

RESPONSES TO AL QAEDA'S INITIAL ASSAULTS

4.1 BEFORE THE BOMBINGS IN KENYA AND TANZANIA

Although the 1995 National Intelligence Estimate had warned of a new type of terrorism, many officials continued to think of terrorists as agents of states (Saudi Hezbollah acting for Iran against Khobar Towers) or as domestic criminals (Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City). As we pointed out in chapter 3, the White House is not a natural locus for program management. Hence, government efforts to cope with terrorism were essentially the work of individual agencies.

President Bill Clinton's counterterrorism Presidential Decision Directives in 1995 (no. 39) and May 1998 (no. 62) reiterated that terrorism was a national security problem, not just a law enforcement issue. They reinforced the authority of the National Security Council (NSC) to coordinate domestic as well as foreign counterterrorism efforts, through Richard Clarke and his interagency Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG). Spotlighting new concerns about unconventional attacks, these directives assigned tasks to lead agencies but did not differentiate types of terrorist threats. Thus, while Clarke might prod or push agencies to act, what actually happened was usually decided at the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA, or the Justice Department. The efforts of these agencies were sometimes energetic and sometimes effective. Terrorist plots were disrupted and individual terrorists were captured. But the United States did not, before 9/11, adopt as a clear strategic objective the elimination of al Qaeda.

Early Efforts against Bin Ladin

Until 1996, hardly anyone in the U.S. government understood that Usama Bin Ladin was an inspirer and organizer of the new terrorism. In 1993, the CIA noted that he had paid for the training of some Egyptian terrorists in Sudan. The State Department detected his money in aid to the Yemeni terrorists who

set a bomb in an attempt to kill U.S. troops in Aden in 1992. State Department sources even saw suspicious links with Omar Abdel Rahman, the “Blind Sheikh” in the New York area, commenting that Bin Ladin seemed “committed to financing ‘Jihads’ against ‘anti Islamic’ regimes worldwide.” After the department designated Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993, it put Bin Ladin on its TIPOFF watchlist, a move that might have prevented his getting a visa had he tried to enter the United States. As late as 1997, however, even the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center continued to describe him as an “extremist financier.”¹

In 1996, the CIA set up a special unit of a dozen officers to analyze intelligence on and plan operations against Bin Ladin. David Cohen, the head of the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, wanted to test the idea of having a “virtual station”—a station based at headquarters but collecting and operating against a subject much as stations in the field focus on a country. Taking his cue from National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who expressed special interest in terrorist finance, Cohen formed his virtual station as a terrorist financial links unit. He had trouble getting any Directorate of Operations officer to run it; he finally recruited a former analyst who was then running the Islamic Extremist Branch of the Counterterrorist Center. This officer, who was especially knowledgeable about Afghanistan, had noticed a recent stream of reports about Bin Ladin and something called al Qaeda, and suggested to Cohen that the station focus on this one individual. Cohen agreed. Thus was born the Bin Ladin unit.²

In May 1996, Bin Ladin left Sudan for Afghanistan. A few months later, as the Bin Ladin unit was gearing up, Jamal Ahmed al Fadl walked into a U.S. embassy in Africa, established his bona fides as a former senior employee of Bin Ladin, and provided a major breakthrough of intelligence on the creation, character, direction, and intentions of al Qaeda. Corroborating evidence came from another walk-in source at a different U.S. embassy. More confirmation was supplied later that year by intelligence and other sources, including material gathered by FBI agents and Kenyan police from an al Qaeda cell in Nairobi.³

By 1997, officers in the Bin Ladin unit recognized that Bin Ladin was more than just a financier. They learned that al Qaeda had a military committee that was planning operations against U.S. interests worldwide and was actively trying to obtain nuclear material. Analysts assigned to the station looked at the information it had gathered and “found connections everywhere,” including links to the attacks on U.S. troops in Aden and Somalia in 1992 and 1993 and to the Manila air plot in the Philippines in 1994–1995.⁴

The Bin Ladin station was already working on plans for offensive operations against Bin Ladin. These plans were directed at both physical assets and sources of finance. In the end, plans to identify and attack Bin Ladin’s money sources did not go forward.⁵

In late 1995, when Bin Ladin was still in Sudan, the State Department and the CIA learned that Sudanese officials were discussing with the Saudi gov-

ernment the possibility of expelling Bin Ladin. U.S. Ambassador Timothy Carney encouraged the Sudanese to pursue this course. The Saudis, however, did not want Bin Ladin, giving as their reason their revocation of his citizenship.⁶

Sudan's minister of defense, Fatih Erwa, has claimed that Sudan offered to hand Bin Ladin over to the United States. The Commission has found no credible evidence that this was so. Ambassador Carney had instructions only to push the Sudanese to expel Bin Ladin. Ambassador Carney had no legal basis to ask for more from the Sudanese since, at the time, there was no indictment outstanding.⁷

The chief of the Bin Ladin station, whom we will call "Mike," saw Bin Ladin's move to Afghanistan as a stroke of luck. Though the CIA had virtually abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, case officers had reestablished old contacts while tracking down Mir Amal Kansi, the Pakistani gunman who had murdered two CIA employees in January 1993. These contacts contributed to intelligence about Bin Ladin's local movements, business activities, and security and living arrangements, and helped provide evidence that he was spending large amounts of money to help the Taliban. The chief of the Counterterrorist Center, whom we will call "Jeff," told Director George Tenet that the CIA's intelligence assets were "near to providing real-time information about Bin Ladin's activities and travels in Afghanistan." One of the contacts was a group associated with particular tribes among Afghanistan's ethnic Pashtun community.⁸

By the fall of 1997, the Bin Ladin unit had roughed out a plan for these Afghan tribals to capture Bin Ladin and hand him over for trial either in the United States or in an Arab country. In early 1998, the cabinet-level Principals Committee apparently gave the concept its blessing.⁹

On their own separate track, getting information but not direction from the CIA, the FBI's New York Field Office and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York were preparing to ask a grand jury to indict Bin Ladin. The Counterterrorist Center knew that this was happening.¹⁰ The eventual charge, conspiring to attack U.S. defense installations, was finally issued from the grand jury in June 1998—as a sealed indictment. The indictment was publicly disclosed in November of that year.

When Bin Ladin moved to Afghanistan in May 1996, he became a subject of interest to the State Department's South Asia bureau. At the time, as one diplomat told us, South Asia was seen in the department and the government generally as a low priority. In 1997, as Madeleine Albright was beginning her tenure as secretary of state, an NSC policy review concluded that the United States should pay more attention not just to India but also to Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹¹ With regard to Afghanistan, another diplomat said, the United States at the time had "no policy."¹²

In the State Department, concerns about India-Pakistan tensions often crowded out attention to Afghanistan or Bin Ladin. Aware of instability and

growing Islamic extremism in Pakistan, State Department officials worried most about an arms race and possible war between Pakistan and India. After May 1998, when both countries surprised the United States by testing nuclear weapons, these dangers became daily first-order concerns of the State Department.¹³

In Afghanistan, the State Department tried to end the civil war that had continued since the Soviets' withdrawal. The South Asia bureau believed it might have a carrot for Afghanistan's warring factions in a project by the Union Oil Company of California (UNOCAL) to build a pipeline across the country. While there was probably never much chance of the pipeline actually being built, the Afghan desk hoped that the prospect of shared pipeline profits might lure faction leaders to a conference table. U.S. diplomats did not favor the Taliban over the rival factions. Despite growing concerns, U.S. diplomats were willing at the time, as one official said, to "give the Taliban a chance."¹⁴

Though Secretary Albright made no secret of thinking the Taliban "despicable," the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, led a delegation to South Asia—including Afghanistan—in April 1998. No U.S. official of such rank had been to Kabul in decades. Ambassador Richardson went primarily to urge negotiations to end the civil war. In view of Bin Ladin's recent public call for all Muslims to kill Americans, Richardson asked the Taliban to expel Bin Ladin. They answered that they did not know his whereabouts. In any case, the Taliban said, Bin Ladin was not a threat to the United States.¹⁵

In sum, in late 1997 and the spring of 1998, the lead U.S. agencies each pursued their own efforts against Bin Ladin. The CIA's Counterterrorist Center was developing a plan to capture and remove him from Afghanistan. Parts of the Justice Department were moving toward indicting Bin Ladin, making possible a criminal trial in a New York court. Meanwhile, the State Department was focused more on lessening Indo-Pakistani nuclear tensions, ending the Afghan civil war, and ameliorating the Taliban's human rights abuses than on driving out Bin Ladin. Another key actor, Marine General Anthony Zinni, the commander in chief of the U.S. Central Command, shared the State Department's view.¹⁶

The CIA Develops a Capture Plan

Initially, the DCI's Counterterrorist Center and its Bin Ladin unit considered a plan to ambush Bin Ladin when he traveled between Kandahar, the Taliban capital where he sometimes stayed the night, and his primary residence at the time, Tarnak Farms. After the Afghan tribals reported that they had tried such an ambush and failed, the Center gave up on it, despite suspicions that the tribals' story might be fiction. Thereafter, the capture plan focused on a nighttime raid on Tarnak Farms.¹⁷

A compound of about 80 concrete or mud-brick buildings surrounded by a 10-foot wall, Tarnak Farms was located in an isolated desert area on the outskirts of the Kandahar airport. CIA officers were able to map the entire site, identifying the houses that belonged to Bin Ladin's wives and the one where

Bin Ladin himself was most likely to sleep. Working with the tribals, they drew up plans for the raid. They ran two complete rehearsals in the United States during the fall of 1997.¹⁸

By early 1998, planners at the Counterterrorist Center were ready to come back to the White House to seek formal approval. Tenet apparently walked National Security Advisor Sandy Berger through the basic plan on February 13. One group of tribals would subdue the guards, enter Tarnak Farms stealthily, grab Bin Ladin, take him to a desert site outside Kandahar, and turn him over to a second group. This second group of tribals would take him to a desert landing zone already tested in the 1997 Kansi capture. From there, a CIA plane would take him to New York, an Arab capital, or wherever he was to be arraigned. Briefing papers prepared by the Counterterrorist Center acknowledged that hitches might develop. People might be killed, and Bin Ladin's supporters might retaliate, perhaps taking U.S. citizens in Kandahar hostage. But the briefing papers also noted that there was risk in not acting. "Sooner or later," they said, "Bin Ladin will attack U.S. interests, perhaps using WMD [weapons of mass destruction]."¹⁹

Clarke's Counterterrorism Security Group reviewed the capture plan for Berger. Noting that the plan was in a "very early stage of development," the NSC staff then told the CIA planners to go ahead and, among other things, start drafting any legal documents that might be required to authorize the covert action. The CSG apparently stressed that the raid should target Bin Ladin himself, not the whole compound.²⁰

The CIA planners conducted their third complete rehearsal in March, and they again briefed the CSG. Clarke wrote Berger on March 7 that he saw the operation as "somewhat embryonic" and the CIA as "months away from doing anything."²¹

