

hit. Second, the administration, and the CIA in particular, was in the midst of intense scrutiny and criticism in May 1999 because faulty intelligence had just led the United States to mistakenly bomb the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO war against Serbia. This episode may have made officials more cautious than might otherwise have been the case.¹⁷⁸

From May 1999 until September 2001, policymakers did not again actively consider a missile strike against Bin Ladin.¹⁷⁹ The principals did give some further consideration in 1999 to more general strikes, reviving Clarke's "Delenda" notion of hitting camps and infrastructure to disrupt al Qaeda's organization. In the first months of 1999, the Joint Staff had developed broader target lists to undertake a "focused campaign" against the infrastructure of Bin Ladin's network and to hit Taliban government sites as well. General Shelton told us that the Taliban targets were "easier" to hit and more substantial.¹⁸⁰

Part of the context for considering broader strikes in the summer of 1999 was renewed worry about Bin Ladin's ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In May and June, the U.S. government received a flurry of ominous reports, including more information about chemical weapons training or development at the Derunta camp and possible attempts to amass nuclear material at Herat.¹⁸¹

By late June, U.S. and other intelligence services had concluded that al Qaeda was in pre-attack mode, perhaps again involving Abu Hafz the Mauritanian. On June 25, at Clarke's request, Berger convened the Small Group in his office to discuss the alert, Bin Ladin's WMD programs, and his location. "Should we pre-empt by attacking UBL facilities?" Clarke urged Berger to ask his colleagues.¹⁸²

In his handwritten notes on the meeting paper, Berger jotted down the presence of 7 to 11 families in the Tarnak Farms facility, which could mean 60–65 casualties. Berger noted the possible "slight impact" on Bin Ladin and added, "if he responds, we're blamed."¹⁸³ The NSC staff raised the option of waiting until after a terrorist attack, and then retaliating, including possible strikes on the Taliban. But Clarke observed that Bin Ladin would probably empty his camps after an attack.¹⁸⁴

The military route seemed to have reached a dead end. In December 1999, Clarke urged Berger to ask the principals to ask themselves: "Why have there been no real options lately for direct US military action?"¹⁸⁵ There are no notes recording whether the question was discussed or, if it was, how it was answered.

Reports of possible attacks by Bin Ladin kept coming in throughout 1999. They included a threat to blow up the FBI building in Washington, D.C. In September, the CSG reviewed a possible threat to a flight out of Los Angeles or New York.¹⁸⁶ These warnings came amid dozens of others that flooded in.

With military and diplomatic options practically exhausted by the summer of 1999, the U.S. government seemed to be back where it had been in the summer of 1998—relying on the CIA to find some other option. That