

and do something that everyone would later regret. Discussing potential repercussions in the region of his military responsibility, Zinni said, "It was easy to take the shot from Washington and walk away from it. We had to live there."¹³⁹

Zinni's distinct preference would have been to build up counterterrorism capabilities in neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan. But he told us that he could not drum up much interest in or money for such a purpose from Washington, partly, he thought, because these countries had dictatorial governments.¹⁴⁰

After the decision—in which fear of collateral damage was an important factor—not to use cruise missiles against Kandahar in December 1998, Shelton and officers in the Pentagon developed plans for using an AC-130 gunship instead of cruise missile strikes. Designed specifically for the special forces, the version of the AC-130 known as "Spooky" can fly in fast or from high altitude, undetected by radar; guided to its zone by extraordinarily complex electronics, it is capable of rapidly firing precision-guided 25, 40, and 105 mm projectiles. Because this system could target more precisely than a salvo of cruise missiles, it had a much lower risk of causing collateral damage. After giving Clarke a briefing and being encouraged to proceed, Shelton formally directed Zinni and General Peter Schoomaker, who headed the Special Operations Command, to develop plans for an AC-130 mission against Bin Ladin's headquarters and infrastructure in Afghanistan. The Joint Staff prepared a decision paper for deployment of the Special Operations aircraft.¹⁴¹

Though Berger and Clarke continued to indicate interest in this option, the AC-130s were never deployed. Clarke wrote at the time that Zinni opposed their use, and John Maher, the Joint Staff's deputy director of operations, agreed that this was Zinni's position. Zinni himself does not recall blocking the option. He told us that he understood the Special Operations Command had never thought the intelligence good enough to justify actually moving AC-130s into position. Schoomaker says, on the contrary, that he thought the AC-130 option feasible.¹⁴²

The most likely explanation for the two generals' differing recollections is that both of them thought serious preparation for any such operations would require a long-term redeployment of Special Operations forces to the Middle East or South Asia. The AC-130s would need bases because the aircraft's unrefueled range was only a little over 2,000 miles. They needed search-and-rescue backup, which would have still less range. Thus an AC-130 deployment had to be embedded in a wider political and military concept involving Pakistan or other neighboring countries to address issues relating to basing and overflight. No one ever put such an initiative on the table. Zinni therefore cautioned about simply ordering up AC-130 deployments for a quick strike; Schoomaker planned for what he saw as a practical strike option; and the underlying issues were not fully engaged. The Joint Staff decision paper was never turned into an interagency policy paper.