"Mike" thought the capture plan was "the perfect operation." It required minimum infrastructure. The plan had now been modified so that the tribals would keep Bin Ladin in a hiding place for up to a month before turning him over to the United States—thereby increasing the chances of keeping the U.S. hand out of sight. "Mike" trusted the information from the Afghan network; it had been corroborated by other means, he told us. The lead CIA officer in the field, Gary Schroen, also had confidence in the tribals. In a May 6 cable to CIA headquarters, he pronounced their planning "almost as professional and detailed . . . as would be done by any U.S. military special operations element." He and the other officers who had worked through the plan with the tribals judged it "about as good as it can be." (By that, Schroen explained, he meant that the chance of capturing or killing Bin Ladin was about 40 percent.) Although the tribals thought they could pull off the raid, if the operation were approved by headquarters and the policymakers, Schroen wrote there was going to be a point when "we step back and keep our fingers crossed that the [tribals] prove as good (and as lucky) as they think they will be."²²

Military officers reviewed the capture plan and, according to “Mike,” “found no showstoppers.” The commander of Delta Force felt “uncomfortable” with having the tribals hold Bin Ladin captive for so long, and the commander of Joint Special Operations Forces, Lieutenant General Michael Canavan, was worried about the safety of the tribals inside Tarnak Farms. General Canavan said he had actually thought the operation too complicated for the CIA—“out of their league”—and an effort to get results “on the cheap.” But a senior Joint Staff officer described the plan as “generally, not too much different than we might have come up with ourselves.” No one in the Pentagon, so far as we know, advised the CIA or the White House not to proceed.²³

In Washington, Berger expressed doubt about the dependability of the tribals. In his meeting with Tenet, Berger focused most, however, on the question of what was to be done with Bin Ladin if he were actually captured. He worried that the hard evidence against Bin Ladin was still skimpy and that there was a danger of snatching him and bringing him to the United States only to see him acquitted.²⁴

On May 18, CIA’s managers reviewed a draft Memorandum of Notification (MON), a legal document authorizing the capture operation. A 1986 presidential finding had authorized worldwide covert action against terrorism and probably provided adequate authority. But mindful of the old “rogue elephant” charge, senior CIA managers may have wanted something on paper to show that they were not acting on their own.

Discussion of this memorandum brought to the surface an unease about paramilitary covert action that had become ingrained, at least among some CIA senior managers. James Pavitt, the assistant head of the Directorate of Operations, expressed concern that people might get killed; it appears he thought the operation had at least a slight flavor of a plan for an assassination. Moreover, he calculated that it would cost several million dollars. He was not prepared to take that money “out of hide,” and he did not want to go to all the necessary congressional committees to get special money. Despite Pavitt’s misgivings, the CIA leadership cleared the draft memorandum and sent it on to the National Security Council.²⁵

Counterterrorist Center officers briefed Attorney General Janet Reno and FBI Director Louis Freeh, telling them that the operation had about a 30 percent chance of success. The Center’s chief, “Jeff,” joined John O’Neill, the head of the FBI’s New York Field Office, in briefing Mary Jo White, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and her staff. Though “Jeff” also used the 30 percent success figure, he warned that someone would surely be killed in the operation. White’s impression from the New York briefing was that the chances of capturing Bin Ladin alive were nil.²⁶

From May 20 to 24, the CIA ran a final, graded rehearsal of the operation, spread over three time zones, even bringing in personnel from the region. The FBI also participated. The rehearsal went well. The Counterterrorist Center

planned to brief cabinet-level principals and their deputies the following week, giving June 23 as the date for the raid, with Bin Ladin to be brought out of Afghanistan no later than July 23.²⁷

On May 20, Director Tenet discussed the high risk of the operation with Berger and his deputies, warning that people might be killed, including Bin Ladin. Success was to be defined as the exfiltration of Bin Ladin out of Afghanistan.²⁸ A meeting of principals was scheduled for May 29 to decide whether the operation should go ahead.

The principals did not meet. On May 29, “Jeff” informed “Mike” that he had just met with Tenet, Pavitt, and the chief of the Directorate’s Near Eastern Division. The decision was made not to go ahead with the operation. “Mike” cabled the field that he had been directed to “stand down on the operation for the time being.” He had been told, he wrote, that cabinet-level officials thought the risk of civilian casualties—“collateral damage”—was too high. They were concerned about the tribals’ safety, and had worried that “the purpose and nature of the operation would be subject to unavoidable misinterpretation and misrepresentation—and probably recriminations—in the event that Bin Ladin, despite our best intentions and efforts, did not survive.”²⁹

Impressions vary as to who actually decided not to proceed with the operation. Clarke told us that the CSG saw the plan as flawed. He was said to have described it to a colleague on the NSC staff as “half-assed” and predicted that the principals would not approve it. “Jeff” thought the decision had been made at the cabinet level. Pavitt thought that it was Berger’s doing, though perhaps on Tenet’s advice. Tenet told us that given the recommendation of his chief operations officers, he alone had decided to “turn off” the operation. He had simply informed Berger, who had not pushed back. Berger’s recollection was similar. He said the plan was never presented to the White House for a decision.³⁰

The CIA’s senior management clearly did not think the plan would work. Tenet’s deputy director of operations wrote to Berger a few weeks later that the CIA assessed the tribals’ ability to capture Bin Ladin and deliver him to U.S. officials as low. But working-level CIA officers were disappointed. Before it was canceled, Schroen described it as the “best plan we are going to come up with to capture [Bin Ladin] while he is in Afghanistan and bring him to justice.”³¹ No capture plan before 9/11 ever again attained the same level of detail and preparation. The tribals’ reported readiness to act diminished. And Bin Ladin’s security precautions and defenses became more elaborate and formidable.

At this time, 9/11 was more than three years away. It was the duty of Tenet and the CIA leadership to balance the risks of inaction against jeopardizing the lives of their operatives and agents. And they had reason to worry about failure: millions of dollars down the drain; a shoot-out that could be seen as an assassination; and, if there were repercussions in Pakistan, perhaps a coup. The decisions of the U.S. government in May 1998 were made, as Berger has put

it, from the vantage point of the driver looking through a muddy windshield moving forward, not through a clean rearview mirror.³²

Looking for Other Options

The Counterterrorist Center continued to track Bin Ladin and to contemplate covert action. The most hopeful possibility seemed now to lie in diplomacy—but not diplomacy managed by the Department of State, which focused primarily on India-Pakistan nuclear tensions during the summer of 1998. The CIA learned in the spring of 1998 that the Saudi government had quietly disrupted Bin Ladin cells in its country that were planning to attack U.S. forces with shoulder-fired missiles. They had arrested scores of individuals, with no publicity. When thanking the Saudis, Director Tenet took advantage of the opening to ask them to help against Bin Ladin. The response was encouraging enough that President Clinton made Tenet his informal personal representative to work with the Saudis on terrorism, and Tenet visited Riyadh in May and again in early June.³³

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, who had taken charge from the ailing King Fahd, promised Tenet an all-out secret effort to persuade the Taliban to expel Bin Ladin so that he could be sent to the United States or to another country for trial. The Kingdom's emissary would be its intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal. Vice President Al Gore later added his thanks to those of Tenet, both making clear that they spoke with President Clinton's blessing. Tenet reported that it was imperative to get an indictment against Bin Ladin. The New York grand jury issued its sealed indictment a few days later, on June 10. Tenet also recommended that no action be taken on other U.S. options, such as the covert action plan.³⁴

Prince Turki followed up in meetings during the summer with Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders. Apparently employing a mixture of possible incentives and threats, Turki received a commitment that Bin Ladin would be expelled, but Mullah Omar did not make good on this promise.³⁵

On August 5, Clarke chaired a CSG meeting on Bin Ladin. In the discussion of what might be done, the note taker wrote, "there was a dearth of bright ideas around the table, despite a consensus that the [government] ought to pursue every avenue it can to address the problem."³⁶

4.2 CRISIS: AUGUST 1998

On August 7, 1998, National Security Advisor Berger woke President Clinton with a phone call at 5:35 A.M. to tell him of the almost simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Suspicion quickly focused on Bin Ladin. Unusually good intelligence, chiefly from

the yearlong monitoring of al Qaeda's cell in Nairobi, soon firmly fixed responsibility on him and his associates.³⁷

Debate about what to do settled very soon on one option: Tomahawk cruise missiles. Months earlier, after cancellation of the covert capture operation, Clarke had prodded the Pentagon to explore possibilities for military action. On June 2, General Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had directed General Zinni at Central Command to develop a plan, which he had submitted during the first week of July. Zinni's planners surely considered the two previous times the United States had used force to respond to terrorism, the 1986 strike on Libya and the 1993 strike against Iraq. They proposed firing Tomahawks against eight terrorist camps in Afghanistan, including Bin Ladin's compound at Tarnak Farms.³⁸ After the embassy attacks, the Pentagon offered this plan to the White House.

The day after the embassy bombings, Tenet brought to a principals meeting intelligence that terrorist leaders were expected to gather at a camp near Khowst, Afghanistan, to plan future attacks. According to Berger, Tenet said that several hundred would attend, including Bin Ladin. The CIA described the area as effectively a military cantonment, away from civilian population centers and overwhelmingly populated by jihadists. Clarke remembered sitting next to Tenet in a White House meeting, asking Tenet "You thinking what I'm thinking?" and his nodding "yes."³⁹ The principals quickly reached a consensus on attacking the gathering. The strike's purpose was to kill Bin Ladin and his chief lieutenants.⁴⁰

Berger put in place a tightly compartmented process designed to keep all planning secret. On August 11, General Zinni received orders to prepare detailed plans for strikes against the sites in Afghanistan. The Pentagon briefed President Clinton about these plans on August 12 and 14. Though the principals hoped that the missiles would hit Bin Ladin, NSC staff recommended the strike whether or not there was firm evidence that the commanders were at the facilities.⁴¹

Considerable debate went to the question of whether to strike targets outside of Afghanistan, including two facilities in Sudan. One was a tannery believed to belong to Bin Ladin. The other was al Shifa, a Khartoum pharmaceutical plant, which intelligence reports said was manufacturing a precursor ingredient for nerve gas with Bin Ladin's financial support. The argument for hitting the tannery was that it could hurt Bin Ladin financially. The argument for hitting al Shifa was that it would lessen the chance of Bin Ladin's having nerve gas for a later attack.⁴²

