



CHAPTER 14

They Want to Change History

Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I have indeed acquired these weapons, then I thank God for enabling me to do so.

—Usama bin Ladin quoted in *Time* magazine, December 24, 1998, when asked if al-Qa'ida had nuclear and chemical weapons

There was not a shred of doubt that Bin Ladin meant what he said, nor any doubt that he would go to any length to fulfill his “religious duty.” Long before 9/11, in public testimony and in secret counsel to two administrations, I raised the alarm about al-Qa’ida. Now, in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, I asked my staff, “What’s next?”

Although we had his own statements to give us great concern, the consensus inside and outside our own government could be boiled down to this: “Guys in caves can’t get WMD.” But this was an issue about which we could not afford to be wrong. So soon after 9/11, I directed CIA’s CTC to establish a new capability to focus exclusively on terrorist WMD. Even the people I put in charge of that effort were skeptical, hopeful that they would simply be proving a negative. We began to review the historical record. We combed our files and sent teams around the world to share our leads and ask foreign intelligence services about information in their possession. We interrogated al-Qa’ida prisoners and pored over documents found in safe houses and on computers captured in Afghanistan. What we discovered stunned us all.

The threats were real. Our intelligence confirmed that the most senior leaders of al-Qa’ida are still singularly focused on acquiring



WMD. Bin Ladin may have provided the spiritual guidance to develop WMD, but the program was personally managed at the top by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Moreover, we established beyond any reasonable doubt that al-Qa'ida had clear intent to acquire chemical, biological, and radiological/nuclear (CBRN) weapons, to possess not as a deterrent but to cause mass casualties in the United States. The assessment prior to 9/11 that terrorists were not working to develop strategic weapons of mass destruction was simply wrong. They were determined to have, and to use, these weapons.

Over time, we were able to link the top echelon of al-Qa'ida's leadership to the group's highly compartmentalized chemical, biological, and nuclear networks. This group included al-Qa'ida's operational chief, Sayf al-Adl; the group's logistics chief, Abu Hafis; Jemaah Islamiya chief Ruidin Isomuddin (Hambali); 9/11 planners Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi bin al-Shibh; Egyptian CBRN expert Abu Khabab al-Masri; self-described "CEO of anthrax," Yazid Sufaat; and explosives expert and "nuclear CEO," Abdel al-Aziz al-Masri.

As we researched the information we were slowly gathering from myriad sources, we unlocked a disturbing secret: the group's interest in WMD was not new. They had been searching for these weapons long before we had been looking for *them*. As far as we know, al-Qa'ida's fascination with chemical weapons goes back to the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in March 1995 by a group of religious fanatics called the Aum Shinrikyo. Twelve people died in that attack, but had the dispersal devices worked as planned, the death toll would have been higher. Al-Qa'ida leaders were impressed and saw the attack as a model for achieving their own ambitions. (In retrospect, the Tokyo attack also foreshadowed al-Qa'ida's interest in subway and railway systems, which later manifested itself in attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004; in London on July 7, 2005; and a planned attack against the New York City subway in fall 2003 that was called off by Ayman

al-Zawahiri in the last stages of preparation—“for something better.”)

In February 2001, in the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, Usama bin Ladin was tried in absentia and others were tried in person for their involvement in the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. It was here that al-Qa'ida's pursuit of WMD became clear: one of the key witnesses in that trial, Jamal Ahmad al-Fadl, described how, as far back as 1993, he helped Bin Ladin try to obtain uranium in Sudan, to be used in some type of a nuclear device. Al-Qa'ida, al-Fadl testified, was willing to pay \$1.5 million to acquire an unknown quantity of uranium. His testimony ended without resolution. Perhaps this was the first of many experiences for al-Qa'ida in which the group was scammed by opportunists, or perhaps the offer was real. We may never know. The important point is that the group was actively attempting to acquire nuclear material in the early 1990s. They were willing to do what needed to be done, and pay whatever it would cost, to get their hands on fissile material. In the face of such steely resolve, the only responsible course of action would be to do whatever was necessary to rule out any possibility that terrorists could get their hands on fissile material.

