

not enough to man a full platoon. Measured on a governmental scale, the resources behind it were trivial. The group itself was dispatched by an organization based in one of the poorest, most remote, and least industrialized countries on earth. This organization recruited a mixture of young fanatics and highly educated zealots who could not find suitable places in their home societies or were driven from them.

To understand these events, we attempted to reconstruct some of the context of the 1990s. Americans celebrated the end of the Cold War with a mixture of relief and satisfaction. The people of the United States hoped to enjoy a peace dividend, as U.S. spending on national security was cut following the end of the Soviet military threat.

The United States emerged into the post-Cold War world as the globe's pre-eminent military power. But the vacuum created by the sudden demise of the Soviet Union created fresh sources of instability and new challenges for the United States. President George H.W. Bush dealt with the first of these in 1990 and 1991 when he led an international coalition to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Other examples of U.S. leaders' handling new threats included the removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan; the Nunn-Lugar threat reduction program to help contain new nuclear dangers; and international involvement in the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.

America stood out as an object for admiration, envy, and blame. This created a kind of cultural asymmetry. To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were.

Understanding the Danger

If the government's leaders understood the gravity of the threat they faced and understood at the same time that their policies to eliminate it were not likely to succeed any time soon, then history's judgment will be harsh. Did they understand the gravity of the threat?

The U.S. government responded vigorously when the attack was on our soil. Both Ramzi Yousef, who organized the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and Mir Amal Kansi, who in 1993 killed two CIA employees as they waited to go to work in Langley, Virginia, were the objects of relentless, uncompromising, and successful efforts to bring them back to the United States to stand trial for their crimes.

Before 9/11, al Qaeda and its affiliates had killed fewer than 50 Americans, including the East Africa embassy bombings and the *Cole* attack. The U.S. government took the threat seriously, but not in the sense of mustering anything like the kind of effort that would be gathered to confront an enemy of the first, second, or even third rank. The modest national effort exerted to contain Serbia and its depredations in the Balkans between 1995 and 1999, for example, was orders of magnitude larger than that devoted to al Qaeda.