Ever since March 1995, American officials had had in the backs of their minds Aum Shinrikyo's release of sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway. President Clinton himself had expressed great concern about chemical and biological terrorism in the United States. Bin Ladin had reportedly been heard to speak of wanting a "Hiroshima" and at least 10,000 casualties. The CIA reported

that a soil sample from the vicinity of the al Shifa plant had tested positive for EMPTA, a precursor chemical for VX, a nerve gas whose lone use was for mass killing. Two days before the embassy bombings, Clarke's staff wrote that Bin Ladin "has invested in and almost certainly has access to VX produced at a plant in Sudan."⁴³ Senior State Department officials believed that they had received a similar verdict independently, though they and Clarke's staff were probably relying on the same report. Mary McCarthy, the NSC senior director responsible for intelligence programs, initially cautioned Berger that the "bottom line" was that "we will need much better intelligence on this facility before we seriously consider any options." She added that the link between Bin Ladin and al Shifa was "rather uncertain at this point." Berger has told us that he thought about what might happen if the decision went against hitting al Shifa, and nerve gas was used in a New York subway two weeks later.⁴⁴

By the early hours of the morning of August 20, President Clinton and all his principal advisers had agreed to strike Bin Ladin camps in Afghanistan near Khowst, as well as hitting al Shifa. The President took the Sudanese tannery off the target list because he saw little point in killing uninvolved people without doing significant harm to Bin Ladin. The principal with the most qualms regarding al Shifa was Attorney General Reno. She expressed concern about attacking two Muslim countries at the same time. Looking back, she said that she felt the "premise kept shifting."⁴⁵

Later on August 20, Navy vessels in the Arabian Sea fired their cruise missiles. Though most of them hit their intended targets, neither Bin Ladin nor any other terrorist leader was killed. Berger told us that an after-action review by Director Tenet concluded that the strikes had killed 20–30 people in the camps but probably missed Bin Ladin by a few hours. Since the missiles headed for Afghanistan had had to cross Pakistan, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was sent to meet with Pakistan's army chief of staff to assure him the missiles were not coming from India. Officials in Washington speculated that one or another Pakistani official might have sent a warning to the Taliban or Bin Ladin.⁴⁶

The air strikes marked the climax of an intense 48-hour period in which Berger notified congressional leaders, the principals called their foreign counterparts, and President Clinton flew back from his vacation on Martha's Vineyard to address the nation from the Oval Office. The President spoke to the congressional leadership from Air Force One, and he called British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from the White House.⁴⁷ House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott initially supported the President. The next month, Gingrich's office dismissed the cruise missile attacks as "pinpricks."⁴⁸

At the time, President Clinton was embroiled in the Lewinsky scandal, which continued to consume public attention for the rest of that year and the first months of 1999. As it happened, a popular 1997 movie, *Wag the Dog*, features a

president who fakes a war to distract public attention from a domestic scandal. Some Republicans in Congress raised questions about the timing of the strikes. Berger was particularly rankled by an editorial in the *Economist* that said that only the future would tell whether the U.S. missile strikes had “created 10,000 new fanatics where there would have been none.”⁴⁹

Much public commentary turned immediately to scalding criticism that the action was too aggressive. The Sudanese denied that al Shifa produced nerve gas, and they allowed journalists to visit what was left of a seemingly harmless facility. President Clinton, Vice President Gore, Berger, Tenet, and Clarke insisted to us that their judgment was right, pointing to the soil sample evidence. No independent evidence has emerged to corroborate the CIA’s assessment.⁵⁰

Everyone involved in the decision had, of course, been aware of President Clinton’s problems. He told them to ignore them. Berger recalled the President saying to him “that they were going to get crap either way, so they should do the right thing.”⁵¹ All his aides testified to us that they based their advice solely on national security considerations. We have found no reason to question their statements.

The failure of the strikes, the “wag the dog” slur, the intense partisanship of the period, and the nature of the al Shifa evidence likely had a cumulative effect on future decisions about the use of force against Bin Ladin. Berger told us that he did not feel any sense of constraint.⁵²

The period after the August 1998 embassy bombings was critical in shaping U.S. policy toward Bin Ladin. Although more Americans had been killed in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack, and many more in Beirut in 1983, the overall loss of life rivaled the worst attacks in memory. More ominous, perhaps, was the demonstration of an operational capability to coordinate two nearly simultaneous attacks on U.S. embassies in different countries.

Despite the availability of information that al Qaeda was a global network, in 1998 policymakers knew little about the organization. The reams of new information that the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit had been developing since 1996 had not been pulled together and synthesized for the rest of the government. Indeed, analysts in the unit felt that they were viewed as alarmists even within the CIA. A National Intelligence Estimate on terrorism in 1997 had only briefly mentioned Bin Ladin, and no subsequent national estimate would authoritatively evaluate the terrorism danger until after 9/11. Policymakers knew there was a dangerous individual, Usama Bin Ladin, whom they had been trying to capture and bring to trial. Documents at the time referred to Bin Ladin “and his associates” or Bin Ladin and his “network.” They did not emphasize the existence of a structured worldwide organization gearing up to train thousands of potential terrorists.⁵³

In the critical days and weeks after the August 1998 attacks, senior policymakers in the Clinton administration had to reevaluate the threat posed by Bin

Ladin. Was this just a new and especially venomous version of the ordinary terrorist threat America had lived with for decades, or was it radically new, posing a danger beyond any yet experienced?

Even after the embassy attacks, Bin Ladin had been responsible for the deaths of fewer than 50 Americans, most of them overseas. An NSC staffer working for Richard Clarke told us the threat was seen as one that could cause hundreds of casualties, not thousands.⁵⁴ Even officials who acknowledge a vital threat intellectually may not be ready to act on such beliefs at great cost or at high risk.

Therefore, the government experts who believed that Bin Ladin and his network posed such a novel danger needed a way to win broad support for their views, or at least spotlight the areas of dispute. The Presidential Daily Brief and the similar, more widely circulated daily reports for high officials—consisting mainly of brief reports of intelligence “news” without much analysis or context—did not provide such a vehicle. The national intelligence estimate has often played this role, and is sometimes controversial for this very reason. It played no role in judging the threat posed by al Qaeda, either in 1998 or later.

In the late summer and fall of 1998, the U.S. government also was worrying about the deployment of military power in two other ongoing conflicts. After years of war in the Balkans, the United States had finally committed itself to significant military intervention in 1995–1996. Already maintaining a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia, U.S. officials were beginning to consider major combat operations against Serbia to protect Muslim civilians in Kosovo from ethnic cleansing. Air strikes were threatened in October 1998; a full-scale NATO bombing campaign against Serbia was launched in March 1999.⁵⁵

In addition, the Clinton administration was facing the possibility of major combat operations against Iraq. Since 1996, the UN inspections regime had been increasingly obstructed by Saddam Hussein. The United States was threatening to attack unless unfettered inspections could resume. The Clinton administration eventually launched a large-scale set of air strikes against Iraq, Operation Desert Fox, in December 1998. These military commitments became the context in which the Clinton administration had to consider opening another front of military engagement against a new terrorist threat based in Afghanistan.

A Follow-On Campaign?

Clarke hoped the August 1998 missile strikes would mark the beginning of a sustained campaign against Bin Ladin. Clarke was, as he later admitted, “obsessed” with Bin Ladin, and the embassy bombings gave him new scope for pursuing his obsession. Terrorism had moved high up among the President’s concerns, and Clarke’s position had elevated accordingly. The CSG, unlike most standing interagency committees, did not have to report through the Deputies Committee. Although such a reporting relationship had been prescribed in

the May 1998 presidential directive (after expressions of concern by Attorney General Reno, among others), that directive contained an exception that permitted the CSG to report directly to the principals if Berger so elected. In practice, the CSG often reported not even to the full Principals Committee but instead to the so-called Small Group formed by Berger, consisting only of those principals cleared to know about the most sensitive issues connected with counterterrorism activities concerning Bin Ladin or the Khobar Towers investigation.⁵⁶

For this inner cabinet, Clarke drew up what he called “Political-Military Plan Delenda.” The Latin *delenda*, meaning that something “must be destroyed,” evoked the famous Roman vow to destroy its rival, Carthage. The overall goal of Clarke’s paper was to “immediately eliminate any significant threat to Americans” from the “Bin Ladin network.”⁵⁷ The paper called for diplomacy to deny Bin Ladin sanctuary; covert action to disrupt terrorist activities, but above all to capture Bin Ladin and his deputies and bring them to trial; efforts to dry up Bin Ladin’s money supply; and preparation for follow-on military action. The status of the document was and remained uncertain. It was never formally adopted by the principals, and participants in the Small Group now have little or no recollection of it. It did, however, guide Clarke’s efforts.

The military component of Clarke’s plan was its most fully articulated element. He envisioned an ongoing campaign of strikes against Bin Ladin’s bases in Afghanistan or elsewhere, whenever target information was ripe. Acknowledging that individual targets might not have much value, he cautioned Berger not to expect ever again to have an assembly of terrorist leaders in his sights. But he argued that rolling attacks might persuade the Taliban to hand over Bin Ladin and, in any case, would show that the action in August was not a “one-off” event. It would show that the United States was committed to a relentless effort to take down Bin Ladin’s network.⁵⁸

Members of the Small Group found themselves unpersuaded of the merits of rolling attacks. Defense Secretary William Cohen told us Bin Ladin’s training camps were primitive, built with “rope ladders”; General Shelton called them “jungle gym” camps. Neither thought them worthwhile targets for very expensive missiles. President Clinton and Berger also worried about the *Economist’s* point—that attacks that missed Bin Ladin could enhance his stature and win him new recruits. After the United States launched air attacks against Iraq at the end of 1998 and against Serbia in 1999, in each case provoking worldwide criticism, Deputy National Security Advisor James Steinberg added the argument that attacks in Afghanistan offered “little benefit, lots of blowback against [a] bomb-happy U.S.”⁵⁹

During the last week of August 1998, officials began considering possible follow-on strikes. According to Clarke, President Clinton was inclined to launch further strikes sooner rather than later. On August 27, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe advised Secretary Cohen that the avail-

able targets were not promising. The experience of the previous week, he wrote, "has only confirmed the importance of defining a clearly articulated rationale for military action" that was effective as well as justified. But Slocombe worried that simply striking some of these available targets did not add up to an effective strategy.⁶⁰

Defense officials at a lower level, in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, tried to meet Slocombe's objections. They developed a plan that, unlike Clarke's, called not for particular strikes but instead for a broad change in national strategy and in the institutional approach of the Department of Defense, implying a possible need for large-scale operations across the whole spectrum of U.S. military capabilities. It urged the department to become a lead agency in driving a national counterterrorism strategy forward, to "champion a national effort to take up the gauntlet that international terrorists have thrown at our feet." The authors expressed concern that "we have not fundamentally altered our philosophy or our approach" even though the terrorist threat had grown. They outlined an eight-part strategy "to be more proactive and aggressive." The future, they warned, might bring "horrific attacks," in which case "we will have no choice nor, unfortunately, will we have a plan." The assistant secretary, Allen Holmes, took the paper to Slocombe's chief deputy, Jan Lodal, but it went no further. Its lead author recalls being told by Holmes that Lodal thought it was too aggressive. Holmes cannot recall what was said, and Lodal cannot remember the episode or the paper at all.⁶¹