Bin Ladin's statements in 1998 regarding his religious obligation to obtain WMD were not made in a vacuum, either. That was the same year that Pakistan first tested a nuclear weapon. The expertise and material for fulfilling UBL's dream lay across the border from his Afghan sanctuary. We received fragmentary information from an intelligence service that, also in 1998, UBL had sent emissaries to establish contact with the nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan's network. Over decades, A.Q. had built an international network of suppliers of nuclear capability for sale to rogue states. According to the intel, A. Q. Khan had rebuffed several of UBL's entreaties, although it was not clear why. However, this new reality of the potential collaboration between a well-organized proliferation network and a terrorist group would

ultimately reshape our understanding of the WMD threat, and the nature of our response to it.

Shortly before 9/11, a friendly intelligence service chanced across information that a Pakistani nongovernmental organization (NGO) called Umma Tameer-e-Nau (UTN) had been formed to establish social-welfare projects in Afghanistan. However, the information suggested that UTN had another purpose: they hoped to lend their expertise and access to the scientific establishment in order to help build chemical, biological, and nuclear programs for al-Qa'ida. (NGOs can be a convenient vehicle for providing cover for terrorist organizations, as they have legitimate reasons to traffic in expertise, material, and money.) The leadership of UTN was made up of retired Pakistani nuclear scientists, military officers, engineers, and technicians. Its founder and chairman, Sultan Bashirrudan Mahmood, was the former director for nuclear power at Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission. Mahmood was thought of as something of a madman by many of his former colleagues in the Pakistan nuclear establishment. In 1987 he published a book called *Doomsday and Life After Death: The Ultimate Faith of the Universe as Seen by the Holy Quran*. It was a disturbing tribute to his skewed view of the role of science in jihad. The book's basic message—from the leader of a group that had offered WMD capabilities to al-Qa'ida—was that the world would end one day soon in the fire of nuclear holocaust that would usher in judgment day and thus fulfill the prophecies of the Quran.

Mahmood's associates in UTN may not have embraced his apocalyptic vision, but they shared his extremist tendencies. Chaudiri Abdul Majeed, a prominent nuclear engineer who retired from the Pakistani Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology in 2000, agreed to play a key role in assisting Mahmood in his plans to share WMD with the Taliban and UBL. We also knew that UTN enjoyed some measure of support from Pakistani military officers opposed to President Musharraf, notably the former director of the Pakistani intelligence service, Gen. Hamid Gul.

It appeared that UTN's contacts with the Taliban and al-Qa'ida may have been supported, if not facilitated, by elements within the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment.

I instructed the Directorate of Operations to press all of our contacts worldwide to find out anything we could about the people and organizations with WMD that might be willing to share expertise with al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups. We did not limit our inquiries to friends. We also spoke to the Libyans, who confirmed that they had rejected overtures from UTN peddling nuclear expertise. Ben Bonk, the deputy chief of CTC, held a clandestine meeting with Musa Kusa, the head of the Libyan intelligence service, to try to elicit what he could about Tripoli's familiarity with al-Qa'ida. During their conversation, Bonk asked if Kusa had ever heard of UTN. "Yes," the Libyan replied, "they tried to sell us a nuclear weapon. Of course, we turned them down." This information confirmed separate reporting from another intelligence service that UTN had approached the Libyans with an offer to provide chemical, biological, and nuclear expertise. Kusa's words rang true because, unbeknownst to him, we knew Libya did not need UTN since they had already secured the services of an upscale supplier of WMD services—the A. Q. Khan proliferation network.

CIA passed our information on UTN to our Pakistani colleagues, who quickly hauled in seven board members for questioning. The investigation was ill-fated from the get-go. The UTN officials all denied wrongdoing and were not properly isolated and questioned. In fact, they were allowed to return home after questioning each day. Pakistani intelligence interrogators treated the UTN officials deferentially, with respect befitting their status in Pakistani society. They were seen as men of science, men who had made significant contributions to Pakistan. Our officers read the question etched in the faces of their Pakistani liaison contacts: Surely, such men cannot be terrorists? It was a problem we would encounter time and time again as we began tracing WMD networks and leads that emerged in the Middle

East, Asia, Africa, Australia, and in North and South America. There was no question al-Qa'ida sought scientific expertise on a global scale. The question I needed an answer to urgently was whether they had already succeeded.

