

us he asked Tenet whether the CIA could kill Bin Ladin, and Tenet replied that killing Bin Ladin would have an effect but would not end the threat. President Bush told us Tenet said to him that the CIA had all the authority it needed.¹⁵⁸

In December, Bush met with Clinton for a two-hour, one-on-one discussion of national security and foreign policy challenges. Clinton recalled saying to Bush, "I think you will find that by far your biggest threat is Bin Ladin and the al Qaeda." Clinton told us that he also said, "One of the great regrets of my presidency is that I didn't get him [Bin Ladin] for you, because I tried to."¹⁵⁹ Bush told the Commission that he felt sure President Clinton had mentioned terrorism, but did not remember much being said about al Qaeda. Bush recalled that Clinton had emphasized other issues such as North Korea and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.¹⁶⁰

In early January, Clarke briefed Rice on terrorism. He gave similar presentations—describing al Qaeda as both an adaptable global network of jihadist organizations and a lethal core terrorist organization—to Vice President-elect Cheney, Hadley, and Secretary of State-designate Powell. One line in the briefing slides said that al Qaeda had sleeper cells in more than 40 countries, including the United States.¹⁶¹ Berger told us that he made a point of dropping in on Clarke's briefing of Rice to emphasize the importance of the issue. Later the same day, Berger met with Rice. He says that he told her the Bush administration would spend more time on terrorism in general and al Qaeda in particular than on anything else. Rice's recollection was that Berger told her she would be surprised at how much more time she was going to spend on terrorism than she expected, but that the bulk of their conversation dealt with the faltering Middle East peace process and North Korea. Clarke said that the new team, having been out of government for eight years, had a steep learning curve to understand al Qaeda and the new transnational terrorist threat.¹⁶²

Organizing a New Administration

During the short transition, Rice and Hadley concentrated on staffing and organizing the NSC.¹⁶³ Their policy priorities differed from those of the Clinton administration. Those priorities included China, missile defense, the collapse of the Middle East peace process, and the Persian Gulf.¹⁶⁴ Generally aware that terrorism had changed since the first Bush administration, they paid particular attention to the question of how counterterrorism policy should be coordinated. Rice had asked University of Virginia history professor Philip Zelikow to advise her on the transition.¹⁶⁵ Hadley and Zelikow asked Clarke and his deputy, Roger Cressey, for a special briefing on the terrorist threat and how Clarke's Transnational Threats Directorate and Counterterrorism Security Group functioned.¹⁶⁶

In the NSC during the first Bush administration, many tough issues were addressed at the level of the Deputies Committee. Issues did not go to the principals unless the deputies had been unable to resolve them. Presidential Deci-