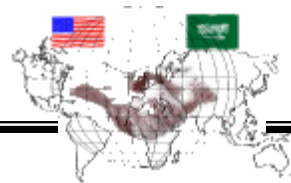


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

June 8, 2004

Prince of a Guy or Al-Qaida Spy? Amid allegations, horsemen, Saudi royals rise to defend late racing magnate Prince Ahmed

By John Eisenberg

Editor's Note:

This article was originally published by *The Baltimore Sun* on May 11, 2004 and is reprinted with permission.

Prince of a Guy or Al-Qaida Spy? Amid allegations, horsemen, Saudi royals rise to defend late racing magnate Prince Ahmed

By John Eisenberg

Two years ago, the Preakness Stakes spotlight shone brightly on Prince Ahmed bin Salman, an affable, highly Westernized member of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia.

A familiar face in thoroughbred racing circles, he was in Baltimore as the owner of War Emblem, winner of the Kentucky Derby. He stayed at the Harbor Court Hotel, attended the post position draw at the ESPN Zone and went to Pimlico Race Course to watch his horse gallop.

"He was as genuinely excited and enthusiastic as any Preakness owner I've ever seen," Pimlico president and chief executive officer Joe De Francis said.

Some six weeks earlier, a high-ranking al-Qaida operative captured in Pakistan reportedly had named him as a go-between linking the terrorist organization and the Saudi royal family.

"I would have been shocked then, and I'm totally shocked now to hear such an allegation," De Francis said recently.

After War Emblem won the Preakness, the prince smiled and joked through the trophy presentation and left town within hours on a private plane.

Three weeks later, War Emblem disappointed in a bid to win the Triple Crown, finishing eighth in the Belmont Stakes. The prince was strangely absent, on business in Saudi Arabia, his racing associates said.

A month after that, the prince was dead at age 43. News accounts said he succumbed to a heart attack in Saudi Arabia.

His alleged link with al-Qaida, outlined in two books published in the past two years, has stunned the racing industry.

"It's very surprising to hear, but it's just innuendo, nothing proven," said Geoffrey Russell, director of sales at Keeneland, the racetrack and sales organization in Lexington, Ky., where the prince spent many millions.

Investigative journalist Gerald Posner revealed the story of the alleged link in *Why America Slept*, a 2003 book. Another journalist, Craig Unger, depicted the link in *House of Bush, House of Saud*, a best seller published last month.

The prince's family and associates vehemently deny the allegation. Prince Faisal bin Salman, brother of the late prince, labeled it "totally ridiculous" in a telephone interview Friday with *The Sun*.

"To us, saying my brother was al-Qaida is like someone in your country saying Ronald Reagan was secretly a Communist," Faisal bin Salman said. "It's that ridiculous. That's what people here [in Saudi Arabia] think."

The prince's brother released a statement last week saying "not a single, solitary government official or media source has ever come forward with any evidence linking Prince Ahmed to any criminal activity. But that fact has not stopped [the authors] and media from accepting the outrageous claims at face value."

Richard Mulhall, who was a trainer and manager for the Thoroughbred Corp., the prince's California-based equine operation - now out of business - said the allegation "is beyond stupid. Someone is just trying to make a buck with a book, and I guess it's working."

Terrorist claims

According to Posner's book, it was Abu Zubaydah, al-Qaida's chief of field operations and a confidant of Osama bin Laden, who revealed a link between the prince and al-Qaida. Captured by American soldiers in Pakistan in March 2002, 6 1/2 months after the Sept. 11 attacks, Zubaydah was given sodium pentothal to make him talkative and questioned by Arab-Americans posing as Saudi interrogators.

From memory, Zubaydah provided the home phone and cell phone number of a Saudi royal family member and suggested his interrogators make the call.

"He will tell you what to do," Zubaydah said, according to Posner's account.

The phone numbers reportedly belonged to Prince Ahmed bin Salman.

Zubaydah went on to identify two other members of the royal family as intermediaries, again furnishing phone numbers from memory. Zubaydah also reportedly said the intermediaries knew before Sept. 11 that a terrorist attack on America was scheduled for that day, although they did not know where, when or how the attacks would occur.

Later, Posner reported, when Zubaydah discovered his interrogators had been Americans and not Saudis, he tried to strangle himself and recanted his entire story.

Unger, in his book, relied on Posner's account of the interrogation, terming it "accurate" after making his own inquiries.

As for whether Zubaydah was telling the truth, which some in the intelligence community have doubted, Unger told The Sun: "I don't think anyone has ever corroborated or refuted whether Zubaydah was lying."

In his book, Unger reports on a possible link between Saudis and the funding of al-Qaida, but there is no evidence Prince Ahmed bin Salman funded terrorism, Unger said.

"The talk is that he had an intermediary role" between the royal family and al-Qaida, Unger told The Sun. The goal of the link, Unger wrote in his book, was to keep terrorism out of Saudi Arabia.

Dad knew bin Laden

A connection between the royal family and al-Qaida is not unthinkable. According to Unger's book, the late prince's father, Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz, is "the powerful governor of Riyadh [Saudi Arabia] who had worked closely with Osama bin Laden ... during the Afghanistan war" with the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

But bin Laden's Saudi citizenship was revoked in the 1990s because of his terrorist activities, and "today the Saudi royal family is his mortal enemy," Prince Faisal bin Salman said, "so the idea that we would be connected with him is ludicrous."

Regardless of any connection, Bob Baffert, who trained War Emblem and other Thoroughbred Corp. horses, said he doubted the royal family would have relied on Prince Ahmed bin Salman for such a sensitive matter.

