

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