

hijacking concern and the antiaircraft missile threat. To address the hijacking warning, the group agreed that New York airports should go to maximum security starting that weekend. They agreed to boost security at other East coast airports. The CIA agreed to distribute versions of the report to the FBI and FAA to pass to the New York Police Department and the airlines. The FAA issued a security directive on December 8, with specific requirements for more intensive air carrier screening of passengers and more oversight of the screening process, at all three New York City area airports.¹¹²

The intelligence community could learn little about the source of the information. Later in December and again in early January 1999, more information arrived from the same source, reporting that the planned hijacking had been stalled because two of the operatives, who were sketchily described, had been arrested near Washington, D.C. or New York. After investigation, the FBI could find no information to support the hijack threat; nor could it verify any arrests like those described in the report. The FAA alert at the New York area airports ended on January 31, 1999.¹¹³

On December 17, the day after the United States and Britain began their Desert Fox bombing campaign against Iraq, the Small Group convened to discuss intelligence suggesting imminent Bin Ladin attacks on the U.S. embassies in Qatar and Ethiopia. The next day, Director Tenet sent a memo to the President, the cabinet, and senior officials throughout the government describing reports that Bin Ladin planned to attack U.S. targets very soon, possibly over the next few days, before Ramadan celebrations began. Tenet said he was “greatly concerned.”¹¹⁴

With alarms sounding, members of the Small Group considered ideas about how to respond to or prevent such attacks. Generals Shelton and Zinni came up with military options. Special Operations Forces were later told that they might be ordered to attempt very high-risk in-and-out raids either in Khartoum, to capture a senior Bin Ladin operative known as Abu Hafs the Mauritanian—who appeared to be engineering some of the plots—or in Kandahar, to capture Bin Ladin himself. Shelton told us that such operations are not risk free, invoking the memory of the 1993 “Black Hawk down” fiasco in Mogadishu.¹¹⁵

The CIA reported on December 18 that Bin Ladin might be traveling to Kandahar and could be targeted there with cruise missiles. Vessels with Tomahawk cruise missiles were on station in the Arabian Sea, and could fire within a few hours of receiving target data.¹¹⁶

On December 20, intelligence indicated Bin Ladin would be spending the night at the Haji Habash house, part of the governor’s residence in Kandahar. The chief of the Bin Ladin unit, “Mike,” told us that he promptly briefed Tenet and his deputy, John Gordon. From the field, the CIA’s Gary Schroen advised: “Hit him tonight—we may not get another chance.” An urgent teleconference of principals was arranged.¹¹⁷