

did not fail; instead, they were not really tried. They were not employed to analyze the enemy that, as the twentieth century closed, was most likely to launch a surprise attack directly against the United States.

11.2 POLICY

The road to 9/11 again illustrates how the large, unwieldy U.S. government tended to underestimate a threat that grew ever greater. The terrorism fostered by Bin Ladin and al Qaeda was different from anything the government had faced before. The existing mechanisms for handling terrorist acts had been trial and punishment for acts committed by individuals; sanction, reprisal, deterrence, or war for acts by hostile governments. The actions of al Qaeda fit neither category. Its crimes were on a scale approaching acts of war, but they were committed by a loose, far-flung, nebulous conspiracy with no territories or citizens or assets that could be readily threatened, overwhelmed, or destroyed.

Early in 2001, DCI Tenet and Deputy Director for Operations James Pavitt gave an intelligence briefing to President-elect Bush, Vice President-elect Cheney, and Rice; it included the topic of al Qaeda. Pavitt recalled conveying that Bin Ladin was one of the gravest threats to the country.²⁵

Bush asked whether killing Bin Ladin would end the problem. Pavitt said he and the DCI had answered that killing Bin Ladin would have an impact, but would not stop the threat. The CIA later provided more formal assessments to the White House reiterating that conclusion. It added that in the long term, the only way to deal with the threat was to end al Qaeda's ability to use Afghanistan as a sanctuary for its operations.²⁶

Perhaps the most incisive of the advisors on terrorism to the new administration was the holdover Richard Clarke. Yet he admits that his policy advice, even if it had been accepted immediately and turned into action, would not have prevented 9/11.²⁷

We must then ask when the U.S. government had reasonable opportunities to mobilize the country for major action against al Qaeda and its Afghan sanctuary. The main opportunities came after the new information the U.S. government received in 1996–1997, after the embassy bombings of August 1998, after the discoveries of the Jordanian and Ressaam plots in late 1999, and after the attack on the *USS Cole* in October 2000.

The U.S. policy response to al Qaeda before 9/11 was essentially defined following the embassy bombings of August 1998. We described those decisions in chapter 4. It is worth noting that they were made by the Clinton administration under extremely difficult domestic political circumstances. Opponents were seeking the President's impeachment. In addition, in 1998–99 President Clinton was preparing the government for possible war against Serbia, and he