

nis also had identified Nashiri, whose links to al Qaeda and the 1998 embassy bombings were even more well-known.¹³³

In other words, the Yemenis provided strong evidence connecting the *Cole* attack to al Qaeda during the second half of November, identifying individual operatives whom the United States knew were part of al Qaeda. During December the United States was able to corroborate this evidence. But the United States did not have evidence about Bin Ladin's personal involvement in the attacks until Nashiri and Khallad were captured in 2002 and 2003.

Considering a Response

The *Cole* attack prompted renewed consideration of what could be done about al Qaeda. According to Clarke, Berger upbraided DCI Tenet so sharply after the *Cole* attack—repeatedly demanding to know why the United States had to put up with such attacks—that Tenet walked out of a meeting of the principals.¹³⁴

The CIA got some additional covert action authorities, adding several other individuals to the coverage of the July 1999 Memorandum of Notification that allowed the United States to develop capture operations against al Qaeda leaders in a variety of places and circumstances. Tenet developed additional options, such as strengthening relationships with the Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks and slowing recent al Qaeda-related activities in Lebanon.¹³⁵

On the diplomatic track, Berger agreed on October 30, 2000, to let the State Department make another approach to Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abdul Jalil about expelling Bin Ladin. The national security advisor ordered that the U.S. message “be stern and foreboding.” This warning was similar to those issued in 1998 and 1999. Meanwhile, the administration was working with Russia on new UN sanctions against Mullah Omar's regime.¹³⁶

President Clinton told us that before he could launch further attacks on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, or deliver an ultimatum to the Taliban threatening strikes if they did not immediately expel Bin Ladin, the CIA or the FBI had to be sure enough that they would “be willing to stand up in public and say, we believe that he [Bin Ladin] did this.” He said he was very frustrated that he could not get a definitive enough answer to do something about the *Cole* attack.¹³⁷ Similarly, Berger recalled that to go to war, a president needs to be able to say that his senior intelligence and law enforcement officers have concluded who is responsible. He recalled that the intelligence agencies had strong suspicions, but had reached “no conclusion by the time we left office that it was al Qaeda.”¹³⁸

Our only sources for what intelligence officials thought at the time are what they said in informal briefings. Soon after the *Cole* attack and for the remainder of the Clinton administration, analysts stopped distributing written reports about who was responsible. The topic was obviously sensitive, and both Ambassador Bodine in Yemen and CIA analysts in Washington presumed that the government did not want reports circulating around the agencies that