

Hadley convened an informal Deputies Committee meeting on March 7, when some of the deputies had not yet been confirmed. For the first time, Clarke's various proposals—for aid to the Northern Alliance and the Uzbeks and for Predator missions—went before the group that, in the Bush NSC, would do most of the policy work. Though they made no decisions on these specific proposals, Hadley apparently concluded that there should be a presidential national security policy directive (NSPD) on terrorism.¹⁸⁸

Clarke would later express irritation about the deputies' insistence that a strategy for coping with al Qaeda be framed within the context of a regional policy. He doubted that the benefits would compensate for the time lost. The administration had in fact proceeded with Principals Committee meetings on topics including Iraq and Sudan without prior contextual review, and Clarke favored moving ahead similarly with a narrow counterterrorism agenda.¹⁸⁹ But the President's senior advisers saw the al Qaeda problem as part of a puzzle that could not be assembled without filling in the pieces for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rice deferred a Principals Committee meeting on al Qaeda until the deputies had developed a new policy for their consideration.

The full Deputies Committee discussed al Qaeda on April 30. CIA briefing slides described al Qaeda as the "most dangerous group we face," citing its "leadership, experience, resources, safe haven in Afghanistan, [and] focus on attacking U.S." The slides warned, "There will be more attacks."¹⁹⁰

At the meeting, the deputies endorsed covert aid to Uzbekistan. Regarding the Northern Alliance, they "agreed to make no major commitment at this time." Washington would first consider options for aiding other anti-Taliban groups.¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, the administration would "initiate a comprehensive review of U.S. policy on Pakistan" and explore policy options on Afghanistan, "including the option of supporting regime change."¹⁹² Working-level officials were also to consider new steps on terrorist financing and America's perennially troubled public diplomacy efforts in the Muslim world, where NSC staff warned that "we have by and large ceded the court of public opinion" to al Qaeda.

While Clarke remained concerned about the pace of the policy review, he now saw a greater possibility of persuading the deputies to recognize the changed nature of terrorism.¹⁹³ The process of fleshing out that strategy was under way.

6.5 THE NEW ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH

The Bush administration in its first months faced many problems other than terrorism. They included the collapse of the Middle East peace process and, in April, a crisis over a U.S. "spy plane" brought down in Chinese territory. The new administration also focused heavily on Russia, a new nuclear strategy that allowed missile defenses, Europe, Mexico, and the Persian Gulf.