

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