A Western intelligence service came to us in the fall of 2001 with a remarkable piece of information that helped break the case open. A source had told them that in August 2001, just weeks before the 9/11 attacks, UTN officials Mahmood and Majeed met with Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan. There, around a campfire, they discussed how al-Qa'ida should go about building a nuclear device. CIA pressed the Pakistanis to confront Mahmood and Majeed with this new information. We put the Libyan information on the table. We also passed new information that had been collected by other intelligence services. To no avail.

Then 9/11 struck, and there was no slowing down in this pursuit. The stakes were too high to accept the lack of progress that the Pakistanis were making. In late November 2001, I briefed the president, vice president, and national security advisor on the latest intelligence, our concerns, and the likelihood we would be unable to resolve this issue satisfactorily without intervention by the president. I brought along with me my WMD chief, Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, and Kevin K., our most senior WMD terrorism analyst. During the ensuing conversation, the vice president asked if we thought al-Qa'ida had a nuclear weapon. Kevin replied, "Sir, if I were to give you a traditional analytical assessment of the al-Qa'ida nuclear program, I would say they probably do not. But I can't assure you they don't." The vice president then made a comment that in my view has since been misinterpreted: "If there's a one percent chance that they do, you have to pursue it as if it were true."

I am convinced the vice president did not mean to suggest, as some have asserted, that we should ignore contrary evidence and that such a policy should be applied to all threats to our national

security. On the contrary, the vice president understood instinctively that WMD must be managed differently because the implications were unique—such an attack would change history. We all felt that the vice president understood this issue. There was no question in my mind that he was absolutely right to insist that when it came to discussing weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists, conventional risk assessments no longer applied; we must rule out any possibility of terrorists succeeding in their quest to obtain such weapons. We could not afford to be surprised.

The president directed that I go to Pakistan the next day and share our concerns with President Musharraf. We did not know how far UTN had gone in providing assistance to al-Qa'ida, but any fireside chat between Pakistani nuclear officials and the al-Qa'ida leadership about a nuclear weapon posed grave concerns. A U.S. Air Force 707 that at one time had served as Air Force One flew Rolf, Kevin, and me to Pakistan. During the long, restless flight, I wrote out my intended talking points on a yellow legal pad, drawing from updated information that I was receiving from Langley on the plane. Some leads were beginning to emerge concerning UTN connections to the United States, and in other countries. I intended to lay it all out for Musharraf; there was no option other than full transparency to help him make the required decisions to resolve our concerns.

We arrived in the middle of the night. After a short rest, I reviewed my plan with our senior officer in Pakistan and discussed with him the next steps he would have to take with Pakistani intelligence after I left the country—assuming we could win Musharraf's cooperation. Our senior officer stressed that our hosts were tense; they were unsure of the nature of this unusual visit for which they had received barely one day's notice. He pointed out that although things were calm in the capital city of Islamabad, the threat level was high and no one was quite sure what might happen next in those uncertain weeks that followed 9/11. The

U.S. ambassador, Wendy Chamberlin, later joined us, and we were whisked away in a heavily armed motorcade for the short but tense ride to the presidential palace.

After a few pleasantries, I explained to President Musharraf that I had been dispatched by the U.S. president to deliver some very serious information to him. I launched into a description of the campfire meeting between Usama bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and the UTN leaders. “Mr. President,” I said, “you cannot imagine the outrage there would be in my country if it were learned that Pakistan is coddling scientists who are helping Bin Ladin acquire a nuclear weapon. Should such a device ever be used, the full fury of the American people would be focused on whoever helped al-Qa’ida in its cause.”

Musharraf considered my words carefully but opened with the response we had expected: “But Mr. Tenet, we are talking about men hiding in caves. Perhaps they have dreams of owning such weapons, but my experts assure me that obtaining one is well beyond their reach. We know in Pakistan what is involved in such an achievement.”

I knew that among his expert advisors was A. Q. Khan, someone who had long been under investigation for his illicit nuclear proliferation efforts. However, I didn’t want the discussion to veer off toward Khan at this point. There would be another day for that topic. The issue at hand was UTN, and they were quite a different matter.