4.3 DIPLOMACY

After the August missile strikes, diplomatic options to press the Taliban seemed no more promising than military options. The United States had issued a formal warning to the Taliban, and also to Sudan, that they would be held directly responsible for any attacks on Americans, wherever they occurred, carried out by the Bin Ladin network as long as they continued to provide sanctuary to it.⁶²

For a brief moment, it had seemed as if the August strikes might have shocked the Taliban into thinking of giving up Bin Ladin. On August 22, the reclusive Mullah Omar told a working-level State Department official that the strikes were counterproductive but added that he would be open to a dialogue with the United States on Bin Ladin's presence in Afghanistan.⁶³ Meeting in Islamabad with William Milam, the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Taliban delegates said it was against their culture to expel someone seeking sanctuary but asked what would happen to Bin Ladin should he be sent to Saudi Arabia.⁶⁴

Yet in September 1998, when the Saudi emissary, Prince Turki, asked Mullah Omar whether he would keep his earlier promise to expel Bin Ladin, the

Taliban leader said no. Both sides shouted at each other, with Mullah Omar denouncing the Saudi government. Riyadh then suspended its diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime. (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates were the only countries that recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.) Crown Prince Abdullah told President Clinton and Vice President Gore about this when he visited Washington in late September. His account confirmed reports that the U.S. government had received independently.⁶⁵

Other efforts with the Saudi government centered on improving intelligence sharing and permitting U.S. agents to interrogate prisoners in Saudi custody. The history of such cooperation in 1997 and 1998 had been strained.⁶⁶ Several officials told us, in particular, that the United States could not get direct access to an important al Qaeda financial official, Madani al Tayyib, who had been detained by the Saudi government in 1997.⁶⁷ Though U.S. officials repeatedly raised the issue, the Saudis provided limited information. In his September 1998 meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah, Vice President Gore, while thanking the Saudi government for their responsiveness, renewed the request for direct U.S. access to Tayyib.⁶⁸ The United States never obtained this access.

An NSC staff-led working group on terrorist finances asked the CIA in November 1998 to push again for access to Tayyib and to see “if it is possible to elaborate further on the ties between Usama bin Ladin and prominent individuals in Saudi Arabia, including especially the Bin Ladin family.”⁶⁹ One result was two NSC-led interagency trips to Persian Gulf states in 1999 and 2000. During these trips the NSC, Treasury, and intelligence representatives spoke with Saudi officials, and later interviewed members of the Bin Ladin family, about Usama’s inheritance. The Saudis and the Bin Ladin family eventually helped in this particular effort and U.S. officials ultimately learned that Bin Ladin was not financing al Qaeda out of a personal inheritance.⁷⁰ But Clarke was frustrated about how little the Agency knew, complaining to Berger that four years after “we first asked CIA to track down [Bin Ladin]’s finances” and two years after the creation of the CIA’s Bin Ladin unit, the Agency said it could only guess at how much aid Bin Ladin gave to terrorist groups, what were the main sources of his budget, or how he moved his money.⁷¹

The other diplomatic route to get at Bin Ladin in Afghanistan ran through Islamabad. In the summer before the embassy bombings, the State Department had been heavily focused on rising tensions between India and Pakistan and did not aggressively challenge Pakistan on Afghanistan and Bin Ladin. But State Department counterterrorism officials wanted a stronger position; the department’s acting counterterrorism coordinator advised Secretary Albright to designate Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, noting that despite high-level Pakistani assurances, the country’s military intelligence service continued “activities in support of international terrorism” by supporting attacks on civilian targets in Kashmir. This recommendation was opposed by the State Department’s South Asia bureau, which was concerned that it would damage already

sensitive relations with Pakistan in the wake of the May 1998 nuclear tests by both Pakistan and India. Secretary Albright rejected the recommendation on August 5, 1998, just two days before the embassy bombings.⁷² She told us that, in general, putting the Pakistanis on the terrorist list would eliminate any influence the United States had over them.⁷³ In October, an NSC counterterrorism official noted that Pakistan's pro-Taliban military intelligence service had been training Kashmiri jihadists in one of the camps hit by U.S. missiles, leading to the death of Pakistanis.⁷⁴

After flying to Nairobi and bringing home the coffins of the American dead, Secretary Albright increased the department's focus on counterterrorism. According to Ambassador Milam, the bombings were a "wake-up call," and he soon found himself spending 45 to 50 percent of his time working the Taliban-Bin Ladin portfolio.⁷⁵ But Pakistan's military intelligence service, known as the ISID (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate), was the Taliban's primary patron, which made progress difficult.

Additional pressure on the Pakistanis—beyond demands to press the Taliban on Bin Ladin—seemed unattractive to most officials of the State Department. Congressional sanctions punishing Pakistan for possessing nuclear arms prevented the administration from offering incentives to Islamabad.⁷⁶ In the words of Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Washington's Pakistan policy was "stick-heavy." Talbott felt that the only remaining sticks were additional sanctions that would have bankrupted the Pakistanis, a dangerous move that could have brought "total chaos" to a nuclear-armed country with a significant number of Islamic radicals.⁷⁷

The Saudi government, which had a long and close relationship with Pakistan and provided it oil on generous terms, was already pressing Sharif with regard to the Taliban and Bin Ladin. A senior State Department official concluded that Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah put "a tremendous amount of heat" on the Pakistani prime minister during the prince's October 1998 visit to Pakistan.⁷⁸

The State Department urged President Clinton to engage the Pakistanis. Accepting this advice, President Clinton invited Sharif to Washington, where they talked mostly about India but also discussed Bin Ladin. After Sharif went home, the President called him and raised the Bin Ladin subject again. This effort elicited from Sharif a promise to talk with the Taliban.⁷⁹

Mullah Omar's position showed no sign of softening. One intelligence report passed to Berger by the NSC staff quoted Bin Ladin as saying that Mullah Omar had given him a completely free hand to act in any country, though asking that he not claim responsibility for attacks in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Bin Ladin was described as grabbing his beard and saying emotionally, "By Allah, by God, the Americans will still be amazed. The so-called United States will suffer the same fate as the Russians. Their state will collapse, too."⁸⁰

Debate in the State Department intensified after December 1998, when Michael Sheehan became counterterrorism coordinator. A onetime special

forces officer, he had worked with Albright when she was ambassador to the United Nations and had served on the NSC staff with Clarke. He shared Clarke's obsession with terrorism, and had little hesitation about locking horns with the regional bureaus. Through every available channel, he repeated the earlier warning to the Taliban of the possible dire consequences—including military strikes—if Bin Ladin remained their guest and conducted additional attacks. Within the department, he argued for designating the Taliban regime a state sponsor of terrorism. This was technically difficult to do, for calling it a state would be tantamount to diplomatic recognition, which the United States had thus far withheld. But Sheehan urged the use of any available weapon against the Taliban. He told us that he thought he was regarded in the department as “a one-note Johnny nutcase.”⁸¹

In early 1999, the State Department's counterterrorism office proposed a comprehensive diplomatic strategy for all states involved in the Afghanistan problem, including Pakistan. It specified both carrots and hard-hitting sticks—among them, certifying Pakistan as uncooperative on terrorism. Albright said the original carrots and sticks listed in a decision paper for principals may not have been used as “described on paper” but added that they were used in other ways or in varying degrees. But the paper's author, Ambassador Sheehan, was frustrated and complained to us that the original plan “had been watered down to the point that nothing was then done with it.”⁸²

The cautiousness of the South Asia bureau was reinforced when, in May 1999, Pakistani troops were discovered to have infiltrated into an especially mountainous area of Kashmir. A limited war began between India and Pakistan, euphemistically called the “Kargil crisis,” as India tried to drive the Pakistani forces out. Patience with Pakistan was wearing thin, inside both the State Department and the NSC. Bruce Riedel, the NSC staff member responsible for Pakistan, wrote Berger that Islamabad was “behaving as a rogue state in two areas—backing Taliban/UBL terror and provoking war with India.”⁸³

Discussion within the Clinton administration on Afghanistan then concentrated on two main alternatives. The first, championed by Riedel and Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth, was to undertake a major diplomatic effort to end the Afghan civil war and install a national unity government. The second, favored by Sheehan, Clarke, and the CIA, called for labeling the Taliban a terrorist group and ultimately funneling secret aid to its chief foe, the Northern Alliance. This dispute would go back and forth throughout 1999 and ultimately become entangled with debate about enlisting the Northern Alliance as an ally for covert action.⁸⁴

Another diplomatic option may have been available: nurturing Afghan exile groups as a possible moderate governing alternative to the Taliban. In late 1999, Washington provided some support for talks among the leaders of exile Afghan groups, including the ousted Rome-based King Zahir Shah and Hamid Karzai, about bolstering anti-Taliban forces inside Afghanistan and linking the

Northern Alliance with Pashtun groups. One U.S. diplomat later told us that the exile groups were not ready to move forward and that coordinating fractious groups residing in Bonn, Rome, and Cyprus proved extremely difficult.⁸⁵

Frustrated by the Taliban's resistance, two senior State Department officials suggested asking the Saudis to offer the Taliban \$250 million for Bin Ladin. Clarke opposed having the United States facilitate a "huge grant to a regime as heinous as the Taliban" and suggested that the idea might not seem attractive to either Secretary Albright or First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton—both critics of the Taliban's record on women's rights.⁸⁶ The proposal seems to have quietly died.

