

rorist facilities in Afghanistan, and expulsion of all terrorists from Afghanistan within 90 days. Noncompliance would mean U.S. “force directed at the Taliban itself” and U.S. efforts to ensure that the Taliban would never defeat the Northern Alliance. No such ultimatum was issued.¹⁴³

Nearly a month later, on December 21, the CIA made another presentation to the Small Group of principals on the investigative team’s findings. The CIA’s briefing slides said that their “preliminary judgment” was that Bin Ladin’s al Qaeda group “supported the attack” on the *Cole*, based on strong circumstantial evidence tying key perpetrators of the attack to al Qaeda. The CIA listed the key suspects, including Nashiri. In addition, the CIA detailed the timeline of the operation, from the mid-1999 preparations, to the failed attack on the USS *The Sullivans* on January 3, 2000, through a meeting held by the operation’s day before the attack.¹⁴⁴

The slides said that so far the CIA had “no definitive answer on [the] crucial question of outside direction of the attack—how and by whom.” The CIA noted that the Yemenis claimed that Khallad helped direct the operation from Afghanistan or Pakistan, possibly as Bin Ladin’s intermediary, but that it had not seen the Yemeni evidence. However, the CIA knew from both human sources and signals intelligence that Khallad was tied to al Qaeda. The prepared briefing concluded that while some reporting about al Qaeda’s role might have merit, those reports offered few specifics. Intelligence gave some ambiguous indicators of al Qaeda direction of the attack.¹⁴⁵

This, President Clinton and Berger told us, was not the conclusion they needed in order to go to war or deliver an ultimatum to the Taliban threatening war. The election and change of power was not the issue, President Clinton added. There was enough time. If the agencies had given him a definitive answer, he said, he would have sought a UN Security Council ultimatum and given the Taliban one, two, or three days before taking further action against both al Qaeda and the Taliban. But he did not think it would be responsible for a president to launch an invasion of another country just based on a “preliminary judgment.”¹⁴⁶

Other advisers have echoed this concern. Some of Secretary Albright’s advisers warned her at the time to be sure the evidence conclusively linked Bin Ladin to the *Cole* before considering any response, especially a military one, because such action might inflame the Islamic world and increase support for the Taliban. Defense Secretary Cohen told us it would not have been prudent to risk killing civilians based only on an assumption that al Qaeda was responsible. General Shelton added that there was an outstanding question as to who was responsible and what the targets were.¹⁴⁷

Clarke recalled that while the Pentagon and the State Department had reservations about retaliation, the issue never came to a head because the FBI and the CIA never reached a firm conclusion. He thought they were “holding back.” He said he did not know why, but his impression was that Tenet and