

Missile strikes kept secretive

Officials confirm that most of the Joint Chiefs were not consulted before the Aug. 20 bombings

By John Diamond
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Most members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were unaware of the planning for the Aug. 20 cruise missile strike on suspected terrorist strongholds in Afghanistan and Sudan until days before the weapons were launched, defense officials confirmed Monday.

The Pentagon defended its highly secretive approach to the raid as appropriate to the sensitivity of the mission and in conformance with the military chain of command. Last-minute recommendations by the service chiefs resulted in one proposed target being deleted as too risky. And after the raid, service chiefs have

voiced no objections to the short notice, said senior defense officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Aug. 20 Tomahawk missile strikes hit a purported terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and the Al Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, Sudan. President Clinton said the Khartoum raid was justified because evidence of a nerve gas component had been found at the plant. Sudanese officials have questioned the validity of the evidence linking the plant to terrorist activity.

An article in this week's New Yorker magazine by writer Seymour Hersh said the White House overruled Attorney General Janet Reno when she questioned whether evidence linking Islamic extremist Osama bin Laden to the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa was strong enough to justify retaliatory attacks.

It also said the White House

kept planning for raids so secret that only the chairman of the five-member Joint Chiefs of Staff and FBI Director Louis Freeh learned of the strikes a matter of days before the missiles were launched.

Elements of Hersh's article had been published before, including the small circle of officials who were in on the strike planning — Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, national security adviser Sandy Berger, Defense Secretary William Cohen, Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs; CIA Director George Tenet and Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, head of the U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for military operations in the Mideast.

"As is appropriate for any sensitive military operation, planning was limited to those who needed to be involved," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said in a statement.

Committee debates impeachment

Republicans are set to pass an impeachment resolution and begin an inquiry

By Larry Margasak
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a blend of constitutional solemnity and partisan tension, the House Judiciary Committee met today to consider whether to open an impeachment inquiry. The Republicans' chief investigator laid out 15 alleged offenses by President Clinton.

Chairman Henry Hyde opened the hearing with a call for "an honest effort to do what is best for the country."

But Democrats were quick to criticize the Republicans' plan for an open-ended inquiry that could go beyond Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's report on the Monica Lewinsky affair and alleged cover-up.

The committee Republicans' top investigator, David Schippers, laid out four more grounds for impeachment based on the Lewinsky case than Starr offered in his referral. Democratic counsel Abbe Lowell said the Republican staff had simply "subdivided" Starr's 11 charges without adding significant new allegations.

Schippers concluded that Clinton and Monica Lewinsky were "part of a conspiracy" to obstruct justice by providing false testimony, withholding evidence and tampering with witnesses.

Schippers also said the president may have tried to obstruct justice "in attempting to coach and influence the testimony" of his secretary Betty Currie by going over with her his own testimony in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case.

But he dropped Starr's allegation that Clinton abused his constitutional authority by invoking executive privilege to shield some of his aides from testifying to Starr's grand jury.

Lowell countered that the Republican conclusions were overstated, unsupported, and "the product of zeal to make a case rather than to state the law."

"The president was engaged in an improper relationship that he did not want exposed," Lowell said. "That sparked this Constitutional crisis."

Impeachment, he said, takes "a

far higher threshold."

The Republicans' investigator, Schippers, said there was evidence that Clinton lied both in his deposition for the Jones lawsuit and before Starr's grand jury. "The president and Ms. Lewinsky had developed a 'cover story' to conceal their activities," Schippers said.

It's wrong for a party to a lawsuit to lie under oath, he said, and the president is "by virtue of his office, held to a higher standard than any other American."

As the panel began its opening statements, Hyde, R-Ill., said, "This will be an emotional process, a strenuous process, because feelings are high on all sides of this question."

The committee's resolution would next go to the House floor, probably late this week. With the Republican majority on the panel supporting a resolution to move ahead with the inquiry, there appeared little chance the Democrats could shape the outcome. Democrats expressed their frustration repeatedly.

Rep. John Conyers of Michigan, the committee's ranking Democrat, said the nation's founding fathers "might shake their heads" at the process as it has unfolded.

"This is not Watergate. It is an extramarital affair," Conyers said.

At the White House, press secretary Joe Lockhart said nothing Clinton had done was an impeachable offense and called for "a process that's fair, nonpartisan, focused and proceeds in a prompt manner."

Before a full hearing room, Hyde kept members' opening statements within the five-minute limit. Republicans stressed the seriousness of the president's conduct and the need to uncover the truth; Democrats decried the Republicans' decision to move ahead before even agreeing on the standards for impeachment.

Conyers launched a sharp attack against Starr, accusing him of seeking to embarrass the president and dismissing most of the allegations in Starr's report to Congress.

"There is no support for any suggestion that the president obstructed justice or tampered with witnesses or abused the power of his office," Conyers said.

But Rep. Bill McCollum, R-Fla.,

said it didn't matter whether the other offenses could be proved — perjury would be enough. "Even if it were only shown to us that the president lied under oath ... that is enough to impeach and for him to be thrown out of office," McCollum said.

Republicans, with their 21-16 committee majority, said they were primed to approve a Watergate-style resolution that includes neither a timetable nor subject limits — even though Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's evidence was solely related to Clinton's relationship with Ms. Lewinsky.

The hearing opens a path to an impeachment inquiry that will enter the history books, along with Watergate and the impeachment case against post-Civil War President Andrew Johnson.

"This is a matter that will define us," said Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C. "As a culture are we going to declare, as we go into the next century, that truth matters?"

Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., said some Republicans feared the charges were not enough to justify impeachment proceedings and therefore wanted to "adopt a resolution that says let's look around, let's see what we can find."

"What we have to do is resist an effort to keep going to try to move public opinion," Frank said.

The GOP resolution asks the committee to investigate "whether sufficient grounds exist for the House of Representatives to exercise its constitutional power to impeach William Jefferson Clinton, president of the United States of America."

Democrats countered with a proposal that is doomed to lose in committee but designed to win points among voters. It would first set the standards for impeachment, determine whether Starr's evidence met that criteria and — if the answer was affirmative — begin an inquiry that would end the day before Thanksgiving. It also would provide the option for a censure of Clinton.

Starr, acting under the independent counsel law, referred what he considered substantial and credible information on potentially impeachable offenses committed by Clinton.

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