Within the State Department, some officials delayed Sheehan and Clarke's push either to designate Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a state sponsor of terrorism or to designate the regime as a foreign terrorist organization (thereby avoiding the issue of whether to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan's government). Sheehan and Clarke prevailed in July 1999, when President Clinton issued an executive order effectively declaring the Taliban regime a state sponsor of terrorism.⁸⁷ In October, a UN Security Council Resolution championed by the United States added economic and travel sanctions.⁸⁸

With UN sanctions set to come into effect in November, Clarke wrote Berger that "the Taliban appear to be up to something."⁸⁹ Mullah Omar had shuffled his "cabinet" and hinted at Bin Ladin's possible departure. Clarke's staff thought his most likely destination would be Somalia; Chechnya seemed less appealing with Russia on the offensive. Clarke commented that Iraq and Libya had previously discussed hosting Bin Ladin, though he and his staff had their doubts that Bin Ladin would trust secular Arab dictators such as Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qadhafi. Clarke also raised the "remote possibility" of Yemen, which offered vast uncontrolled spaces. In November, the CSG discussed whether the sanctions had rattled the Taliban, who seemed "to be looking for a face-saving way out of the Bin Ladin issue."⁹⁰

In fact none of the outside pressure had any visible effect on Mullah Omar, who was unconcerned about commerce with the outside world. Omar had virtually no diplomatic contact with the West, since he refused to meet with non-Muslims. The United States learned that at the end of 1999, the Taliban Council of Ministers unanimously reaffirmed that their regime would stick by Bin Ladin. Relations between Bin Ladin and the Taliban leadership were sometimes tense, but the foundation was deep and personal.⁹¹ Indeed, Mullah Omar had executed at least one subordinate who opposed his pro-Bin Ladin policy.⁹²

The United States would try tougher sanctions in 2000. Working with Russia (a country involved in an ongoing campaign against Chechen separatists, some of whom received support from Bin Ladin), the United States persuaded the United Nations to adopt Security Council Resolution 1333, which included an embargo on arms shipments to the Taliban, in December 2000.⁹³ The aim of the resolution was to hit the Taliban where it was most sensitive—

on the battlefield against the Northern Alliance—and criminalize giving them arms and providing military “advisers,” which Pakistan had been doing.⁹⁴ Yet the passage of the resolution had no visible effect on Omar, nor did it halt the flow of Pakistani military assistance to the Taliban.⁹⁵

U.S. authorities had continued to try to get cooperation from Pakistan in pressing the Taliban to stop sheltering Bin Ladin. President Clinton contacted Sharif again in June 1999, partly to discuss the crisis with India but also to urge Sharif, “in the strongest way I can,” to persuade the Taliban to expel Bin Ladin.⁹⁶ The President suggested that Pakistan use its control over oil supplies to the Taliban and over Afghan imports through Karachi. Sharif suggested instead that Pakistani forces might try to capture Bin Ladin themselves. Though no one in Washington thought this was likely to happen, President Clinton gave the idea his blessing.⁹⁷

The President met with Sharif in Washington in early July. Though the meeting’s main purpose was to seal the Pakistani prime minister’s decision to withdraw from the Kargil confrontation in Kashmir, President Clinton complained about Pakistan’s failure to take effective action with respect to the Taliban and Bin Ladin. Sharif came back to his earlier proposal and won approval for U.S. assistance in training a Pakistani special forces team for an operation against Bin Ladin. Then, in October 1999, Sharif was deposed by General Pervez Musharraf, and the plan was terminated.⁹⁸

At first, the Clinton administration hoped that Musharraf’s coup might create an opening for action on Bin Ladin. A career military officer, Musharraf was thought to have the political strength to confront and influence the Pakistani military intelligence service, which supported the Taliban. Berger speculated that the new government might use Bin Ladin to buy concessions from Washington, but neither side ever developed such an initiative.⁹⁹

By late 1999, more than a year after the embassy bombings, diplomacy with Pakistan, like the efforts with the Taliban, had, according to Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering, “borne little fruit.”¹⁰⁰

4.4 COVERT ACTION

As part of the response to the embassy bombings, President Clinton signed a Memorandum of Notification authorizing the CIA to let its tribal assets use force to capture Bin Ladin and his associates. CIA officers told the tribals that the plan to capture Bin Ladin, which had been “turned off” three months earlier, was back on. The memorandum also authorized the CIA to attack Bin Ladin in other ways. Also, an executive order froze financial holdings that could be linked to Bin Ladin.¹⁰¹

The counterterrorism staff at CIA thought it was gaining a better understanding of Bin Ladin and his network. In preparation for briefing the Senate

Select Committee on Intelligence on September 2, Tenet was told that the intelligence community knew more about Bin Ladin's network "than about any other top tier terrorist organization."¹⁰²

The CIA was using this knowledge to disrupt a number of Bin Ladin-associated cells. Working with Albanian authorities, CIA operatives had raided an al Qaeda forgery operation and another terrorist cell in Tirana. These operations may have disrupted a planned attack on the U.S. embassy in Tirana, and did lead to the rendition of a number of al Qaeda-related terrorist operatives. After the embassy bombings, there were arrests in Azerbaijan, Italy, and Britain. Several terrorists were sent to an Arab country. The CIA described working with FBI operatives to prevent a planned attack on the U.S. embassy in Uganda, and a number of suspects were arrested. On September 16, Abu Hajer, one of Bin Ladin's deputies in Sudan and the head of his computer operations and weapons procurement, was arrested in Germany. He was the most important Bin Ladin lieutenant captured thus far. Clarke commented to Berger with satisfaction that August and September had brought the "greatest number of terrorist arrests in a short period of time that we have ever arranged/facilitated."¹⁰³

Given the President's August Memorandum of Notification, the CIA had already been working on new plans for using the Afghan tribals to capture Bin Ladin. During September and October, the tribals claimed to have tried at least four times to ambush Bin Ladin. Senior CIA officials doubted whether any of these ambush attempts had actually occurred. But the tribals did seem to have success in reporting where Bin Ladin was.¹⁰⁴

This information was more useful than it had been in the past; since the August missile strikes, Bin Ladin had taken to moving his sleeping place frequently and unpredictably and had added new bodyguards. Worst of all, al Qaeda's senior leadership had stopped using a particular means of communication almost immediately after a leak to the *Washington Times*.¹⁰⁵ This made it much more difficult for the National Security Agency to intercept his conversations. But since the tribals seemed to know where Bin Ladin was or would be, an alternative to capturing Bin Ladin would be to mark his location and call in another round of missile strikes.

On November 3, the Small Group met to discuss these problems, among other topics. Preparing Director Tenet for a Small Group meeting in mid-November, the Counterterrorist Center stressed, "At this point we cannot predict when or if a capture operation will be executed by our assets."¹⁰⁶

U.S. counterterrorism officials also worried about possible domestic attacks. Several intelligence reports, some of dubious sourcing, mentioned Washington as a possible target. On October 26, Clarke's CSG took the unusual step of holding a meeting dedicated to trying "to evaluate the threat of a terrorist attack in the United States by the Usama bin Ladin network."¹⁰⁷ The CSG members were "urged to be as creative as possible in their thinking" about preventing a Bin Ladin attack on U.S. territory. Participants noted that while the FBI had

been given additional resources for such efforts, both it and the CIA were having problems exploiting leads by tracing U.S. telephone numbers and translating documents obtained in cell disruptions abroad. The Justice Department reported that the current guidelines from the Attorney General gave sufficient legal authority for domestic investigation and surveillance.¹⁰⁸

Though intelligence gave no clear indication of what might be afoot, some intelligence reports mentioned chemical weapons, pointing toward work at a camp in southern Afghanistan called Derunta. On November 4, 1998, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York unsealed its indictment of Bin Ladin, charging him with conspiracy to attack U.S. defense installations. The indictment also charged that al Qaeda had allied itself with Sudan, Iran, and Hezbollah. The original sealed indictment had added that al Qaeda had "reached an understanding with the government of Iraq that al Qaeda would not work against that government and that on particular projects, specifically including weapons development, al Qaeda would work cooperatively with the Government of Iraq."¹⁰⁹ This passage led Clarke, who for years had read intelligence reports on Iraqi-Sudanese cooperation on chemical weapons, to speculate to Berger that a large Iraqi presence at chemical facilities in Khartoum was "probably a direct result of the Iraq-Al Qida agreement." Clarke added that VX precursor traces found near al Shifa were the "exact formula used by Iraq."¹¹⁰ This language about al Qaeda's "understanding" with Iraq had been dropped, however, when a superseding indictment was filed in November 1998.¹¹¹

On Friday, December 4, 1998, the CIA included an article in the Presidential Daily Brief describing intelligence, received from a friendly government, about a threatened hijacking in the United States. This article was declassified at our request.

The same day, Clarke convened a meeting of his CSG to discuss both the

The following is the text of an item from the Presidential Daily Brief received by President William J. Clinton on December 4, 1998. Redacted material is indicated in brackets.

SUBJECT: Bin Ladin Preparing to Hijack US Aircraft and Other Attacks

1. Reporting [—] suggests Bin Ladin and his allies are preparing for attacks in the US, including an aircraft hijacking to obtain the release of Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, Ramzi Yousef, and Muhammad Sadiq 'Awda. One source quoted a senior member of the Gama'at al-Islamiyya (IG) saying that, as of late October, the IG had completed planning for

an operation in the US on behalf of Bin Ladin, but that the operation was on hold. A senior Bin Ladin operative from Saudi Arabia was to visit IG counterparts in the US soon thereafter to discuss options—perhaps including an aircraft hijacking.

- IG leader Islambuli in late September was planning to hijack a US airliner during the “next couple of weeks” to free ‘Abd al-Rahman and the other prisoners, according to what may be a different source.
- The same source late last month said that Bin Ladin might implement plans to hijack US aircraft before the beginning of Ramadan on 20 December and that two members of the operational team had evaded security checks during a recent trial run at an unidentified New York airport. [—]

2. Some members of the Bin Ladin network have received hijack training, according to various sources, but no group directly tied to Bin Ladin’s al-Qa’ida organization has ever carried out an aircraft hijacking. Bin Ladin could be weighing other types of operations against US aircraft. According to [—] the IG in October obtained SA-7 missiles and intended to move them from Yemen into Saudi Arabia to shoot down an Egyptian plane or, if unsuccessful, a US military or civilian aircraft.

- A [—] in October told us that unspecified “extremist elements” in Yemen had acquired SA-7s. [—]

3. [—] indicate the Bin Ladin organization or its allies are moving closer to implementing anti-US attacks at unspecified locations, but we do not know whether they are related to attacks on aircraft. A Bin Ladin associate in Sudan late last month told a colleague in Kandahar that he had shipped a group of containers to Afghanistan. Bin Ladin associates also talked about the movement of containers to Afghanistan before the East Africa bombings.

- In other [—] Bin Ladin associates last month discussed picking up a package in Malaysia. One told his colleague in Malaysia that “they” were in the “ninth month [of pregnancy].”
- An alleged Bin Ladin supporter in Yemen late last month remarked to his mother that he planned to work in “commerce” from abroad and said his impending “marriage,” which would take place soon, would be a “surprise.” “Commerce” and “marriage” often are codewords for terrorist attacks. [—]

hijacking concern and the anti-aircraft missile threat. To address the hijacking warning, the group agreed that New York airports should go to maximum security starting that weekend. They agreed to boost security at other East coast airports. The CIA agreed to distribute versions of the report to the FBI and FAA to pass to the New York Police Department and the airlines. The FAA issued a security directive on December 8, with specific requirements for more intensive air carrier screening of passengers and more oversight of the screening process, at all three New York City area airports.¹¹²

The intelligence community could learn little about the source of the information. Later in December and again in early January 1999, more information arrived from the same source, reporting that the planned hijacking had been stalled because two of the operatives, who were sketchily described, had been arrested near Washington, D.C. or New York. After investigation, the FBI could find no information to support the hijack threat; nor could it verify any arrests like those described in the report. The FAA alert at the New York area airports ended on January 31, 1999.¹¹³

On December 17, the day after the United States and Britain began their Desert Fox bombing campaign against Iraq, the Small Group convened to discuss intelligence suggesting imminent Bin Ladin attacks on the U.S. embassies in Qatar and Ethiopia. The next day, Director Tenet sent a memo to the President, the cabinet, and senior officials throughout the government describing reports that Bin Ladin planned to attack U.S. targets very soon, possibly over the next few days, before Ramadan celebrations began. Tenet said he was “greatly concerned.”¹¹⁴

