

sassination. Decision-makers feared that "the purpose and nature of the operation would be subject to unavoidable misinterpretation . . . in the event that bin Laden, despite our best intentions and efforts, did not survive."⁴³ The tribal team's plans should be set aside, perhaps to be revived later. Meanwhile the agents were encouraged to continue to look for opportunities to catch bin Laden away from Tarnak, traveling only with his bodyguard.

Some of the field-level CIA officers involved in the Tarnak planning reacted bitterly to the decision. They had put a great deal of effort into their work. They believed the raid could succeed. If bin Laden was not stopped now, the challenge he presented would only deepen.

As it happened, this was only the beginning of their frustration.

"The Kingdom's Interests"

PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL, the Saudi intelligence chief, saw the threat posed by Osama bin Laden through a lens colored by Saudi Arabian politics. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri preached against the kingdom in its own language: They denounced the royal family's claim to be the true and legitimate guardians of Sunni Islam's two most important holy places, Mecca and Medina. They appealed to the Koran as inspiration for violent revolt against the ruling al-Sauds. Bin Laden continued to use his wealth and the global channels of digital technology to link up with other Saudi Islamist dissidents inside the kingdom and in exile. For years the Saudis had tried to hold bin Laden at a distance, hoping to isolate and outlast him. "There are no permanent enemies here in Saudi Arabia," a leading prince once remarked, describing the kingdom's swirling webs of family-rooted alliances and enmities.¹ With his shrill cries for jihad against the royal family, however, bin Laden was starting to make himself an exception.

By the late spring of 1998, Turki and other senior princes, including the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah, had become alarmed. Saudi security forces arrested militant bin Laden followers who had smuggled

surface-to-air missiles into the kingdom. In March the Saudis secured the defection of bin Laden's Afghanistan-based treasurer, Mohammed bin Moaisalih. He revealed the names of prominent Saudis who had been secretly sending funds to bin Laden. All the while bin Laden kept holding press conferences and television interviews to denounce the Saudi royals in menacing, unyielding terms. The interviews were beamed by satellite across the Arab world and to the ubiquitous reception dishes sprouting on Saudi rooftops. Aware of this turmoil, Clinton sent Tenet secretly to Riyadh to urge Saudi cooperation. Abdullah authorized Turki to undertake a secret visit to Kandahar. As Turki later described it, he was instructed to meet with Mullah Omar and discuss options for putting bin Laden out of action.²

The mission was constrained by the complexities of Saudi royal power. Then seventy-four, Crown Prince Abdullah had emerged as a newly confident force. His flaccid older brother, King Fahd, remained incapacitated by a stroke suffered several years earlier. With the passage of time royal power had gradually consolidated around Abdullah. A goateed, bulky man with attentive black eyes and Asiatic cheeks, Abdullah had won praise within the kingdom for his straight talk, his hard-headed Saudi nationalism, his ease with ordinary Saudi soldiers and citizens, and his relatively austere lifestyle. He did not summer in Cannes casinos, indulge undisciplined sexual appetites, or recklessly pilot stunt planes, and in the context of the Saudi royal family, this made him a ramrod figure. In Saudi tradition he continued to marry younger wives and father children as he aged. By 1998 he lived in a series of manicured palace complexes that resembled midsized American colleges, with pathways and driveways weaving through watered lawns and stately rows of desert arbor. He kept an idiosyncratic schedule, sleeping in two four-hour shifts, once between 9 P.M. and 1 A.M., and then again between 8 A.M. and noon. In the wee hours he swam in his royal pool and busied himself with paperwork. Each Saturday he flew to Jeddah with several of his brothers, boarded his yacht, motored into the Red Sea for a few hours, ate lunch, and retired for a nap, rocking on the waves. Each Wednesday he went via bus to a desert farm where he bred Arabian horses. He was hardworking and serious about his political responsibilities, but he was austere only in the ways that a multibillionaire with enormous palaces, yachts, and horse farms can be austere.³

Abdullah was skeptical about the eagerness of some Saudi princes to curry favor at any price with the United States. The crown prince understood that Saudi Arabia was not strong enough militarily to abandon its protective alliance with Washington, but he wanted to establish more independence in the relationship. He thought Saudi Arabia should pursue a balanced foreign pol-

icy that included outreach to ambivalent American friends in Europe, especially France. He wanted a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran even though the United States was opposed. He wanted to help the United States achieve a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians but rejected American support for the Israeli government. Abdullah pursued what he saw as an independent brand of Saudi nationalism, and while he was not hostile to American interests, he was not as accommodating as some previous Saudi monarchs had been. Fear of communism no longer united Riyadh and Washington. Abdullah felt he could recast the alliance without undermining its basic solidity.⁴

Abdullah's ascension changed and complicated Prince Turki's position within the royal family. In Saudi political culture, which venerated seniority and family, Turki remained a relatively junior figure. Educated at Georgetown and Oxford, he was one of the royal cabinet's most obviously pro-American princes, not necessarily an asset in the Abdullah era. Turki's vast personal riches and the wealth accumulated by his aides, such as the Badeeb brothers, bothered some of his rivals in the royal family. They felt the Saudi intelligence department had become a financial black hole. In keeping with Abdullah's calls for increased professionalism in Saudi government, Turki's rivals clamored for accountability at the General Intelligence Department.

