

The principals considered a cruise missile strike to try to kill Bin Ladin. One issue they discussed was the potential collateral damage—the number of innocent bystanders who would be killed or wounded. General Zinni predicted a number well over 200 and was concerned about damage to a nearby mosque. The senior intelligence officer on the Joint Staff apparently made a different calculation, estimating half as much collateral damage and not predicting damage to the mosque. By the end of the meeting, the principals decided against recommending to the President that he order a strike. A few weeks later, in January 1999, Clarke wrote that the principals had thought the intelligence only half reliable and had worried about killing or injuring perhaps 300 people. Tenet said he remembered doubts about the reliability of the source and concern about hitting the nearby mosque. “Mike” remembered Tenet telling him that the military was concerned that a few hours had passed since the last sighting of Bin Ladin and that this persuaded everyone that the chance of failure was too great.¹¹⁸

Some lower-level officials were angry. “Mike” reported to Schroen that he had been unable to sleep after this decision. “I’m sure we’ll regret not acting last night,” he wrote, criticizing the principals for “worrying that some stray shrapnel might hit the Habash mosque and ‘offend’ Muslims.” He commented that they had not shown comparable sensitivity when deciding to bomb Muslims in Iraq. The principals, he said, were “obsessed” with trying to get others—Saudis, Pakistanis, Afghan tribals—to “do what we won’t do.” Schroen was disappointed too. “We should have done it last night,” he wrote. “We may well come to regret the decision not to go ahead.”¹¹⁹ The Joint Staff’s deputy director for operations agreed, even though he told us that later intelligence appeared to show that Bin Ladin had left his quarters before the strike would have occurred. Missing Bin Ladin, he said, “would have caused us a hell of a problem, but it was a shot we should have taken, and we would have had to pay the price.”¹²⁰

The principals began considering other, more aggressive covert alternatives using the tribals. CIA officers suggested that the tribals would prefer to try a raid rather than a roadside ambush because they would have better control, it would be less dangerous, and it played more to their skills and experience. But everyone knew that if the tribals were to conduct such a raid, guns would be blazing. The current Memorandum of Notification instructed the CIA to capture Bin Ladin and to use lethal force only in self-defense. Work now began on a new memorandum that would give the tribals more latitude. The intention was to say that they could use lethal force if the attempted capture seemed impossible to complete successfully.¹²¹

Early drafts of this highly sensitive document emphasized that it authorized only a capture operation. The tribals were to be paid only if they captured Bin Ladin, not if they killed him. Officials throughout the government approved this draft. But on December 21, the day after principals decided not to launch