With alarms sounding, members of the Small Group considered ideas about how to respond to or prevent such attacks. Generals Shelton and Zinni came up with military options. Special Operations Forces were later told that they might be ordered to attempt very high-risk in-and-out raids either in Khartoum, to capture a senior Bin Ladin operative known as Abu Hafis the Mauritanian—who appeared to be engineering some of the plots—or in Kandahar, to capture Bin Ladin himself. Shelton told us that such operations are not risk free, invoking the memory of the 1993 “Black Hawk down” fiasco in Mogadishu.¹¹⁵

The CIA reported on December 18 that Bin Ladin might be traveling to Kandahar and could be targeted there with cruise missiles. Vessels with Tomahawk cruise missiles were on station in the Arabian Sea, and could fire within a few hours of receiving target data.¹¹⁶

On December 20, intelligence indicated Bin Ladin would be spending the night at the Haji Habash house, part of the governor’s residence in Kandahar. The chief of the Bin Ladin unit, “Mike,” told us that he promptly briefed Tenet and his deputy, John Gordon. From the field, the CIA’s Gary Schroen advised: “Hit him tonight—we may not get another chance.” An urgent teleconference of principals was arranged.¹¹⁷

The principals considered a cruise missile strike to try to kill Bin Ladin. One issue they discussed was the potential collateral damage—the number of innocent bystanders who would be killed or wounded. General Zinni predicted a number well over 200 and was concerned about damage to a nearby mosque. The senior intelligence officer on the Joint Staff apparently made a different calculation, estimating half as much collateral damage and not predicting damage to the mosque. By the end of the meeting, the principals decided against recommending to the President that he order a strike. A few weeks later, in January 1999, Clarke wrote that the principals had thought the intelligence only half reliable and had worried about killing or injuring perhaps 300 people. Tenet said he remembered doubts about the reliability of the source and concern about hitting the nearby mosque. “Mike” remembered Tenet telling him that the military was concerned that a few hours had passed since the last sighting of Bin Ladin and that this persuaded everyone that the chance of failure was too great.¹¹⁸

Some lower-level officials were angry. “Mike” reported to Schroen that he had been unable to sleep after this decision. “I’m sure we’ll regret not acting last night,” he wrote, criticizing the principals for “worrying that some stray shrapnel might hit the Habash mosque and ‘offend’ Muslims.” He commented that they had not shown comparable sensitivity when deciding to bomb Muslims in Iraq. The principals, he said, were “obsessed” with trying to get others—Saudis, Pakistanis, Afghan tribals—to “do what we won’t do.” Schroen was disappointed too. “We should have done it last night,” he wrote. “We may well come to regret the decision not to go ahead.”¹¹⁹ The Joint Staff’s deputy director for operations agreed, even though he told us that later intelligence appeared to show that Bin Ladin had left his quarters before the strike would have occurred. Missing Bin Ladin, he said, “would have caused us a hell of a problem, but it was a shot we should have taken, and we would have had to pay the price.”¹²⁰

The principals began considering other, more aggressive covert alternatives using the tribals. CIA officers suggested that the tribals would prefer to try a raid rather than a roadside ambush because they would have better control, it would be less dangerous, and it played more to their skills and experience. But everyone knew that if the tribals were to conduct such a raid, guns would be blazing. The current Memorandum of Notification instructed the CIA to capture Bin Ladin and to use lethal force only in self-defense. Work now began on a new memorandum that would give the tribals more latitude. The intention was to say that they could use lethal force if the attempted capture seemed impossible to complete successfully.¹²¹

Early drafts of this highly sensitive document emphasized that it authorized only a capture operation. The tribals were to be paid only if they captured Bin Ladin, not if they killed him. Officials throughout the government approved this draft. But on December 21, the day after principals decided not to launch

the cruise missile strike against Kandahar, the CIA's leaders urged strengthening the language to allow the tribals to be paid whether Bin Ladin was captured *or* killed. Berger and Tenet then worked together to take this line of thought even further.¹²²

They finally agreed, as Berger reported to President Clinton, that an extraordinary step was necessary. The new memorandum would allow the killing of Bin Ladin if the CIA and the tribals judged that capture was not feasible (a judgment it already seemed clear they had reached). The Justice Department lawyer who worked on the draft told us that what was envisioned was a group of tribals assaulting a location, leading to a shoot-out. Bin Ladin and others would be captured if possible, but probably would be killed. The administration's position was that under the law of armed conflict, killing a person who posed an imminent threat to the United States would be an act of self-defense, not an assassination. On Christmas Eve 1998, Berger sent a final draft to President Clinton, with an explanatory memo. The President approved the document.¹²³

Because the White House considered this operation highly sensitive, only a tiny number of people knew about this Memorandum of Notification. Berger arranged for the NSC's legal adviser to inform Albright, Cohen, Shelton, and Reno. None was allowed to keep a copy. Congressional leaders were briefed, as required by law. Attorney General Reno had sent a letter to the President expressing her concern: she warned of possible retaliation, including the targeting of U.S. officials. She did not pose any legal objection. A copy of the final document, along with the carefully crafted instructions that were to be sent to the tribals, was given to Tenet.¹²⁴

A message from Tenet to CIA field agents directed them to communicate to the tribals the instructions authorized by the President: the United States preferred that Bin Ladin and his lieutenants be captured, but if a successful capture operation was not feasible, the tribals were permitted to kill them. The instructions added that the tribals must avoid killing others unnecessarily and must not kill or abuse Bin Ladin or his lieutenants if they surrendered. Finally, the tribals would not be paid if this set of requirements was not met.¹²⁵

The field officer passed these instructions to the tribals word for word. But he prefaced the directions with a message: "From the American President down to the average man in the street, we want him [Bin Ladin] stopped." If the tribals captured Bin Ladin, the officer assured them that he would receive a fair trial under U.S. law and be treated humanely. The CIA officer reported that the tribals said they "fully understand the contents, implications and the spirit of the message" and that their response was, "We will try our best to capture Bin Ladin alive and will have no intention of killing or harming him on purpose." The tribals explained that they wanted to prove that their standards of behavior were more civilized than those of Bin Ladin and his band of terrorists. In an additional note addressed to Schroen, the tribals noted that if they were to adopt Bin Ladin's ethics, "we would have finished the job long before,"

but they had been limited by their abilities and “by our beliefs and laws we have to respect.”¹²⁶

Schroen and “Mike” were impressed by the tribals’ reaction. Schroen cabled that the tribals were not in it for the money but as an investment in the future of Afghanistan. “Mike” agreed that the tribals’ reluctance to kill was not a “showstopper.” “From our view,” he wrote, “that seems in character and fair enough.”¹²⁷

Policymakers in the Clinton administration, including the President and his national security advisor, told us that the President’s intent regarding covert action against Bin Ladin was clear: he wanted him dead. This intent was never well communicated or understood within the CIA. Tenet told the Commission that except in one specific case (discussed later), the CIA was authorized to kill Bin Ladin only in the context of a capture operation. CIA senior managers, operators, and lawyers confirmed this understanding. “We always talked about how much easier it would have been to kill him,” a former chief of the Bin Ladin unit said.¹²⁸

In February 1999, another draft Memorandum of Notification went to President Clinton. It asked him to allow the CIA to give exactly the same guidance to the Northern Alliance as had just been given to the tribals: they could kill Bin Ladin if a successful capture operation was not feasible. On this occasion, however, President Clinton crossed out key language he had approved in December and inserted more ambiguous language. No one we interviewed could shed light on why the President did this. President Clinton told the Commission that he had no recollection of why he rewrote the language.¹²⁹

Later in 1999, when legal authority was needed for enlisting still other collaborators and for covering a wider set of contingencies, the lawyers returned to the language used in August 1998, which authorized force only in the context of a capture operation. Given the closely held character of the document approved in December 1998, and the subsequent return to the earlier language, it is possible to understand how the former White House officials and the CIA officials might disagree as to whether the CIA was ever authorized by the President to kill Bin Ladin.¹³⁰

The dispute turned out to be somewhat academic, as the limits of available legal authority were not tested. Clarke commented to Berger that “despite ‘expanded’ authority for CIA’s sources to engage in direct action, they have shown no inclination to do so.” He added that it was his impression that the CIA thought the tribals unlikely to act against Bin Ladin and hence relying on them was “unrealistic.”¹³¹ Events seemed to bear him out, since the tribals did not stage an attack on Bin Ladin or his associates during 1999.

The tribals remained active collectors of intelligence, however, providing good but not predictive information about Bin Ladin’s whereabouts. The CIA also tried to improve its intelligence reporting on Bin Ladin by what Tenet’s assistant director for collection, the indefatigable Charles Allen, called an “all-out, all-agency, seven-days-a-week” effort.¹³² The effort might have had an

effect. On January 12, 1999, Clarke wrote Berger that the CIA's confidence in the tribals' reporting had increased. It was now higher than it had been on December 20.¹³³

In February 1999, Allen proposed flying a U-2 mission over Afghanistan to build a baseline of intelligence outside the areas where the tribals had coverage. Clarke was nervous about such a mission because he continued to fear that Bin Ladin might leave for someplace less accessible. He wrote Deputy National Security Advisor Donald Kerrick that one reliable source reported Bin Ladin's having met with Iraqi officials, who "may have offered him asylum." Other intelligence sources said that some Taliban leaders, though not Mullah Omar, had urged Bin Ladin to go to Iraq. If Bin Ladin actually moved to Iraq, wrote Clarke, his network would be at Saddam Hussein's service, and it would be "virtually impossible" to find him. Better to get Bin Ladin in Afghanistan, Clarke declared.¹³⁴ Berger suggested sending one U-2 flight, but Clarke opposed even this. It would require Pakistani approval, he wrote; and "Pak[istan's] intel[ligence service] is in bed with" Bin Ladin and would warn him that the United States was getting ready for a bombing campaign: "Armed with that knowledge, old wily Usama will likely boogie to Baghdad."¹³⁵ Though told also by Bruce Riedel of the NSC staff that Saddam Hussein wanted Bin Ladin in Baghdad, Berger conditionally authorized a single U-2 flight. Allen meanwhile had found other ways of getting the information he wanted. So the U-2 flight never occurred.¹³⁶

4.5 SEARCHING FOR FRESH OPTIONS

"Boots on the Ground?"

Starting on the day the August 1998 strikes were launched, General Shelton had issued a planning order to prepare follow-on strikes and think beyond just using cruise missiles.¹³⁷ The initial strikes had been called Operation Infinite Reach. The follow-on plans were given the code name Operation Infinite Resolve.