On the bin Laden question, Turki had to compete for influence with his uncle, the more senior Saudi interior minister Prince Naif, who was the Saudi equivalent of the attorney general and the FBI director combined. Naif and his powerful sons jealously guarded Saudi sovereignty against American interference. They often seemed to hold explicitly anti-American attitudes. They refused repeatedly to respond to requests for investigative assistance from the FBI, the White House counterterrorism office, and the CIA. They interpreted Saudi laws so as to minimize American access to their police files and interrogations. Naif made exceptions and occasionally cooperated with the FBI, but his general policy of stonewalling the Americans put Turki in an awkward position. Turki was the CIA's primary liaison to the Saudi government, and he tried to maintain open channels to Langley. He worked closely with George Tenet on the Middle East peace process and tried to establish a secret, joint working group to share intelligence about the threat posed by bin Laden. But Naif often scuttled his efforts at openness. On terrorism, at least, Turki was unable to deliver much for the CIA. On a desert camping trip, the prince suffered carbon monoxide poisoning after a heater failed inside his tent, and for a while his colleagues at Langley wondered if he had been permanently impaired. As Turki faded, physically and politically, the CIA

watched its links to Saudi Arabia fray—a bond that had been an important part of the agency's worldwide clandestine operations for two decades.⁵

ON A MID-JUNE DAY IN 1998, Prince Turki's jet banked above Kandahar airport. He looked out the airplane window and spotted Tarnak Farm. He had been briefed about bin Laden's use of the compound and had been told to watch out for it as he landed. He could see it now on the barren plain—no better than a squatter's encampment by the standards of Saudi Arabia. Its primitive facilities were centuries removed from the luxuries Turki enjoyed in Jeddah, Riyadh, Paris, and beyond. Turki often reflected on the tensions inherent in Saudi Arabia's oil-fed drive for modernization. The combustible interactions of wealth and Islamic faith, Bedouin tradition and global culture, had opened deep fault lines in the Saudi kingdom. Osama bin Laden had fallen through the cracks, and here he was, in a mud-walled compound on the outskirts of Kandahar, preaching revolution.

Beside the prince on the jet sat Sheikh Abdullah bin Turki, then the Saudi minister of religious endowments. The intelligence chief had invited the sheikh, an Islamic scholar, in the hope that he could convincingly quote Koranic scripture and Islamic philosophy to Mullah Omar to persuade the Taliban leader that it was time to do something about his troublemaking Saudi guest.⁶ The Ministry of Religious Endowments also represented the part of the Saudi establishment that maintained the closest ties to the Taliban through charities and Wahhabi proselytizing groups. Prince Turki hoped to convince Mullah Omar that the Taliban would benefit in many ways if they broke with bin Laden. Saudi charities and religious groups could deliver on that promise.

Turki had never met Mullah Omar. The Taliban leaders he had met, such as Mullah Rabbani, had told him that Omar was very brave and deeply religious. Other Afghans had tried to convince Turki that Omar was reclusive, a religious extremist, intolerant, and unwilling to change his decisions once they were made no matter what the risks. Apart from these assessments from visiting Afghans, Turki had few other ways to evaluate Omar. Turki had only tentative, formal relations with the sectors of the Saudi religious establishment that were closest to the Taliban. Bin Laden's recent manifestos and *fatwas* had attracted Turki's attention, however, and his analysts had studied and catalogued the published texts. Turki's department estimated bin Laden's following of non-Afghans at about two thousand hard-core members. The Saudi intelligence chief regarded bin Laden himself as the movement's key decision

maker. Much of the painstaking, sometimes nasty work of tracking down bin Laden sympathizers inside Saudi Arabia, interrogating them, and investigating leads was carried out by the Naif-led clan at the Interior Ministry, however. Turki was not directly involved in that work, although he often saw the intelligence it produced.⁷

A dozen senior Taliban mullahs, led by their one-eyed emir, met Turki's entourage at Taliban headquarters downtown. Omar offered warm embraces, elaborate courtesies, and steaming cups of green tea. They settled in for a long discussion. As far as Turki was concerned, bin Laden was the only subject.

Turki said later that he "briefed" the Taliban leaders on bin Laden's persistent speeches and interviews denouncing the Saudi kingdom. The prince highlighted what bin Laden "had done against the kingdom's interests." Bin Laden's offense was to seek the violent overthrow of Saudi Arabia's Islamic government, which had special responsibilities to all Muslims worldwide. Turki demanded, as he recalled it, that Mullah Omar either oust bin Laden from Afghan territory or turn him over to Saudi custody. "We made it plain that if they wanted to have good relations with Saudi Arabia, they have to get bin Laden out of Afghanistan," the prince said later. This could be accomplished through strict adherence to Islamic principles, Turki and his guest scholar assured Mullah Omar.⁸

The Taliban leader agreed to Turki's request in principle but suggested that Saudi Arabia and Taliban leaders establish a joint commission of religious scholars to work out how bin Laden would be brought to court in accordance with Islamic law. Turki said later that he regarded this commission idea as a way to help the Taliban save face. It would provide public justification for bin Laden's extradition. Turki interpreted Omar's words as a clear decision to force bin Laden out of Afghanistan. "I repeated to Sheikh Mullah Omar," Turki recalled: "Do you agree that you're going to hand over this fellow and that the only thing required is for us to sit down together and work out the modalities?" And he said, "Assure the king and the crown prince that this is my view."⁹

