

Cohen Finds No One, Everyone to Blame in Cole Disaster

In one of his last acts as Secretary of Defense, William S. Cohen on Jan. 19 said that a series of reports shows no single US officer or official is to blame for the Oct. 12 bombing of USS Cole.

At the same time, said Cohen, the suicide attack shows that every level of the US military chain of command could do a better job at preparing for counterterrorism in today's dangerous world.

"All of us in the leadership positions, including myself, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of the Navy, ... and others needed to engage more vigorously in examination of the range of potential threats," said Cohen in a briefing for reporters. "Clever, committed terrorists are predators who will always search and look for weaknesses."

Cohen's words echoed the findings of a Pentagon commission, which found that shortfalls in intelligence resources, training, and administration helped make Cole vulnerable.

While the Navy has focused on high-tech threats such as missiles, and done a good job at laying plans to protect ships tied up at a pier, US forces are less prepared to defend against a small craft that approaches them in mid-harbor, said the commission. Cole was attacked while moored at a refueling barge in Aden harbor.

"We must constantly search for and find the so-called 'seams' in our force protection plans before our enemies do," said Cohen.

A separate Navy investigation determined that the Cole's captain, Cmdr. Kirk S. Lippold, should not be punished in the attack's aftermath. Any security steps that Lippold did not take either would not have stopped the attack or were more than the Navy could have expected under the circumstances, concluded Adm. Vernon E. Clark, Chief of Naval Operations.