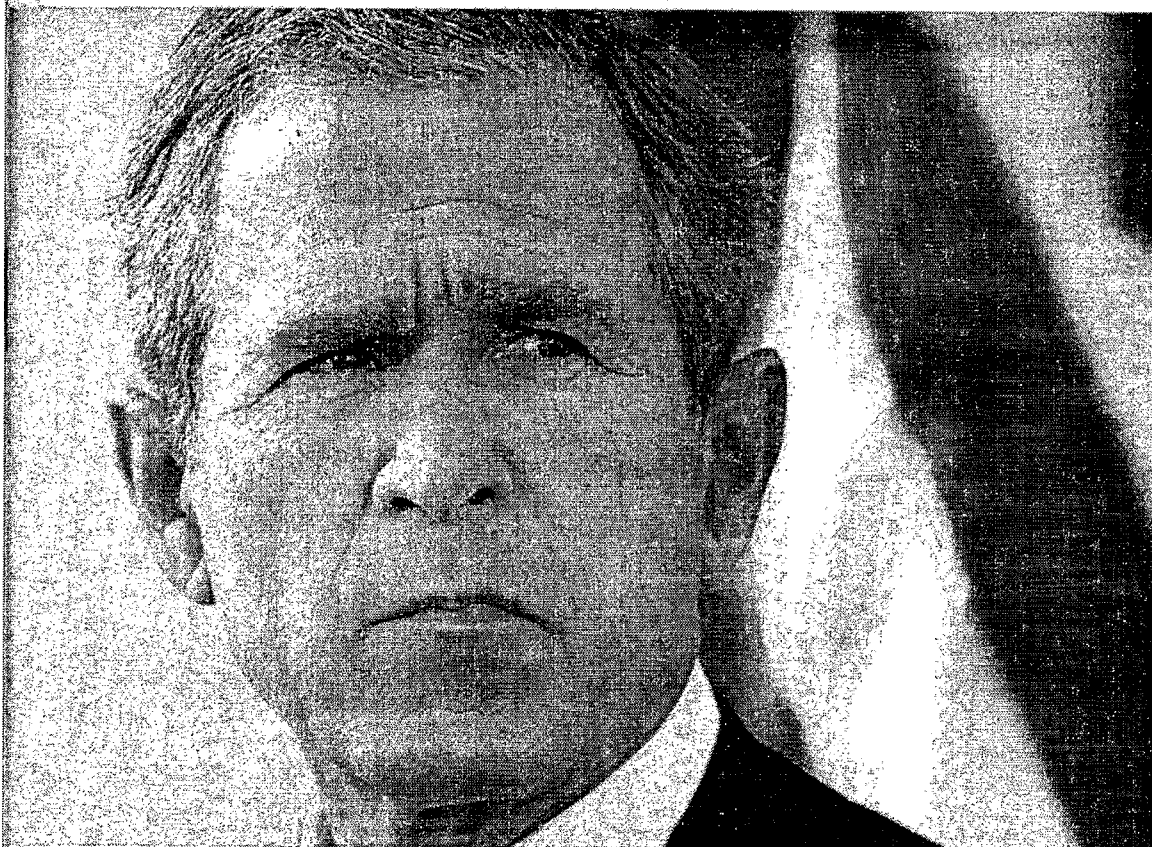


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BUSH AT WAR



— BOB —
WOODWARD

clear that bin Laden felt emboldened and didn't feel threatened by the United States."

Until September 11, however, Bush had not put that thinking into practice nor had he pressed the issue of bin Laden. Though Rice and the others were developing a plan to eliminate al Qaeda, no formal recommendations had ever been presented to the president.

"I know there was a plan in the works. . . . I don't know how mature the plan was," Bush recalled. He said the idea that a plan was going to be on his desk September 10 was perhaps "a convenient date. It would have been odd to come September the 10th because I was in Florida on September the 10th, so I don't think they would have been briefing me in Florida."

He acknowledged that bin Laden was not his focus or that of his national security team. "There was a significant difference in my attitude after September 11. I was not on point, but I knew he was a menace, and I knew he was a problem. I knew he was responsible, or we felt he was responsible, for the [previous] bombings that killed Americans. I was prepared to look at a plan that would be a thoughtful plan that would bring him to justice, and would have given the order to do that. I have no hesitancy about going after him. But I didn't feel that sense of urgency, and my blood was not nearly as boiling."

AT 8 A.M., September 12, Tenet arrived at the Oval Office for the President's Daily Brief, the TOP SECRET/CODEWORD digest of the most important and sensitive intelligence. This briefing included a review of available intelligence tracing the attacks to bin Laden and his top associates in al Qaeda. One report out of Kandahar, Afghanistan, the spiritual home of the Taliban, showed the attacks were "the results of two years' planning." Another report said the attacks were "the beginning of the wrath"—an ominous note. Several re-

ports specifically identified Capitol Hill and the White House as targets on September 11. One said a bin Laden associate—incorrectly—“gave thanks for the explosion in the Congress building.”

A key figure in the bin Laden financing organization called Wafa initially claimed that “The White House has been destroyed” before having to correct himself. Another report showed that al Qaeda members in Afghanistan had said at 9:53 A.M., September 11, shortly after the Pentagon was hit, that the attackers were following through with “the doctor’s program.” The second-ranking member of bin Laden’s organization was Ayman Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician often referred to as “the Doctor.”

A central piece of evidence involved Abu Zubayda, identified early as the chief field commander of the October 2000 attack on the Navy destroyer USS *Cole* that killed 17 sailors in the Yemeni port of Aden. One of the most ruthless members of bin Laden’s inner circle, Zubayda, according to a reliable report received after September 11, had referred to the day of the attacks as “zero hour.”

In addition, the CIA and the FBI had evidence of connections between at least three of the 19 hijackers and bin Laden and his training camps in Afghanistan. It was consistent with intelligence reporting all summer showing that bin Laden had been planning “spectacular attacks” against U.S. targets.

For Tenet, the evidence on bin Laden was conclusive—game, set, match. He turned to the agency’s capabilities on the ground in Afghanistan.

As the president knew, the CIA had had covert relationships in Afghanistan authorized first in 1998 by Clinton and then reaffirmed later by him. The CIA was giving several million dollars a year in assistance to the Northern Alliance. The CIA also had contact with tribal leaders in southern Afghanistan. And the agency had secret paramilitary teams that had been going in and out of Afghanistan without detection for years to meet with opposition figures.

Though an expanded covert action plan had been in the works for months, Tenet told Bush an even more expanded plan would soon be presented for approval, and it would be expensive, very ex-