

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