

Kandahar, May 1999

It was in Kandahar that perhaps the last, and most likely the best, opportunity arose for targeting Bin Ladin with cruise missiles before 9/11. In May 1999, CIA assets in Afghanistan reported on Bin Ladin's location in and around Kandahar over the course of five days and nights. The reporting was very detailed and came from several sources. If this intelligence was not "actionable," working-level officials said at the time and today, it was hard for them to imagine how any intelligence on Bin Ladin in Afghanistan would meet the standard. Communications were good, and the cruise missiles were ready. "This was in our strike zone," a senior military officer said. "It was a fat pitch, a home run." He expected the missiles to fly. When the decision came back that they should stand down, not shoot, the officer said, "we all just slumped." He told us he knew of no one at the Pentagon or the CIA who thought it was a bad gamble. Bin Ladin "should have been a dead man" that night, he said.¹⁷³

Working-level CIA officials agreed. While there was a conflicting intelligence report about Bin Ladin's whereabouts, the experts discounted it. At the time, CIA working-level officials were told by their managers that the strikes were not ordered because the military doubted the intelligence and worried about collateral damage. Replying to a frustrated colleague in the field, the Bin Ladin unit chief wrote: "having a chance to get [Bin Ladin] three times in 36 hours and foregoing the chance each time has made me a bit angry. . . . [T]he DCI finds himself alone at the table, with the other princip[als] basically saying 'we'll go along with your decision Mr. Director,' and implicitly saying that the Agency will hang alone if the attack doesn't get Bin Ladin."¹⁷⁴ But the military officer quoted earlier recalled that the Pentagon had been willing to act. He told us that Clarke informed him and others that Tenet assessed the chance of the intelligence being accurate as 50–50. This officer believed that Tenet's assessment was the key to the decision.¹⁷⁵

Tenet told us he does not remember any details about this episode, except that the intelligence came from a single uncorroborated source and that there was a risk of collateral damage. The story is further complicated by Tenet's absence from the critical principals meeting on this strike (he was apparently out of town); his deputy, John Gordon, was representing the CIA. Gordon recalled having presented the intelligence in a positive light, with appropriate caveats, but stating that this intelligence was about as good as it could get.¹⁷⁶

Berger remembered only that in all such cases, the call had been Tenet's. Berger felt sure that Tenet was eager to get Bin Ladin. In his view, Tenet did his job responsibly. "George would call and say, 'We just don't have it,'" Berger said.¹⁷⁷

The decision not to strike in May 1999 may now seem hard to understand. In fairness, we note two points: First, in December 1998, the principals' wariness about ordering a strike appears to have been vindicated: Bin Ladin left his room unexpectedly, and if a strike had been ordered he would not have been