

‘we will respond at a time, place and manner of our own choosing’ and not be forced into knee-jerk responses.”¹⁷⁷ Before Vice President Cheney visited the CIA in mid-February, Clarke sent him a memo—outside the usual White House document-management system—suggesting that he ask CIA officials “what additional information is needed before CIA can definitively conclude that al-Qida was responsible” for the *Cole*.¹⁷⁸ In March 2001, the CIA’s briefing slides for Rice were still describing the CIA’s “preliminary judgment” that a “strong circumstantial case” could be made against al Qaeda but noting that the CIA continued to lack “conclusive information on external command and control” of the attack.¹⁷⁹ Clarke and his aides continued to provide Rice and Hadley with evidence reinforcing the case against al Qaeda and urging action.¹⁸⁰

The President explained to us that he had been concerned lest an ineffectual air strike just serve to give Bin Ladin a propaganda advantage. He said he had not been told about Clinton administration warnings to the Taliban. The President told us that he had concluded that the United States must use ground forces for a job like this.¹⁸¹

Rice told us that there was never a formal, recorded decision not to retaliate specifically for the *Cole* attack. Exchanges with the President, between the President and Tenet, and between herself and Powell and Rumsfeld had produced a consensus that “tit-for-tat” responses were likely to be counterproductive. This had been the case, she thought, with the cruise missile strikes of August 1998. The new team at the Pentagon did not push for action. On the contrary, Rumsfeld thought that too much time had passed and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, thought that the *Cole* attack was “stale.” Hadley said that in the end, the administration’s real response to the *Cole* would be a new, more aggressive strategy against al Qaeda.¹⁸²

The administration decided to propose to Congress a substantial increase in counterterrorism funding for national security agencies, including the CIA and the FBI. This included a 27 percent increase in counterterrorism funding for the CIA.¹⁸³

Starting a Review

In early March, the administration postponed action on proposals for increasing aid to the Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks. Rice noted at the time that a more wide-ranging examination of policy toward Afghanistan was needed first. She wanted the review very soon.¹⁸⁴

Rice and others recalled the President saying, “I’m tired of swatting at flies.”¹⁸⁵ The President reportedly also said, “I’m tired of playing defense. I want to play offense. I want to take the fight to the terrorists.”¹⁸⁶ President Bush explained to us that he had become impatient. He apparently had heard proposals for rolling back al Qaeda but felt that catching terrorists one by one or even cell by cell was not an approach likely to succeed in the long run. At the same time, he said, he understood that policy had to be developed slowly so that diplomatic and financial and military measures could mesh with one another.¹⁸⁷