No one present at the meeting has directly challenged Turki's account of it, but differences and suspicions about what really happened in Kandahar that day persisted for years. Published accounts of the meeting in Pakistan, for example, suggested that Turki had discussed military strategy with the Taliban, offering to fund a drive against Massoud and other holdouts in the Northern Alliance. Turki did not tell the Americans in advance about his visit, nor did he give them a detailed briefing afterward. Longtime Saudi watchers at the CIA

and the White House came to believe that in addition to whatever issues of religious law were discussed, Prince Turki had pursued his usual method, opening his checkbook in front of Mullah Omar and offering enormous financial support if the Taliban solved the bin Laden problem to Turki's satisfaction. Some estimated Turki's offer in the hundreds of millions of dollars.¹⁰

The more suspicious American analysts, conditioned by past Saudi deceptions, wondered if Turki might have met with bin Laden himself in Kandahar and perhaps renewed the kingdom's efforts to negotiate his peaceful return. Some analysts at the CIA Counterterrorist Center doubted that Turki's visit had been in any way a sincere effort to incarcerate bin Laden. These analysts had no idea what Turki was up to, but they doubted it was good. Their skepticism reflected the gradual erosion of CIA faith in Saudi Arabia, especially inside the Counterterrorist Center, as the bin Laden threat grew. There was no hard evidence to support the suspicion that Turki met with bin Laden in Kandahar, however. As for the offer of financial support to the Taliban if they cooperated, Turki's own public accounts of the meeting hinted as much. Such an offer would have been consistent with the agenda Turki said he pursued in Kandahar: He wanted to use incentives, arguments, and threats to persuade the Taliban to break with bin Laden.

White House counterterrorism officials remained convinced that Saudi Arabia still had little desire to put bin Laden on trial. It would be much easier for the royal family if the Americans captured bin Laden and put him in the dock. That way, bin Laden would be out of the royal family's hair, but they would not have to accept any political risk. They could instead deflect popular Saudi anger about bin Laden's punishment toward the United States and away from themselves.

According to Prince Turki, the Taliban sent a delegation to the kingdom in July 1998 to begin the commission talks on how to expel bin Laden from Afghanistan. The delegates returned to Kandahar with more specific proposals, by this account.

Prince Turki did not hear back from the Taliban leader, however. July yielded to August, and still there was no word.

Osama bin Laden certainly knew as August began that the entire context of Prince Turki's negotiations with the Taliban was about to change. What, if anything, bin Laden told Mullah Omar about the plans he had in motion that summer is unknown. His alliance with al-Zawahiri and other hard-core Egyptian militants had delivered him to a new phase of ambition. Within days he would be the most famous Islamic radical in the world.

THE CONSPIRATORS all had been trained, inspired, or recruited in Afghanistan. Wadih el Hage was a Lebanese Christian raised amid the roiling Muslim exile populations of Kuwait. He had been born with a deformity, a withered and weak right arm. As a teenager he converted to Islam, and at twenty-three, at the height of the anti-Soviet jihad, he traveled to the Afghan frontier to work with refugees. Mohammed Odeh learned about the Afghan jihad while attending a university in southeast Asia; he was a college student one week and a volunteer on the Afghan battlefield the next. K. K. Mohammed traveled to Afghanistan from his native Tanzania after years of Islamic studies. In 1994, at an Afghan training camp for multinational volunteers, a friend asked him if he wanted to "get involved in a jihad job," and he eagerly said yes. Some of them swore direct fealty to Osama bin Laden and the war-fighting organization he now called al Qaeda. Others said they never met bin Laden, nor did they consider him their general. They only knew that they were part of a righteous Islamic army fighting on behalf of the *umma*, or the worldwide community of the faithful.¹¹

Some of the conspirators lived quietly for years in Africa after their training in Afghanistan. They were the first in a new constellation of operational al Qaeda sleeper cells spread out around the world, directed by bin Laden and his Egyptian allies from Taliban-protected safehouses in Kandahar and Kabul or from barren camps in the eastern Afghan mountains.

Shortly before 10:30 A.M. on Friday, August 7, 1998, two teams of suicide bombers rolled through two sprawling African capital cities. In Nairobi a wobbling truck packed with homemade explosives turned into the exit lane of a parking lot behind the American embassy and approached a barrier of steel bollards. One of the attackers jumped out, tossed a flash grenade at the Kenyan guards, and fled. When the truck detonated, it sheared off the U.S. embassy's rear façade. Glass shards, jagged concrete, and splintered furniture flew through the interior offices, killing and wounding Americans and Africans at their desks. The adjacent Ufundi Building collapsed, killing scores of Africans inside, including students at a secretarial college. Pedestrians in the crowded streets beside the embassy died where they stood.

