

tence: "Iran and its surrogates, as well as terrorist financier Usama Bin Ladin and his followers, have stepped up their threats and surveillance of US facilities abroad in what also may be a portent of possible additional attacks in the United States."³ Bin Ladin was mentioned in only two other sentences in the six-page report. The al Qaeda organization was not mentioned. The 1997 update was the last national estimate on the terrorism danger completed before 9/11.⁴

From 1998 to 2001, a number of very good analytical papers were distributed on specific topics. These included Bin Ladin's political philosophy, his command of a global network, analysis of information from terrorists captured in Jordan in December 1999, al Qaeda's operational style, and the evolving goals of the Islamist extremist movement. Many classified articles for morning briefings were prepared for the highest officials in the government with titles such as "Bin Ladin Threatening to Attack US Aircraft [with anti-aircraft missiles]" (June 1998), "Strains Surface Between Taliban and Bin Ladin" (January 1999), "Terrorist Threat to US Interests in Caucasus" (June 1999), "Bin Ladin to Exploit Looser Security During Holidays" (December 1999), "Bin Ladin Evading Sanctions" (March 2000), "Bin Ladin's Interest in Biological, Radiological Weapons" (February 2001), "Taliban Holding Firm on Bin Ladin for Now" (March 2001), "Terrorist Groups Said Cooperating on US Hostage Plot" (May 2001), and "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in the US" (August 2001).⁵

Despite such reports and a 1999 paper on Bin Ladin's command structure for al Qaeda, there were no complete portraits of his strategy or of the extent of his organization's involvement in past terrorist attacks. Nor had the intelligence community provided an authoritative depiction of his organization's relationships with other governments, or the scale of the threat his organization posed to the United States.

Though Deputy DCI John McLaughlin said to us that the cumulative output of the Counterterrorist Center (CTC) "dramatically eclipsed" any analysis that could have appeared in a fresh National Intelligence Estimate, he conceded that most of the work of the Center's 30- to 40-person analytic group dealt with collection issues.⁶ In late 2000, DCI George Tenet recognized the deficiency of strategic analysis against al Qaeda. To tackle the problem within the CTC he appointed a senior manager, who briefed him in March 2001 on "creating a strategic assessment capability." The CTC established a new strategic assessments branch during July 2001. The decision to add about ten analysts to this effort was seen as a major bureaucratic victory, but the CTC labored to find them. The new chief of this branch reported for duty on September 10, 2001.⁷

Whatever the weaknesses in the CIA's portraiture, both Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush and their top advisers told us they got the picture—they understood Bin Ladin was a danger. But given the character and pace of their policy efforts, we do not believe they fully understood just how many people