

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