At the time, any actual military action in Afghanistan would have been carried out by General Zinni's Central Command. This command was therefore the locus for most military planning. Zinni was even less enthusiastic than Cohen and Shelton about follow-on cruise missile strikes. He knew that the Tomahawks did not always hit their targets. After the August 20 strikes, President Clinton had had to call Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif to apologize for a wayward missile that had killed several people in a Pakistani village. Sharif had been understanding, while commenting on American "overkill."¹³⁸

Zinni feared that Bin Ladin would in the future locate himself in cities, where U.S. missiles could kill thousands of Afghans. He worried also lest Pakistani authorities not get adequate warning, think the missiles came from India,

and do something that everyone would later regret. Discussing potential repercussions in the region of his military responsibility, Zinni said, "It was easy to take the shot from Washington and walk away from it. We had to live there."¹³⁹

Zinni's distinct preference would have been to build up counterterrorism capabilities in neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan. But he told us that he could not drum up much interest in or money for such a purpose from Washington, partly, he thought, because these countries had dictatorial governments.¹⁴⁰

After the decision—in which fear of collateral damage was an important factor—not to use cruise missiles against Kandahar in December 1998, Shelton and officers in the Pentagon developed plans for using an AC-130 gunship instead of cruise missile strikes. Designed specifically for the special forces, the version of the AC-130 known as "Spooky" can fly in fast or from high altitude, undetected by radar; guided to its zone by extraordinarily complex electronics, it is capable of rapidly firing precision-guided 25, 40, and 105 mm projectiles. Because this system could target more precisely than a salvo of cruise missiles, it had a much lower risk of causing collateral damage. After giving Clarke a briefing and being encouraged to proceed, Shelton formally directed Zinni and General Peter Schoomaker, who headed the Special Operations Command, to develop plans for an AC-130 mission against Bin Ladin's headquarters and infrastructure in Afghanistan. The Joint Staff prepared a decision paper for deployment of the Special Operations aircraft.¹⁴¹

Though Berger and Clarke continued to indicate interest in this option, the AC-130s were never deployed. Clarke wrote at the time that Zinni opposed their use, and John Maher, the Joint Staff's deputy director of operations, agreed that this was Zinni's position. Zinni himself does not recall blocking the option. He told us that he understood the Special Operations Command had never thought the intelligence good enough to justify actually moving AC-130s into position. Schoomaker says, on the contrary, that he thought the AC-130 option feasible.¹⁴²

The most likely explanation for the two generals' differing recollections is that both of them thought serious preparation for any such operations would require a long-term redeployment of Special Operations forces to the Middle East or South Asia. The AC-130s would need bases because the aircraft's unrefueled range was only a little over 2,000 miles. They needed search-and-rescue backup, which would have still less range. Thus an AC-130 deployment had to be embedded in a wider political and military concept involving Pakistan or other neighboring countries to address issues relating to basing and overflight. No one ever put such an initiative on the table. Zinni therefore cautioned about simply ordering up AC-130 deployments for a quick strike; Schoomaker planned for what he saw as a practical strike option; and the underlying issues were not fully engaged. The Joint Staff decision paper was never turned into an interagency policy paper.

The same was true for the option of using ground units from the Special Operations Command. Within the command, some officers—such as Schoomaker—wanted the mission of “putting boots on the ground” to get at Bin Ladin and al Qaeda. At the time, Special Operations was designated as a “supporting command,” not a “supported command”: that is, it supported a theater commander and did not prepare its own plans for dealing with al Qaeda. Schoomaker proposed to Shelton and Cohen that Special Operations become a supported command, but the proposal was not adopted. Had it been accepted, he says, he would have taken on the al Qaeda mission instead of deferring to Zinni. Lieutenant General William Boykin, the current deputy under secretary of defense for intelligence and a founding member of Delta Force, told us that “opportunities were missed because of an unwillingness to take risks and a lack of vision and understanding.”¹⁴³

President Clinton relied on the advice of General Shelton, who informed him that without intelligence on Bin Ladin’s location, a commando raid’s chance of failure was high. Shelton told President Clinton he would go forward with “boots on the ground” if the President ordered him to do so; however, he had to ensure that the President was completely aware of the large logistical problems inherent in a military operation.¹⁴⁴

The Special Operations plans were apparently conceived as another quick strike option—an option to insert forces after the United States received actionable intelligence. President Clinton told the Commission that “if we had had really good intelligence about . . . where [Usama Bin Ladin] was, I would have done it.” Zinni and Schoomaker did make preparations for possible very high risk in-and-out operations to capture or kill terrorists. Cohen told the Commission that the notion of putting military personnel on the ground without some reasonable certitude that Bin Ladin was in a particular location would have resulted in the mission’s failure and the loss of life in a fruitless effort.¹⁴⁵ None of these officials was aware of the ambitious plan developed months earlier by lower-level Defense officials.

In our interviews, some military officers repeatedly invoked the analogy of Desert One and the failed 1980 hostage rescue mission in Iran.¹⁴⁶ They were dubious about a quick strike approach to using Special Operations Forces, which they thought complicated and risky. Such efforts would have required bases in the region, but all the options were unappealing. Pro-Taliban elements of Pakistan’s military might warn Bin Ladin or his associates of pending operations. With nearby basing options limited, an alternative was to fly from ships in the Arabian Sea or from land bases in the Persian Gulf, as was done after 9/11. Such operations would then have to be supported from long distances, overflying the airspace of nations that might not have been supportive or aware of U.S. efforts.¹⁴⁷

However, if these hurdles were addressed, and if the military could then operate regularly in the region for a long period, perhaps clandestinely, it might

attempt to gather intelligence and wait for an opportunity. One Special Operations commander said his view of actionable intelligence was that if you “give me the action, I will give you the intelligence.”¹⁴⁸ But this course would still be risky, in light both of the difficulties already mentioned and of the danger that U.S. operations might fail disastrously. We have found no evidence that such a long-term political-military approach for using Special Operations Forces in the region was proposed to or analyzed by the Small Group, even though such capability had been honed for at least a decade within the Defense Department.

Therefore the debate looked to some like bold proposals from civilians meeting hypercaution from the military. Clarke saw it this way. Of the military, he said to us, “They were very, very, very reluctant.”¹⁴⁹ But from another perspective, poorly informed proposals for bold action were pitted against experienced professional judgment. That was how Secretary of Defense Cohen viewed it. He said to us: “I would have to place my judgment call in terms of, do I believe that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, former commander of Special Forces command, is in a better position to make a judgment on the feasibility of this than, perhaps, Mr. Clarke?”¹⁵⁰

Beyond a large-scale political-military commitment to build up a covert or clandestine capability using American personnel on the ground, either military or CIA, there was a still larger option that could have been considered—invading Afghanistan itself. Every official we questioned about the possibility of an invasion of Afghanistan said that it was almost unthinkable, absent a provocation such as 9/11, because of poor prospects for cooperation from Pakistan and other nations and because they believed the public would not support it. Cruise missiles were and would remain the only military option on the table.

The Desert Camp, February 1999

Early in 1999, the CIA received reporting that Bin Ladin was spending much of his time at one of several camps in the Afghan desert south of Kandahar. At the beginning of February, Bin Ladin was reportedly located in the vicinity of the Sheikh Ali camp, a desert hunting camp being used by visitors from a Gulf state. Public sources have stated that these visitors were from the United Arab Emirates.¹⁵¹

Reporting from the CIA's assets provided a detailed description of the hunting camp, including its size, location, resources, and security, as well as of Bin Ladin's smaller, adjacent camp.¹⁵² Because this was not in an urban area, missiles launched against it would have less risk of causing collateral damage. On February 8, the military began to ready itself for a possible strike.¹⁵³ The next day, national technical intelligence confirmed the location and description of the larger camp and showed the nearby presence of an official aircraft of the United Arab Emirates. But the location of Bin Ladin's quarters could not be pinned down so precisely.¹⁵⁴ The CIA did its best to answer a host of questions

about the larger camp and its residents and about Bin Ladin's daily schedule and routines to support military contingency planning. According to reporting from the tribals, Bin Ladin regularly went from his adjacent camp to the larger camp where he visited the Emiratis; the tribals expected him to be at the hunting camp for such a visit at least until midmorning on February 11.¹⁵⁵ Clarke wrote to Berger's deputy on February 10 that the military was then doing targeting work to hit the main camp with cruise missiles and should be in position to strike the following morning.¹⁵⁶ Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert appears to have been briefed on the situation.¹⁵⁷

No strike was launched. By February 12 Bin Ladin had apparently moved on, and the immediate strike plans became moot.¹⁵⁸ According to CIA and Defense officials, policymakers were concerned about the danger that a strike would kill an Emirati prince or other senior officials who might be with Bin Ladin or close by. Clarke told us the strike was called off after consultations with Director Tenet because the intelligence was dubious, and it seemed to Clarke as if the CIA was presenting an option to attack America's best counterterrorism ally in the Gulf. The lead CIA official in the field, Gary Schroen, felt that the intelligence reporting in this case was very reliable; the Bin Ladin unit chief, "Mike," agreed. Schroen believes today that this was a lost opportunity to kill Bin Ladin before 9/11.¹⁵⁹

Even after Bin Ladin's departure from the area, CIA officers hoped he might return, seeing the camp as a magnet that could draw him for as long as it was still set up. The military maintained readiness for another strike opportunity.¹⁶⁰ On March 7, 1999, Clarke called a UAE official to express his concerns about possible associations between Emirati officials and Bin Ladin. Clarke later wrote in a memorandum of this conversation that the call had been approved at an interagency meeting and cleared with the CIA.¹⁶¹ When the former Bin Ladin unit chief found out about Clarke's call, he questioned CIA officials, who denied having given such a clearance.¹⁶² Imagery confirmed that less than a week after Clarke's phone call the camp was hurriedly dismantled, and the site was deserted.¹⁶³ CIA officers, including Deputy Director for Operations Pavitt, were irate. "Mike" thought the dismantling of the camp erased a possible site for targeting Bin Ladin.¹⁶⁴

The United Arab Emirates was becoming both a valued counterterrorism ally of the United States and a persistent counterterrorism problem. From 1999 through early 2001, the United States, and President Clinton personally, pressed the UAE, one of the Taliban's only travel and financial outlets to the outside world, to break off its ties and enforce sanctions, especially those relating to flights to and from Afghanistan.¹⁶⁵ These efforts achieved little before 9/11.

In July 1999, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hamdan bin Zayid threatened to break relations with the Taliban over Bin Ladin.¹⁶⁶ The Taliban did not take him seriously, however. Bin Zayid later told an American diplo-

mat that the UAE valued its relations with the Taliban because the Afghan radicals offered a counterbalance to “Iranian dangers” in the region, but he also noted that the UAE did not want to upset the United States.¹⁶⁷

Looking for New Partners

Although not all CIA officers had lost faith in the tribals’ capabilities—many judged them to be good reporters—few believed they would carry out an ambush of Bin Ladin. The chief of the Counterterrorist Center compared relying on the tribals to playing the lottery.¹⁶⁸ He and his associates, supported by Clarke, pressed for developing a partnership with the Northern Alliance, even though doing so might bring the United States squarely behind one side in Afghanistan’s long-running civil war.