About nine minutes later, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a second truck turned into the parking lot of the American embassy and exploded. By sheer luck a filled embassy water tanker stood between the truck bomb and the building; the water tanker flew three stories into the air and splashed beside

the chancery, absorbing much of the explosive impact. In Nairobi, 213 people died in the suicide bombing, 12 of them Americans. Another 32 of the dead were Kenyans who worked in the U.S. embassy. About 4,000 people were wounded. In Dar es Salaam 11 Africans died and 85 people were wounded. It was the most devastating terrorist attack against American targets since the suicide bombing of a Marine barracks in Lebanon by Shiite Islamic radicals in 1983.¹²

There was no warning. The CIA's Counterterrorist Center issued an alert on July 29 about a possible chemical, biological, or radiological attack by bin Laden, but it knew nothing of his plans in Africa. Bin Laden's press conference threats earlier in the year had led the State Department's diplomatic security office to issue a series of terrorist alerts, publicly and through classified channels, but none of these was specific enough to be useful. Nairobi and Dares Salaam were each deemed medium threat posts, but security officers worried at least as much about muggings and carjackings as they did about terrorists.¹³

The CIA knew bin Laden had followers in Nairobi. The Counterterrorist Center and the Africa division, working with the FBI, had tracked Afghan-trained bin Laden followers, including el Hage, to a ramshackle Nairobi charity office in 1996 and 1997. Their investigation included liaison with the Kenyan police and unannounced visits by FBI agents during the summer of 1997 to the homes of suspected militants. El Hage felt so much pressure that he left for the United States. The FBI followed him, pulled him off an airplane in New York, and dragged him before a federal grand jury for interrogation. But the suspect lied about his relations with bin Laden and was released. He moved to Texas, seemingly out of action, and his departure from Nairobi persuaded American investigators that they had disrupted bin Laden's east African cell. But other Afghan-trained sleepers had stayed behind.

With aid from bin Laden operatives who flew in from Pakistan they managed to evade attention while they manufactured their truck bombs in the backyards of two impoverished rental houses. For seven months prior to the bombings neither the Nairobi nor the Dar es Salaam CIA station picked up credible threats of a coming attack. This was typical of terrorist violence. Over two decades the CIA had learned again and again that it could not hope to defend against terrorists by relying solely on its ability to detect specific attacks in advance. No matter how many warnings they picked up, no matter how many terrorist cells they disrupted, at least some attackers were going to get through. Officers in the Counterterrorist Center privately compared themselves to soccer goalies: They wanted to be the best in their league, they wanted

to record as many shutouts as possible, but they knew they were going to give up scores to their opponents. Ultimately, many of them believed, the only way to defeat terrorists was to get out of the net and try to take the enemy off the field.¹⁴

In a broader sense the bin Laden tracking unit inside the Counterterrorist Center had seen this coming. The center's analysts and officers worked eight to twelve hours a day in government cubicles reading and analyzing translated text from bin Laden's press conferences, television interviews, and intercepted messages and telephone calls. It seemed obvious to the dozen of them that bin Laden meant what he said: He had decided to launch a new jihad against the United States, and he would attack American targets wherever he could reach them. Yet the bin Laden unit's officers had been unable to persuade their bosses to act on the plan to raid Tarnak Farm.

Some of them were devastated and angry as they watched the television images of death and rescue in Africa. One of the bin Laden unit's female analysts confronted CIA director Tenet: "You are responsible for those deaths because you didn't act on the information we had, when we could have gotten him," she told him, according to an American official familiar with the accusation. The woman was "crying and sobbing, and it was a very rough scene," the official recalled.¹⁵

Tenet stood there and took it. He was a boisterous, emotional man, and he did not shrink from honest confrontation, his colleagues felt. Whether spurred by this challenge or in spite of it, Tenet redoubled his commitment to the agency's covert campaign against bin Laden in the weeks ahead.

For those who had worked on the Tarnak raid plan, the questions lingered: Why had Tenet never recommended the idea to Sandy Berger and President Clinton? Why had they been unwilling to risk civilian casualties among bin Laden's followers at the camp when it was clear that civilians were going to die in terrorist strikes, as they now had in Africa? Had the Counterterrorist Center's leaders pitched it aggressively enough to Tenet? Down in the trenches of a bureaucracy enveloped in secrecy, it was impossible to know why or how decisions of this kind were made. The resentments festered, amplified by rumors and the intensity of the daily grind.

SIX YEARS INTO HIS PRESIDENCY, Clinton had ample experience in decision-making about responses to terrorist attacks. His national security cabinet had been through the drill in both international and domestic cases: the attempted Iraqi assassination of President Bush in 1993; Kasi's attack at

the CIA; the World Trade Center bombing; and the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. That Friday, August 7, the White House Situation Room became the frantic locus of immediate relief and rescue response. Upstairs in the Oval Office, Clinton began to talk informally with his most trusted senior national security advisers, an inner circle that soon became known as the Small Group: Sandy Berger, George Tenet, Madeleine Albright, Janet Reno, Defense Secretary William Cohen, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton. Of these Clinton was closest by far to Berger, his longtime friend and confidant. He worked comfortably with Tenet. Clinton's relationships with the rest of the Small Group members were more formal and distant. Still, while there were some chronic disagreements and tensions—Berger felt that Reno was defensive and uncooperative; Albright and Cohen clashed about policy questions—they often worked together well. Clinton encouraged open, loquacious discussion. The Small Group usually took him up.¹⁶

