

In the spring, reporting on terrorism surged dramatically. In chapter 8, we will explore this reporting and the ways agencies responded. These increasingly alarming reports, briefed to the President and top officials, became part of the context in which the new administration weighed its options for policy on al Qaeda.

Except for a few reports that the CSG considered and apparently judged to be unreliable, none of these pointed specifically to possible al Qaeda action inside the United States—although the CSG continued to be concerned about the domestic threat. The mosaic of threat intelligence came from the Counterterrorist Center, which collected only abroad. Its reports were not supplemented by reports from the FBI. Clarke had expressed concern about an al Qaeda presence in the United States, and he worried about an attack on the White House by “Hizbollah, Hamas, al Qida and other terrorist organizations.”¹⁹⁴

In May, President Bush announced that Vice President Cheney would himself lead an effort looking at preparations for managing a possible attack by weapons of mass destruction and at more general problems of national preparedness. The next few months were mainly spent organizing the effort and bringing an admiral from the Sixth Fleet back to Washington to manage it. The Vice President’s task force was just getting under way when the 9/11 attack occurred.¹⁹⁵

On May 29, at Tenet’s request, Rice and Tenet converted their usual weekly meeting into a broader discussion on al Qaeda; participants included Clarke, CTC chief Cofer Black, and “Richard,” a group chief with authority over the Bin Ladin unit. Rice asked about “taking the offensive” and whether any approach could be made to influence Bin Ladin or the Taliban. Clarke and Black replied that the CIA’s ongoing disruption activities *were* “taking the offensive” and that Bin Ladin could not be deterred. A wide-ranging discussion then ensued about “breaking the back” of Bin Ladin’s organization.¹⁹⁶

Tenet emphasized the ambitious plans for covert action that the CIA had developed in December 2000. In discussing the draft authorities for this program in March, CIA officials had pointed out that the spending level envisioned for these plans was larger than the CIA’s entire current budget for counterterrorism covert action. It would be a multiyear program, requiring such levels of spending for about five years.¹⁹⁷

The CIA official, “Richard,” told us that Rice “got it.” He said she agreed with his conclusions about what needed to be done, although he complained to us that the policy process did not follow through quickly enough.¹⁹⁸ Clarke and Black were asked to develop a range of options for attacking Bin Ladin’s organization, from the least to most ambitious.¹⁹⁹

Rice and Hadley asked Clarke and his staff to draw up the new presidential directive. On June 7, Hadley circulated the first draft, describing it as “an admittedly ambitious” program for confronting al Qaeda.²⁰⁰ The draft NSPD’s goal was to “eliminate the al Qida network of terrorist groups as a