"He was like a kid, just a big, happy kid who lived for his horses," Baffert said. "The family wanted him to get into politics, because you have to be into politics to be something big in Saudi. But he told me, 'I hate politics.' That's why he never would have been involved in something like that."

A similar opinion was voiced by Terrence Collier, vice president of marketing for Fasig-Tipton, an equine sales company, who served as a consultant to the prince on bloodstock issues.

Not secretive man

"He was an enormous family man with a great sense of joie de vivre. He wore his heart so openly on his sleeve, it was impossible for him to keep secrets," Collier said. "He was so simplistic in his way of life. There was no subterfuge to him whatsoever. Those types of people don't seek to enter the world of intrigue, nor are they invited into the world of intrigue and espionage."

A smiling, bearish man, the prince was known in the racing industry for his humor and deep pockets. He attended college at the University of California at Irvine and later headed a business, the Research and Marketing Group, which publishes major Arab newspapers and magazines and has offices in England and Saudi Arabia.

Married with five children, "he owned a home in America, vacationed in America, loved America," his brother said.

"He was bullish on the game. A fun guy. Almost to the point of being childish about it," said trainer D. Wayne Lukas, who trained Sharp Cat and Spain. "He would get one-liners off, a prankster guy. But no one enjoyed winning more."

One time his presence caused a stir, Lukas said, was when Sharp Cat ran in the Breeders' Cup in Toronto in 1996.

"The FBI came to the barn and said there had been some threats made on his life," Lukas said. "They briefed us on their policy and told us where they would station guys, and they made us walk the route we were going [from the barn to the track]. All I told the prince was, 'I'll take a bullet in the leg but not in the chest.'"

Death debate

His death in 2002 was deemed a setback for a sport into which he poured millions of dollars as an owner and breeder.

"We need guys like that who play at that level. He is sorely missed," Lukas said.

His death is deemed suspicious in Posner's and Unger's books because the two other alleged intermediaries named by Zubaydah also died within four months of the interrogation.

Both were relatives of the prince. One died in a one-car crash on the way to the prince's funeral. The other was found in the desert, having apparently died of thirst.

Despite the mysterious timing of the deaths, Baffert was dismissive of the idea that the prince's demise was puzzling.

"I talked to him two days before he died," the trainer said. "He was in the hospital. He had let himself go and gained a bunch of weight. That's why he died. He died of a blood clot."

Four months before his death, he watched the Illinois Derby on television in April 2002 and saw War Emblem win by nine lengths. He then purchased the horse from a Chicago businessman and soon became the first Arab owner to win the Kentucky Derby.

It happened on a day when surviving firefighters from a New York ladder company were honored at Churchill Downs.

Zubaydah had revealed the prince's alleged link to al-Qaida just a month earlier, according to Posner's book.

"It was chilling, to say the least. Before the race, taps was played to honor the firemen. Then, into the winner's circle marches Prince Ahmed right in front of them," author Unger told The Sun.

Newsday columnist Jimmy Breslin wrote scathingly about the successive appearances of the firefighters and the prince in the winner's circle.

"I wondered if Prince Ahmed had done anything to let us know he was sorry and could he do anything to assist after what bin Laden and other homegrown degenerates did to [New York]," Breslin wrote. "But the guy did nothing. 'What are you bothering me for?' the Prince said in Louisville, 'I am in horse racing, not politics.'"

His visit to Baltimore two weeks later was uneventful. He had a driver and private security, which Pimlico coordinated with the FBI, according to the track's horsemen's relations office. The prince kept a low profile and appeared at race-related functions with the owners of the other horses.

On race day, the horsemen's relations office fondly assigned him table No. 13 in the owners' infield tent. His party had had the same number in 2001 when Point Given won.

"He was very friendly," said Nancy Alberts, the owner and trainer of Magic Weisner, the Maryland-bred colt who finished second to War Emblem in the race. "My sister spent a lot of time in the tent and said he couldn't have been nicer. She has pictures of her with him.

"When he won, he said to some people, 'Who was second?' When they told him it was the Maryland horse, he said, 'Noooo kidding.'"

Baffert recalled: "He was so excited. Then he flew out right after the race. That was the last time I saw him."

No-show at Belmont

Baffert said at the time he was "disappointed" when the prince did not come to the Belmont even though War Emblem was going for the Triple Crown. But he understood.

"He was a loose cannon. That's why they didn't let him come to the Belmont. His dad said,

'You're not going.'

The prince's father was pressuring him "to become more seriously involved in the day-to-day running of Saudi Arabia," Fasig-Tipton's Collier said. "But he chose not to do that. He loved sports, soccer, racing, American football - those were his big interests. I spent many days and nights with him, and there was never a conversation about politics or terrorism. It just never entered our domain. He was interested in two things, his publishing company and his horses."

The Saudi royal family has hired a public relations firm to help it rebut the charges made in the books.

" "Don't you think if the FBI or CIA had concerns, they would have talked to me?" Baffert said. "But they didn't talk to me, didn't talk to Mulhall. See what I mean?"

Like everyone else, people in racing can only judge the evidence and make their own conclusions about the smiling man who was so prominent in their industry.

"He was good for our game and never gave me any indication that he was anything other than a positive guy," Lukas said. "I wouldn't have any idea what went on beyond our world in racing."

ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues -
- impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service.

Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

CONTACT INFORMATION

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at:
info@Saudi-American-Forum.org

Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the Saudi-American Forum.