The first phase of their meetings involved what was known in national security jargon as the “attribution” question. What terrorist group had carried out the bombings? Had it received help from a foreign government? These questions had both legal and political aspects. If Clinton decided to strike back against the terrorists, he would have to justify the targets he chose and the proportion of violence he unleashed to the American people, allied governments, and the United Nations. A lawyer and an advocate of international institutions, Clinton paid attention to evidence and to legal standards governing the use of military force, including the doctrines of customary international law. When presented with presidential “findings” for lethal covert action, for instance, Clinton sometimes rewrote the CIA's authorizing language in his own hand, like an attorney honing an important brief. In the Africa case the first and most important question was whether the United States had adequate evidence about who was responsible for the embassy attacks. In domestic terrorist cases the president relied on the FBI and the Justice Department to marshal evidence and prosecute the guilty. In an overseas attack it was the CIA that traditionally presented the evidence. If Clinton concluded that the evidence was strong, he could then decide whether to respond by military force, placing the Pentagon in the lead; by covert action, with the CIA in charge; or by traditional law enforcement methods, pursued and prosecuted by Justice.

For a week after the attacks George Tenet and his senior aides briefed Clinton daily on the evidence. From the start it seemed likely that bin Laden was behind the attacks. The earlier CIA-FBI efforts to break up bin Laden's

Nairobi cell provided one archive of clues. Interrogation of a detained participant in the attacks, evidence seized in Nairobi, fax and satellite phone calls between Africa and Afghanistan, and electronic intercepts left little doubt, as the CIA saw it, that bin Laden had planned, funded, and ordered the bombings. On Friday, August 14, a week after the attacks, Tenet delivered to the Small Group the CIA's formal judgment that bin Laden and his senior Egyptian aides were responsible. “Intelligence from a variety of human and technical sources, statements of arrested suspects, and public statements by bin Laden's organization left no doubt about its responsibilities,” according to Paul Pillar, then deputy director of the CIA Counterterrorist Center. The evidence “spoke for itself pretty clearly,” recalled one person who saw the file. “There was a high degree of confidence.” Recounting this moment to a colleague years afterward, Clinton called it “the first compelling evidence” that bin Laden personally “had been responsible for the deaths of Americans.”¹⁷

With attribution established, the question became how to react. Bin Laden was a dangerous but obscure Islamic militant living in isolated caves halfway around the world. He had become an inspirational leader for national, violent Islamist movements in Algeria and Egypt. He directly controlled scattered Islamist revolutionary cells elsewhere. He contracted with Pakistani intelligence to train Islamist fighters for Kashmir, he colluded with the Taliban to train fighters against the Northern Alliance, and he hosted volunteer militants from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and China. He was, in other words, a complex and widely distributed enemy. Was bin Laden individually the enemy? His elusive, shadowy al Qaeda network? Where did the Taliban fit?

Clinton and his Small Group gave relatively little attention to the Afghan context from which the embassy bombings arose. They had a sophisticated grasp of terrorism and counterterrorist doctrine, but Afghanistan and its tribal and ethnic conflicts seemed a violent muddle, and there were no real Afghan experts among them. They saw the Taliban as an obscurantist, bizarre militia reigning in a primitive, vicious land whose fighters had recently bled the once-vaunted Soviet Red Army. They understood and discussed some of the links among the Taliban, bin Laden, Pakistani intelligence, and the multinational militants who trained in Afghanistan. But the full picture of these links was not clear. No American president since Ronald Reagan had given serious consideration to Afghanistan as a foreign policy problem. Now the place had abruptly forced itself to the top of the Oval Office agenda as the locus of a shocking terrorist crime.

There was no serious discussion among them that August about a broad U.S.-led military campaign against the Taliban. Congress and the American

people would not sanction such a war as an answer to the embassy attacks, Sandy Berger said later; the idea was all out of proportion. Clinton told a colleague later that "as despicable as the embassy bombings were," he was certain that even "our closest allies would not support us" if he ordered a sustained ground attack in Afghanistan. Besides, as skeptical as Madeleine Albright was about the Taliban, many regional specialists at her State Department and elsewhere believed—as Prince Turki did—that Mullah Omar could be persuaded by threats and enticements to break with bin Laden eventually. These American analysts believed, as Prince Turki and Pakistani intelligence repeatedly argued, that the Taliban would eventually mature into a Saudi-like moderate Islamic government. The Small Group did review that first week Pentagon-drawn options for a Special Forces raid into Afghanistan. But the size of the force that Joint Chiefs chairman Shelton said would be required, the slow pace at which it could be assembled, and the lack of obvious targets to attack inside Afghanistan led the group to set aside this idea quickly.¹⁸

These were strange, strange days on Pennsylvania Avenue. In between urgent Oval Office review sessions with the Small Group, Clinton was bracing himself and his closest friends for a painful decision. After eight months of public and private lies, the president had concluded that he had no choice but to confess to his wife and to the American people about his sexual liaison with the former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. On August 17, Clinton testified at the White House, before video cameras and cross-examining prosecutors, about the history of his sordid affair. That same day George Tenet privately briefed the Small Group about possible targets for cruise missile strikes against bin Laden's "infrastructure" in Afghanistan and Sudan. That night the president appeared on national television to admit publicly that he had been lying about his relationship with Lewinsky for months. In the media storm that followed he flew to Martha's Vineyard to stay with friends. Two days later he turned fifty years old.¹⁹

