: whether Clinton

himself read the 1998 document or received a direct [briefing](#) on its contents. According to the report, that could not be determined.

The document had previously been referenced in the 9/11 Commission's report as a "threat report," but the commission did not disclose at the time that the information was included in material provided to recipients of the President's Daily Brief.

The release is particularly significant because of another well-known intelligence document from the months before the attacks: the PDB received by President George W. Bush on August 6, 2001, titled "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US."

That document stated that bin Laden had sought for years to carry out attacks inside the United States and that al-Qaeda had operatives and a presence in the country. However, it did not include operational intelligence identifying the four aircraft, the targets, or

the timing of the attack.

'The largest CIA release related to 9/11'

CIA Director John Ratcliffe said the release of the documents, timed to coincide with the anniversary of the attacks, was “the largest release ever of CIA analysis related to 9/11.”

The release could renew debate in Washington over a question that has persisted for 25 years: whether the failure was caused by intelligence agencies failing to connect the available information in time, or by political leaders and the national security establishment failing to take sufficiently forceful action in response to the warnings that had accumulated.

The 9/11 Commission concluded that the failure was not the responsibility of a single agency, but instead resulted from several factors, including a “failure of imagination,” inadequate coordination between agencies, and

insufficient operational intelligence to disrupt the plot.

The CIA has also emphasized over the years that while numerous warning signs indicated al-Qaeda was seeking to attack the United States, the agency did not possess intelligence before September 11 that identified the specific timing and location of the attack in a way that would have allowed it to be prevented.

The newly released documents do not change that assessment, but they add another layer to the historical record: years before 9/11 al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and killed nearly 3,000 people, a scenario in which bin Laden's followers would use an aircraft to strike an American city had already appeared within the classified intelligence system, reaching the highest levels of the US government.

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