

need for formal meetings. If, however, he decided that an event or an issue called for action, Rice would typically call on Hadley to have the Deputies Committee develop and review options. The President said that this process often tried his patience but that he understood the necessity for coordination.¹⁷¹

Early Decisions

Within the first few days after Bush's inauguration, Clarke approached Rice in an effort to get her—and the new President—to give terrorism very high priority and to act on the agenda that he had pushed during the last few months of the previous administration. After Rice requested that all senior staff identify desirable major policy reviews or initiatives, Clarke submitted an elaborate memorandum on January 25, 2001. He attached to it his 1998 Delenda Plan and the December 2000 strategy paper. "We urgently need . . . a Principals level review on the *al Qida* network," Clarke wrote.¹⁷²

He wanted the Principals Committee to decide whether al Qaeda was "a first order threat" or a more modest worry being overblown by "chicken little" alarmists. Alluding to the transition briefing that he had prepared for Rice, Clarke wrote that al Qaeda "is not some narrow, little terrorist issue that needs to be included in broader regional policy." Two key decisions that had been deferred, he noted, concerned covert aid to keep the Northern Alliance alive when fighting began again in Afghanistan in the spring, and covert aid to the Uzbeks. Clarke also suggested that decisions should be made soon on messages to the Taliban and Pakistan over the al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan, on possible new money for CIA operations, and on "when and how . . . to respond to the attack on the USS Cole."¹⁷³

The national security advisor did not respond directly to Clarke's memorandum. No Principals Committee meeting on al Qaeda was held until September 4, 2001 (although the Principals Committee met frequently on other subjects, such as the Middle East peace process, Russia, and the Persian Gulf).¹⁷⁴ But Rice and Hadley began to address the issues Clarke had listed. What to do or say about the *Cole* had been an obvious question since inauguration day. When the attack occurred, 25 days before the election, candidate Bush had said to CNN, "I hope that we can gather enough intelligence to figure out who did the act and take the necessary action. There must be a consequence."¹⁷⁵ Since the Clinton administration had not responded militarily, what was the Bush administration to do?

On January 25, Tenet briefed the President on the *Cole* investigation. The written briefing repeated for top officials of the new administration what the CIA had told the Clinton White House in November. This included the "preliminary judgment" that al Qaeda was responsible, with the caveat that no evidence had yet been found that Bin Ladin himself ordered the attack. Tenet told us he had no recollection of a conversation with the President about this briefing.¹⁷⁶

In his January 25 memo, Clarke had advised Rice that the government should respond to the *Cole* attack, but "should take advantage of the policy that