

Bin Laden aide talks to U.S. interrogators

WASHINGTON (AP) — Osama bin Laden's top field commander is talking.

Trouble is, his American interrogators don't know whether to believe him.

Abu Zubaydah already has given information that led to last week's alert to financial institutions in the northeastern United States, U.S. officials say. He has also claimed that al-Qaida knows how to build a "dirty bomb" designed to spread radioactivity over a wide area.

Neither piece of information surprised American authorities. U.S. intelligence already had obtained similar nonspecific threats to banks, and bin Laden's quest for weapons of mass destruction is well-known.

But because the information came from Abu Zubaydah, the interrogators took note. Officials describe the Saudi-born Palestinian as the connection between bin Laden and many of al-Qaida's operational cells.

"He's talking, but the issue is sorting out what's true and what's not, what is reality

events in the outside world.

Officials say the terrorist leader, who speaks English, has plenty of reasons to lie. They are well aware he could be manipulating them to cause panic.

Bush administration spokesman Ari Fleischer, asked if Abu Zubaydah's claims are to be believed, said Tuesday, "Those are judgments that intelligence experts make based on not only what he says, but on other pieces of information that will corroborate information."

The CIA, FBI and military can put his claims to other al-Qaida prisoners, check them against existing intelligence or subtly feed them back to Abu Zubaydah at some later time to see how he responds.

But officials acknowledge he's smart and experienced enough to know many of the mind games that comprise a modern interrogation.

Pakistani officials have said that Abu Zubaydah has denied involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Defense and intelligence officials said al-Qaida terrorist training manuals uncovered in Afghanistan advise operatives to say nothing to interrogators — or else to spread disinformation.

U.S. techniques to elicit information from prisoners include gaining the subject's trust, flattering him, disorienting him with a battery of questions and playing on his fears and desires, experts said. CIA officials declined to discuss interrogative techniques but said the agency does not condone torture.

In 1988, CIA operative Dick Stolz told the Senate that the agency counted the following techniques as coercive but falling short of the definition of torture: forcing the subject to stand at attention or sit on an uncomfortable stool for long periods of time, depriving him of sleep and sound, enforcing isolation and causing climate changes.

"He's talking, but the issue is sorting out what's true and what's not"

— anonymous U.S. official

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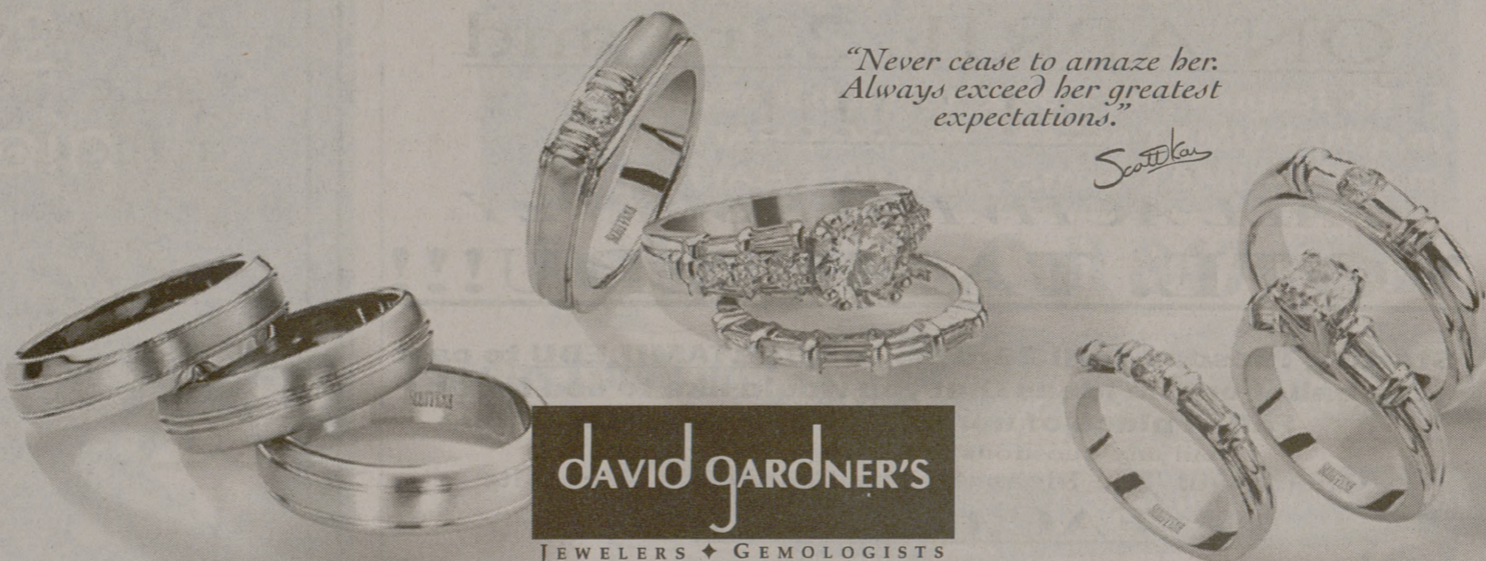
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