

6.4 CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

On November 7, 2000, American voters went to the polls in what turned out to be one of the closest presidential contests in U.S. history—an election campaign during which there was a notable absence of serious discussion of the al Qaeda threat or terrorism. Election night became a 36-day legal fight. Until the Supreme Court's 5–4 ruling on December 12 and Vice President Al Gore's concession, no one knew whether Gore or his Republican opponent, Texas Governor George W. Bush, would become president in 2001.

The dispute over the election and the 36-day delay cut in half the normal transition period. Given that a presidential election in the United States brings wholesale change in personnel, this loss of time hampered the new administration in identifying, recruiting, clearing, and obtaining Senate confirmation of key appointees.

From the Old to the New

The principal figures on Bush's White House staff would be National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who had been a member of the NSC staff in the administration of George H. W. Bush; Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, who had been an assistant secretary of defense under the first Bush; and Chief of Staff Andrew Card, who had served that same administration as deputy chief of staff, then secretary of transportation. For secretary of state, Bush chose General Colin Powell, who had been national security advisor for President Ronald Reagan and then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For secretary of defense he selected Donald Rumsfeld, a former member of Congress, White House chief of staff, and, under President Gerald Ford, already once secretary of defense. Bush decided fairly soon to keep Tenet as Director of Central Intelligence. Louis Freeh, who had statutory ten-year tenure, would remain director of the FBI until his voluntary retirement in the summer of 2001.

Bush and his principal advisers had all received briefings on terrorism, including Bin Ladin. In early September 2000, Acting Deputy Director of Central Intelligence John McLaughlin led a team to Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, and gave him a wide-ranging, four-hour review of sensitive information. Ben Bonk, deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, used one of the four hours to deal with terrorism. To highlight the danger of terrorists obtaining chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons, Bonk brought along a mock-up suitcase to evoke the way the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult had spread deadly sarin nerve agent on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Bonk told Bush that Americans would die from terrorism during the next four years.¹⁵⁶ During the long contest after election day, the CIA set up an office in Crawford to pass intelligence to Bush and some of his key advisers.¹⁵⁷ Tenet, accompanied by his deputy director for operations, James Pavitt, briefed President-elect Bush at Blair House during the transition. President Bush told