

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