Describing this period later, Clinton insisted to a colleague that that August's public spectacle and private anguish had "absolutely no impact" on his willingness to act against bin Laden. It was clear to every member of the national security team, Clinton believed, that he was willing to retaliate against the Saudi for the embassy bombings. His aides later described the president as stalwart and focused during these Afghanistan meetings, fully able to separate the serious national security questions from the political squalor of the Lewinsky matter. Clinton would not let political considerations deter him from acting against bin Laden, his aides remembered him saying. "If I have to take

more criticism for this, I will," he reportedly said.²⁰ Even if these accounts are credited, Clinton's instantly weakened presidency was plain for all to see. That August and for six months to come, as he became only the second president in American history to face impeachment charges, Clinton had neither the credibility nor the political strength required to lead the United States into a sustained military conflict even if it was an unconventional or low-grade war fought by Special Forces. His realistic options were severely limited. And Clinton could be certain that he would be harshly criticized no matter what he did or did not do.

Cruise missile strikes seemed the most obvious instrument. There was precedent for such an attack dating back to President Reagan's 1986 bombing of Tripoli, Libya, after Reagan reviewed evidence of Libyan involvement in a terrorist attack on American soldiers in a Berlin disco. Clinton had sent cruise missiles into Iraq's intelligence service headquarters in Baghdad after receiving clear evidence of Saddam Hussein's involvement in the 1993 assassination attempt on former president Bush. International law did not recognize revenge or punishment as justification for a military attack, but the customary laws of self-defense did sanction such strikes if they were designed to disrupt or preempt an enemy's ability to carry out future attacks. This principle helped shape the Pentagon's target list: They would emphasize bin Laden's ongoing operations, the threat he posed to the United States in the future, and his ability to give orders. The Pentagon had been studying possible Afghan targets in the same spring that the CIA had been drawing up its secret plan to raid Tarnak Farm. Bin Laden's televised threats had stimulated these exercises.²¹ The CIA's covert satellite mapping had helped build a new Afghan target archive. Afghanistan was not the world's richest "target set," as the Pentagon jargon put it (bin Laden's training camps, like Tarnak Farm, were mainly dirt-rock expanses filled with mud-brick shacks and a few rope sleeping cots), but at least the Pentagon and CIA knew where the camps were and had good overhead imagery to work with. In some cases they had been mapping these camps since the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s.

As Clinton coped with his family crisis, incoming intelligence from the CIA accelerated attack plans. The day after the embassy bombings the CIA received a report that senior leaders of Islamist militant and terrorist groups linked to bin Laden planned to meet on August 20 at the Zawhar Kili camp complex about seven miles south of Khost in eastern Afghanistan. The intelligence indicated that bin Laden himself might attend the meeting. Zawhar Kili was near the scene of bin Laden's myth-making glory, the place he legendarily battled

Soviet troops. It had been his February announcement of the forthcoming jihad against "Crusaders and Jews." It had been the site of his May press conference and one-on-one television interviews. By striking the complex, the Americans would be attacking the birthplace of bin Laden's war and a symbol of his power. The complex routinely served as a training ground for jihadist fighters who were supported by Pakistani intelligence. Some of these groups sent militant volunteers to Kashmir. Others waged violent sectarian campaigns in Pakistan's large cities against clerical and political leaders of the country's Shia Muslim minority. Arab, Chechen, and Central Asian jihadists also passed through. The facility had a base headquarters and five satellite training areas, all of them primitively equipped. Because it was so close to the Pakistani border, officers from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate could make easy day trips for meetings, training, and inspections.

Participants later differed about the quality of the CIA's intelligence on the Zawhar Kili meeting. The report suggested a very large gathering, perhaps two hundred or three hundred militants and leaders. General Anthony Zinni, then the senior military officer for the Middle East and Afghanistan, recalled that "the intelligence wasn't that solid." He felt launching cruise missiles into the camp during the August 20 meeting would be "a long shot, very iffy." The CIA's Paul Pillar and two senior directors in Richard Clarke's White House counterterrorism office recalled that the intelligence predicted bin Laden's presence at the meeting. Other participants recalled the opposite, that the report offered no specific assurance bin Laden would attend. Whatever the uncertainties, there was no doubt from Clinton on down that an objective of the American attack was to kill bin Laden.²²

The August 20 meeting was not much of a secret: It was known to Pakistani intelligence. Former ISI chief Hamid Gul later said that he provided the Taliban with advance warning of the American attack, according to reports that circulated inside the U.S. government. Mushahid Hussain, a cabinet minister in the civilian government of Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, was in Saudi Arabia on an official visit on August 19. He called the head of Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau on an open phone line to see how everything was going back home. "So I said, 'What's happening?' . . . [He said] 'Bin Laden is having a meeting tomorrow. . . . He's called a summit.' I said, 'Do the Americans know?' He said, 'Of course.'"²³

"The attack will come this evening," Hussain told his Saudi hosts the next morning. If he could anticipate the strikes, he reflected later, "surely bin Laden with all of his resources would have known what was coming."²⁴

In Islamabad, General Joseph Ralston, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sat down to dinner on the evening of August 20 with General Jehangir Karamat, Sharif's army chief. The Americans had war-gamed the Afghanistan attack in Washington the previous week, and they feared that Pakistan might mistake the missiles for a nuclear strike by India. Ralston's role was to assure Karamat that the incoming missiles were American.²⁵

Seventy-five Tomahawk cruise missiles, each costing about \$750,000, slammed into Zawhar Kili's rock gorges at about 10 P.M. local time. At least twenty-one Pakistani jihadist volunteers died, and dozens more were wounded. Bin Laden was not among them.

