

As best we can determine, neither in 2000 nor in the first eight months of 2001 did any polling organization in the United States think the subject of terrorism sufficiently on the minds of the public to warrant asking a question about it in a major national survey. Bin Ladin, al Qaeda, or even terrorism was not an important topic in the 2000 presidential campaign. Congress and the media called little attention to it.

If a president wanted to rally the American people to a warlike effort, he would need to publicize an assessment of the growing al Qaeda danger. Our government could spark a full public discussion of who Usama Bin Ladin was, what kind of organization he led, what Bin Ladin or al Qaeda intended, what past attacks they had sponsored or encouraged, and what capabilities they were bringing together for future assaults. We believe American and international public opinion might have been different—and so might the range of options for a president—had they been informed of these details. Recent examples of such debates include calls to arms against such threats as Serbian ethnic cleansing, biological attacks, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, global climate change, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

While we now know that al Qaeda was formed in 1988, at the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the intelligence community did not describe this organization, at least in documents we have seen, until 1999. A National Intelligence Estimate distributed in July 1995 predicted future terrorist attacks against the United States—and *in* the United States. It warned that this danger would increase over the next several years. It specified as particular points of vulnerability the White House, the Capitol, symbols of capitalism such as Wall Street, critical infrastructure such as power grids, areas where people congregate such as sports arenas, and civil aviation generally. It warned that the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been intended to kill a lot of people, not to achieve any more traditional political goal.

This 1995 estimate described the greatest danger as “transient groupings of individuals” that lacked “strong organization but rather are loose affiliations.” They operate “outside traditional circles but have access to a worldwide network of training facilities and safehavens.”² This was an excellent summary of the emerging danger, based on what was then known.

In 1996–1997, the intelligence community received new information making clear that Bin Ladin headed his own terrorist group, with its own targeting agenda and operational commanders. Also revealed was the previously unknown involvement of Bin Ladin’s organization in the 1992 attack on a Yemeni hotel quartering U.S. military personnel, the 1993 shootdown of U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters in Somalia, and quite possibly the 1995 Riyadh bombing of the American training mission to the Saudi National Guard.

The 1997 update of the 1995 estimate did not discuss the new intelligence. It did state that the terrorist danger depicted in 1995 would persist. In the update’s summary of key points, the only reference to Bin Ladin was this sen-