The Northern Alliance was dominated by Tajiks and drew its strength mainly from the northern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. In contrast, Taliban members came principally from Afghanistan’s most numerous ethnic group, the Pashtuns, who are concentrated in the southern part of the country, extending into the North-West Frontier and Baluchistan provinces of Pakistan.¹⁶⁹

Because of the Taliban’s behavior and its association with Pakistan, the Northern Alliance had been able at various times to obtain assistance from Russia, Iran, and India. The alliance’s leader was Afghanistan’s most renowned military commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud. Reflective and charismatic, he had been one of the true heroes of the war against the Soviets. But his bands had been charged with more than one massacre, and the Northern Alliance was widely thought to finance itself in part through trade in heroin. Nor had Massoud shown much aptitude for governing except as a ruthless warlord. Nevertheless, Tenet told us Massoud seemed the most interesting possible new ally against Bin Ladin.¹⁷⁰

In February 1999, Tenet sought President Clinton’s authorization to enlist Massoud and his forces as partners. In response to this request, the President signed the Memorandum of Notification whose language he personally altered. Tenet says he saw no significance in the President’s changes. So far as he was concerned, it was the language of August 1998, expressing a preference for capture but accepting the possibility that Bin Ladin could not be brought out alive. “We were playing the same ground,” Tenet said.¹⁷¹

CIA officers described Massoud’s reaction when he heard that the United States wanted him to capture and not kill Bin Ladin. One characterized Massoud’s body language as “a wince.” Schroen recalled Massoud’s response as “You guys are crazy—you haven’t changed a bit.” In Schroen’s opinion, the capture proviso inhibited Massoud and his forces from going after Bin Ladin but did not completely stop them.¹⁷² The idea, however, was a long shot. Bin Ladin’s usual base of activity was near Kandahar, far from the front lines of Taliban operations against the Northern Alliance.

Kandahar, May 1999

It was in Kandahar that perhaps the last, and most likely the best, opportunity arose for targeting Bin Ladin with cruise missiles before 9/11. In May 1999, CIA assets in Afghanistan reported on Bin Ladin's location in and around Kandahar over the course of five days and nights. The reporting was very detailed and came from several sources. If this intelligence was not "actionable," working-level officials said at the time and today, it was hard for them to imagine how any intelligence on Bin Ladin in Afghanistan would meet the standard. Communications were good, and the cruise missiles were ready. "This was in our strike zone," a senior military officer said. "It was a fat pitch, a home run." He expected the missiles to fly. When the decision came back that they should stand down, not shoot, the officer said, "we all just slumped." He told us he knew of no one at the Pentagon or the CIA who thought it was a bad gamble. Bin Ladin "should have been a dead man" that night, he said.¹⁷³

Working-level CIA officials agreed. While there was a conflicting intelligence report about Bin Ladin's whereabouts, the experts discounted it. At the time, CIA working-level officials were told by their managers that the strikes were not ordered because the military doubted the intelligence and worried about collateral damage. Replying to a frustrated colleague in the field, the Bin Ladin unit chief wrote: "having a chance to get [Bin Ladin] three times in 36 hours and foregoing the chance each time has made me a bit angry. . . . [T]he DCI finds himself alone at the table, with the other princip[als] basically saying 'we'll go along with your decision Mr. Director,' and implicitly saying that the Agency will hang alone if the attack doesn't get Bin Ladin."¹⁷⁴ But the military officer quoted earlier recalled that the Pentagon had been willing to act. He told us that Clarke informed him and others that Tenet assessed the chance of the intelligence being accurate as 50–50. This officer believed that Tenet's assessment was the key to the decision.¹⁷⁵

Tenet told us he does not remember any details about this episode, except that the intelligence came from a single uncorroborated source and that there was a risk of collateral damage. The story is further complicated by Tenet's absence from the critical principals meeting on this strike (he was apparently out of town); his deputy, John Gordon, was representing the CIA. Gordon recalled having presented the intelligence in a positive light, with appropriate caveats, but stating that this intelligence was about as good as it could get.¹⁷⁶

Berger remembered only that in all such cases, the call had been Tenet's. Berger felt sure that Tenet was eager to get Bin Ladin. In his view, Tenet did his job responsibly. "George would call and say, 'We just don't have it,'" Berger said.¹⁷⁷

The decision not to strike in May 1999 may now seem hard to understand. In fairness, we note two points: First, in December 1998, the principals' wariness about ordering a strike appears to have been vindicated: Bin Ladin left his room unexpectedly, and if a strike had been ordered he would not have been

hit. Second, the administration, and the CIA in particular, was in the midst of intense scrutiny and criticism in May 1999 because faulty intelligence had just led the United States to mistakenly bomb the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO war against Serbia. This episode may have made officials more cautious than might otherwise have been the case.¹⁷⁸

From May 1999 until September 2001, policymakers did not again actively consider a missile strike against Bin Ladin.¹⁷⁹ The principals did give some further consideration in 1999 to more general strikes, reviving Clarke's "Delenda" notion of hitting camps and infrastructure to disrupt al Qaeda's organization. In the first months of 1999, the Joint Staff had developed broader target lists to undertake a "focused campaign" against the infrastructure of Bin Ladin's network and to hit Taliban government sites as well. General Shelton told us that the Taliban targets were "easier" to hit and more substantial.¹⁸⁰

Part of the context for considering broader strikes in the summer of 1999 was renewed worry about Bin Ladin's ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In May and June, the U.S. government received a flurry of ominous reports, including more information about chemical weapons training or development at the Derunta camp and possible attempts to amass nuclear material at Herat.¹⁸¹

By late June, U.S. and other intelligence services had concluded that al Qaeda was in pre-attack mode, perhaps again involving Abu Hafs the Mauritanian. On June 25, at Clarke's request, Berger convened the Small Group in his office to discuss the alert, Bin Ladin's WMD programs, and his location. "Should we pre-empt by attacking UBL facilities?" Clarke urged Berger to ask his colleagues.¹⁸²

In his handwritten notes on the meeting paper, Berger jotted down the presence of 7 to 11 families in the Tarnak Farms facility, which could mean 60–65 casualties. Berger noted the possible "slight impact" on Bin Ladin and added, "if he responds, we're blamed."¹⁸³ The NSC staff raised the option of waiting until after a terrorist attack, and then retaliating, including possible strikes on the Taliban. But Clarke observed that Bin Ladin would probably empty his camps after an attack.¹⁸⁴

The military route seemed to have reached a dead end. In December 1999, Clarke urged Berger to ask the principals to ask themselves: "Why have there been no real options lately for direct US military action?"¹⁸⁵ There are no notes recording whether the question was discussed or, if it was, how it was answered.

Reports of possible attacks by Bin Ladin kept coming in throughout 1999. They included a threat to blow up the FBI building in Washington, D.C. In September, the CSG reviewed a possible threat to a flight out of Los Angeles or New York.¹⁸⁶ These warnings came amid dozens of others that flooded in.

With military and diplomatic options practically exhausted by the summer of 1999, the U.S. government seemed to be back where it had been in the summer of 1998—relying on the CIA to find some other option. That

picture also seemed discouraging. Several disruptions and renditions aimed against the broader al Qaeda network had succeeded.¹⁸⁷ But covert action efforts in Afghanistan had not been fruitful.

In mid-1999, new leaders arrived at the Counterterrorist Center and the Bin Ladin unit. The new director of CTC, replacing “Jeff,” was Cofer Black. The new head of the section that included the Bin Ladin unit was “Richard.” Black, “Richard,” and their colleagues began working on a new operational strategy for attacking al Qaeda; their starting point was to get better intelligence, relying more on the CIA’s own sources and less on the tribals.¹⁸⁸

In July 1999, President Clinton authorized the CIA to work with several governments to capture Bin Ladin, and extended the scope of efforts to Bin Ladin’s principal lieutenants. The President reportedly also authorized a covert action under carefully limited circumstances which, if successful, would have resulted in Bin Ladin’s death.¹⁸⁹ Attorney General Reno again expressed concerns on policy grounds. She was worried about the danger of retaliation. The CIA also developed the short-lived effort to work with a Pakistani team that we discussed earlier, and an initiative to work with Uzbekistan. The Uzbeks needed basic equipment and training. No action could be expected before March 2000, at the earliest.¹⁹⁰

In fall 1999, DCI Tenet unveiled the CIA’s new Bin Ladin strategy. It was called, simply, “the Plan.” The Plan proposed continuing disruption and rendition operations worldwide. It announced a program for hiring and training better officers with counterterrorism skills, recruiting more assets, and trying to penetrate al Qaeda’s ranks. The Plan aimed to close gaps in technical intelligence collection (signal and imagery) as well. In addition, the CIA would increase contacts with the Northern Alliance rebels fighting the Taliban.¹⁹¹

With a new operational strategy, the CIA evaluated its capture options. None scored high marks. The CIA had no confidence in the Pakistani effort. In the event that Bin Ladin traveled to the Kandahar region in southern Afghanistan, the tribal network there was unlikely to attack a heavily guarded Bin Ladin; the Counterterrorist Center rated the chance of success at less than 10 percent. To the northwest, the Uzbeks might be ready for a cross-border sortie in six months; their chance of success was also rated at less than 10 percent.¹⁹²

In the northeast were Massoud’s Northern Alliance forces—perhaps the CIA’s best option. In late October, a group of officers from the Counterterrorist Center flew into the Panjshir Valley to meet up with Massoud, a hazardous journey in rickety helicopters that would be repeated several times in the future. Massoud appeared committed to helping the United States collect intelligence on Bin Ladin’s activities and whereabouts and agreed to try to capture him if the opportunity arose. The Bin Ladin unit was satisfied that its reporting on Bin Ladin would now have a second source. But it also knew that Massoud would act against Bin Ladin only if his own interests and those of the

United States intersected. By early December, the CIA rated this possibility at less than 15 percent.¹⁹³

Finally, the CIA considered the possibility of putting U.S. personnel on the ground in Afghanistan. The CIA had been discussing this option with Special Operations Command and found enthusiasm on the working level but reluctance at higher levels. CIA saw a 95 percent chance of Special Operations Command forces capturing Bin Ladin if deployed—but less than a 5 percent chance of such a deployment. Sending CIA officers into Afghanistan was to be considered “if the gain clearly outweighs the risk”—but at this time no such gains presented themselves to warrant the risk.¹⁹⁴

As mentioned earlier, such a protracted deployment of U.S. Special Operations Forces into Afghanistan, perhaps as part of a team joined to a deployment of the CIA's own officers, would have required a major policy initiative (probably combined with efforts to secure the support of at least one or two neighboring countries) to make a long-term commitment, establish a durable presence on the ground, and be prepared to accept the associated risks and costs. Such a military plan was never developed for interagency consideration before 9/11. As 1999 came to a close, the CIA had a new strategic plan in place for capturing Bin Ladin, but no option was rated as having more than a 15 percent chance of achieving that objective.