The CIA later reported to Clinton that it had received information that bin Laden had been at Zawhar Kili but that he had left several hours before the strikes. There was no way to be certain.²⁶ They had made a symbolic reply to the embassy bombings and perhaps had killed a few Pakistani terrorists bound for Kashmir or Karachi's Shiite slums, but as to bin Laden and his hard-core leadership, they had missed.

Simultaneously with the Zawhar Kili attack, thirteen cruise missiles slammed into a chemical factory in Khartoum, Sudan, called the al Shifa plant. From the beginning there had been a strong push within the Small Group to identify at least some additional targets outside Afghanistan. There were several reasons. Richard Clarke's new Counterterrorism Security Group had begun the previous spring to target bin Laden's global finances. The Saudi's money was one of his distinguishing features as a terrorist. Bin Laden's network had been the focus of the multiyear federal grand jury investigation that finally produced a sealed indictment the previous June. It named bin Laden as the sole defendant in a "conspiracy to attack defense utilities of the United States." Any cruise missile attack intended to disrupt bin Laden's future operations ought to do more than kick up dirt in eastern Afghanistan. It should also hurt his financial network, Clarke and his aides argued. CIA reporting showed ownership links between bin Laden and the al Shifa plant. Moreover, an Egyptian agent working with the CIA had returned soil samples from al Shifa that showed precursor substances associated with chemical weapons. The CIA had reported on this finding to the White House in late July, just before the African bombings. Previous CIA reporting from bin Laden's days of exile in Sudan, including the credible account of defector Jamal al-Fadl, had produced evidence of bin Laden's interest in chemical and nuclear weapons. Moreover, Clinton had developed a personal and specific conviction that the United States faced a grave, even existential danger from

terrorists seeking to acquire biological, chemical, or nuclear arms. Richard Clarke had led a secret, multihour exercise just weeks earlier at Blair House in which top Clinton administration officials rehearsed their reaction to an attack by terrorists using weapons of mass destruction. The CIA put al Shifa on the table as a legitimate target because of the evidence it had collected about ownership and chemical precursors. Clinton embraced the target, one of his aides recalled, in part because he talked about terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction "all the time, and it was very much on his mind."²⁷

Clinton announced to the American public that bin Laden had launched "a terrorist war" against the United States and that he had decided to strike back. "I think it's very important for the American people to understand that we are involved here in a long-term struggle," Madeleine Albright said. But Clinton and his aides came under withering criticism in Washington in the weeks after the missile strikes. Republicans and media pundits accused them of launching cruise missiles in a vain effort to distract public attention from Clinton's confession about Lewinsky. A movie called *Wag the Dog*, in which a fictional American president launches a war in Albania to deflect political criticism, had just been released; the cruise missile strikes were denounced widely as life imitating art. Sudan's government launched a publicity campaign in an effort to prove that the CIA had acted on false information in singling out the al Shifa plant. Bin Laden's supporters in Pakistan poured into the streets to protest the American assault. Pakistani politicians blamed the United States for abandoning Afghanistan in the first place. "You left us with the baby," said Riaz Khokhar, the Pakistani ambassador to Washington. "In this game we have to take care of our own interests."²⁸

At the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, Deputy Director Paul Pillar felt all the *Wag the Dog* talk "muddied the message that the missile strikes were intended to send." Also, "The physical impact of the missile strike . . . was limited by the primitive nature of the facilities." The attacks "might have resulted in plans for further terrorist attacks being postponed, although this outcome is uncertain."²⁹

Bin Laden's reputation in the Islamic world had been enhanced. He had been shot at by a high-tech superpower and the superpower missed. Two instant celebratory biographies of bin Laden appeared in Pakistani stores. Without seeming to work very hard at it, bin Laden had crafted one of the era's most successful terrorist media strategies. The missile strikes were his biggest publicity payoff to date.

All of this criticism constrained Clinton's options as he pursued the "war" against al Qaeda that he had announced to the public. The president was so

unsettled by the criticism over the strike on the al Shifa plant in Sudan that he ordered a detailed review of the evidence that had led the CIA to recommend it as a target. For a president conditioned by his friend John Deutch and by his own experience to be skeptical about CIA competence, here was another episode to feed his doubts. Tenet was stung by the outcry over al Shifa. He remained convinced that it was a legitimate target, but he and his staff now had to invest time and effort to prove they were right. At the Pentagon the Joint Chiefs of Staff planned for additional cruise missile strikes, working under the code name Operation Infinite Resolve. Clarke told senior national security officials that Clinton wanted to launch new strikes soon. But the Pentagon planners had doubts. Walter Slocombe, the number three civilian official in the Defense Department, wrote to Defense Secretary William Cohen about a lack of attractive targets in Afghanistan. Fallout from the initial cruise missile strikes "has only confirmed the importance of defining a clearly articulated rationale for military action" that would really make a difference, he wrote. At the same time, Clinton's burlesque public struggle in the Lewinsky case reached its humiliating nadir. Weeks after the missile strikes the special prosecutor's office released what became known as the "Starr Report," chronicling in near-pornographic detail the history of the president's conduct. In the climate of political conflict and hysteria that ensued, it was unlikely that Clinton would return readily to a new round of cruise missile strikes. He could not afford to miscalculate.

