

Insight for the future is thus not easy to apply in practice. It is hardest to mount a major effort while a problem still seems minor. Once the danger has fully materialized, evident to all, mobilizing action is easier—but it then may be too late.

Another possibility, short of putting U.S. personnel on the ground, was to issue a blunt ultimatum to the Taliban, backed by a readiness to at least launch an indefinite air campaign to disable that regime's limited military capabilities and tip the balance in Afghanistan's ongoing civil war. The United States had warned the Taliban that they would be held accountable for further attacks by Bin Ladin against Afghanistan's U.S. interests. The warning had been given in 1998, again in late 1999, once more in the fall of 2000, and again in the summer of 2001. Delivering it repeatedly did not make it more effective.

As evidence of al Qaeda's responsibility for the *Cole* attack came in during November 2000, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger asked the Pentagon to develop a plan for a sustained air campaign against the Taliban. Clarke developed a paper laying out a formal, specific ultimatum. But Clarke's plan apparently did not advance to formal consideration by the Small Group of principals. We have found no indication that the idea was briefed to the new administration or that Clarke passed his paper to them, although the same team of career officials spanned both administrations.

After 9/11, President Bush announced that al Qaeda was responsible for the attack on the USS *Cole*. Before 9/11, neither president took any action. Bin Ladin's inference may well have been that attacks, at least at the level of the *Cole*, were risk free.²⁹

11.3 CAPABILITIES

Earlier chapters describe in detail the actions decided on by the Clinton and Bush administrations. Each president considered or authorized covert actions, a process that consumed considerable time—especially in the Clinton administration—and achieved little success beyond the collection of intelligence. After the August 1998 missile strikes in Afghanistan, naval vessels remained on station in or near the region, prepared to fire cruise missiles. General Hugh Shelton developed as many as 13 different strike options, and did not recommend any of them. The most extended debate on counterterrorism in the Bush administration before 9/11 had to do with missions for the unmanned Predator—whether to use it just to locate Bin Ladin or to wait until it was armed with a missile, so that it could find him and also attack him. Looking back, we are struck with the narrow and unimaginative menu of options for action offered to both President Clinton and President Bush.

Before 9/11, the United States tried to solve the al Qaeda problem with the