

attempt to gather intelligence and wait for an opportunity. One Special Operations commander said his view of actionable intelligence was that if you “give me the action, I will give you the intelligence.”¹⁴⁸ But this course would still be risky, in light both of the difficulties already mentioned and of the danger that U.S. operations might fail disastrously. We have found no evidence that such a long-term political-military approach for using Special Operations Forces in the region was proposed to or analyzed by the Small Group, even though such capability had been honed for at least a decade within the Defense Department.

Therefore the debate looked to some like bold proposals from civilians meeting hypercaution from the military. Clarke saw it this way. Of the military, he said to us, “They were very, very, very reluctant.”¹⁴⁹ But from another perspective, poorly informed proposals for bold action were pitted against experienced professional judgment. That was how Secretary of Defense Cohen viewed it. He said to us: “I would have to place my judgment call in terms of, do I believe that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, former commander of Special Forces command, is in a better position to make a judgment on the feasibility of this than, perhaps, Mr. Clarke?”¹⁵⁰

Beyond a large-scale political-military commitment to build up a covert or clandestine capability using American personnel on the ground, either military or CIA, there was a still larger option that could have been considered—invading Afghanistan itself. Every official we questioned about the possibility of an invasion of Afghanistan said that it was almost unthinkable, absent a provocation such as 9/11, because of poor prospects for cooperation from Pakistan and other nations and because they believed the public would not support it. Cruise missiles were and would remain the only military option on the table.

The Desert Camp, February 1999

Early in 1999, the CIA received reporting that Bin Ladin was spending much of his time at one of several camps in the Afghan desert south of Kandahar. At the beginning of February, Bin Ladin was reportedly located in the vicinity of the Sheikh Ali camp, a desert hunting camp being used by visitors from a Gulf state. Public sources have stated that these visitors were from the United Arab Emirates.¹⁵¹

Reporting from the CIA's assets provided a detailed description of the hunting camp, including its size, location, resources, and security, as well as of Bin Ladin's smaller, adjacent camp.¹⁵² Because this was not in an urban area, missiles launched against it would have less risk of causing collateral damage. On February 8, the military began to ready itself for a possible strike.¹⁵³ The next day, national technical intelligence confirmed the location and description of the larger camp and showed the nearby presence of an official aircraft of the United Arab Emirates. But the location of Bin Ladin's quarters could not be pinned down so precisely.¹⁵⁴ The CIA did its best to answer a host of questions