Under the circumstances CIA-led covert action in Afghanistan seemed a promising pathway. By their very stealth the agency's efforts to capture or kill bin Laden would help Clinton evade the political problems of waging a military campaign, even a limited one, during an impeachment crisis. Tenet told the Senate intelligence committee in a closed session on September 2 that "key elements" of the CIA's emerging secret strategy would include hitting bin Laden's infrastructure, working with liaison intelligence services to "break up cells and carry out arrests," a plan to "recruit or expose his operatives," as well as pressure on the Taliban and efforts to improve "unilateral capability to capture him."³⁰

In some respects this was the kind of covert action campaign that Tenet had warned about. When he took over at Langley, Tenet had cautioned against using CIA covert action programs as an expedient substitute for failed overt policies. But he had also noted that time and again in American history presidents called on the CIA to solve foreign policy problems in secret. Just as Kennedy had decades earlier wished for the agency to solve his Fidel Castro problem with a silver bullet, Clinton now needed the CIA to take the lead

against bin Laden. But the United States was not prepared to take on as a serious foreign policy challenge Afghanistan's broader regional war in which bin Laden was now a key participant. That war would have required choosing sides against the Taliban and confronting the movement's supporters in Pakistani intelligence, among many other complications. It would be much easier if the CIA could just quietly slip into Afghanistan and bundle up bin Laden in a burlap sack.

PRINCE TURKI FLEW BACK to Kandahar in mid-September. Naseem Rana, the chief of Pakistani intelligence, accompanied him. A Pashtun ISI officer came along to handle translations.³¹ They landed again within sight of Tarnak Farm and drove across the desert into the center of town. Turki hoped that the shock of the Africa bombings and the hostility of the American response had jarred the Taliban and that Mullah Omar would now recalculate the costs of his hospitality to bin Laden. Clinton had enacted a first round of sanctions against the Taliban that summer, signing an executive order that froze the militia's assets in the United States. More than ever, it seemed to Prince Turki, the Taliban had reason to embrace the economic rewards that would follow if they broke with bin Laden.

As they sat with their tea, the Saudi prince opened by explaining that the Americans strongly believed they had evidence proving bin Laden was behind the Africa bombings. "We've been waiting for you," Prince Turki said. "You gave us your word that you were going to deliver Osama bin Laden to us."³²

Mullah Omar wheeled on him. He was more agitated than Turki had ever seen him. By one account he doused his head with water, explaining that he was so angry, he needed to cool himself down. "Why are you doing this? Why are you persecuting and harassing this courageous, valiant Muslim?" Omar demanded, referring to bin Laden. He continued to rant, with the Pakistani intelligence officer uncomfortably translating his insults into English for the Saudi prince. "Instead of doing that," he suggested to Turki, "why don't you put your hands in ours and let us go together and liberate the Arabian peninsula from the infidel soldiers!"³³

Furious, Turki stood up. "I'm not going to take any more of this," he announced. As he left, he told Mullah Omar, "What you are doing today is going to bring great harm, not just to you but to Afghanistan."³⁴

Days later Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Kabul. Yet as with so many other episodes of Saudi Arabian intelligence and foreign policy,

Turki's split with Omar looked murky—even suspicious—at the White House and at Langley. It was typical of the staccato, mutually distrustful communications between the two governments that Turki provided no detailed briefing to the Americans after he returned from Kandahar. Abdullah did brief Clinton and Gore on his efforts when he visited Washington that month. Still, perpetually leery of American motives, the Saudis continued to see little benefit in transparent information sharing with Washington. The kingdom's ministry of religious endowments, its proselytizing religious charities, and its Islamist businessmen all ran what amounted to separate foreign policies, channeling large sums to favored causes abroad. Some of them regarded the Taliban and bin Laden as comrades and heroes now more than ever.

At the bin Laden unit of the Counterterrorist Center, cynicism about the Saudis only deepened. The bin Laden unit's leader, an analyst known to his colleagues as Mike, argued with rising emotion that the CIA and the White House had become prisoners of their alliances with Saudi Arabia and Pakistani intelligence. America was in a war against a dangerous terrorist network. As it waged that war, it was placing far too much faith in unreliable allies. The CIA needed to break out of its lazy dependence on liaisons with corrupt, Islamist-riddled intelligence services such as the ISI and the Saudi General Intelligence Department, he argued. If it did not, he insisted, the CIA and the United States would pay a price.

His arguments cut against the grain of prevailing CIA assumptions and long-standing practice. Some of his colleagues feared that he was campaigning so emotionally and vociferously against the Saudis and the Pakistanis that he was beginning to jeopardize his agency career.³⁵