“Mr. President, your experts are wrong,” I said. I told him that the current state of play between weapon design and construction and the availability of the needed materials made it possible for a few men hidden in a remote location—if they had enough persistence and money, and black enough hearts—to obtain and use a nuclear device. I turned the briefing over to Rolf, who proceeded to explain in detail how plausible the threat had become, and how our thinking had changed in terms of dealing with it. When he finished there was a brief uncomfortable silence in the room. President Musharraf was clearly reflecting on this new informa-

tion. Responding with quiet confidence, he asked why we had assumed al-Qa'ida would look to Pakistan for such assistance. He recalled information he had been briefed on about "loose nukes" in Russia and the availability of nuclear material in the former Soviet Union as a more likely source of material and assistance. Still, I sensed that we had made our case.

"Let me tell you, sir," I said, "what steps we need to take." I laid out a series of steps that required immediate action. I counseled him to look at certain elements in the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. In addition to asking for a more vigorous investigation of UTN, I suggested it might be a good time for Pakistan to perform a thorough inventory of its nuclear material. If any had gone missing, both he and I needed to know. "Can I report to President Bush that we can count on you?" I asked. "Yes, of course," he replied.

Even though we were on the ground for fewer than twenty-four hours, a picture of our big 707 with the words "United States of America" emblazoned across the fuselage had quickly appeared in the Pakistan media. With the war across the border in Afghanistan only a few weeks old and fighting still raging, U.S. and Pakistani officials were worried that terrorists might be waiting somewhere just beyond the end of the runway with a surface-to-air missile ready to bring down this symbol of American power. On takeoff, the crew executed a climb steeper than anything I imagined an old 707 could pull off. We had been advised to pull down the window shades in the darkened cabin for security reasons, but I could not refrain from lifting mine. If our plane was going to be attacked, I wanted to see it coming. Fortunately, the departure was uneventful, and I relaxed as we crossed the snowcapped Himalayas in brilliant sunlight.

By the time I got back to Washington, it was clear that President Musharraf was true to his word. Pakistani authorities had redoubled their efforts in questioning the UTN leadership. They were methodically running down all the leads we had passed. With the arrival of a team of U.S. experts, they conducted polygraph

investigations of the key UTN members and eventually obtained confessions that added important new details to the story. Mahmood confirmed all we had heard about the August 2001 meeting with Usama bin Ladin, and even provided a hand-drawn rough bomb design that he had shared with al-Qa'ida leaders. He told his interrogators that he had discussed the practicalities of building a weapon. "The most difficult part of the process," he told Bin Ladin, "is obtaining the necessary fissile material." "What if we already have the material?" Bin Ladin replied. This surprised Mahmood. He said he did not know if this was a hypothetical question or if Bin Ladin was seeking a design to use with fissile material or components he had already obtained elsewhere.

According to the account, an unidentified senior al-Qa'ida leader displayed a canister for the visitors that may or may not—the account was frustratingly vague—have contained some kind of nuclear material or radioactive source. This al-Qa'ida operative shared his ideas of building a simple firing system for a weapon using commercially available supplies. Over the next several months, we ran down every lead and turned over every rock in an effort to make a judgment as to whether UTN had provided WMD to al-Qa'ida. We followed a number of serious U.S. leads. It appears we had disrupted the organization in the early stages of its efforts to ply trade with al-Qa'ida. CIA, FBI, and dozens of foreign partners had worked together in unprecedented ways in an effort to prove a negative, as best as one can do so. This effort was a success in terms of working out a new modus operandi to deal with the new threats that had emerged in the wake of 9/11. What we did not know then, and do not know now, is how many other groups like UTN are out there.

The cause for my lightning trip to Pakistan was not an aberration but part of an emerging series of nuclear-related threats. At the same time, our threat matrix was carrying unsubstantiated rumors from several reliable foreign intelligence services that some sort of small nuclear device had been smuggled into the United States and was destined for New York City. The

Department of Energy quietly dispatched detection equipment to New York to possibly detect an unexpected source of radiation before such a device could be detonated. It was a pattern that would repeat itself over time. Adding fuel to the fire, detained al-Qa'ida senior paramilitary trainer Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi had provided the Egyptians with information that he later recanted, that al-Qa'ida had collaborated with Russian organized crime to import into New York "canisters containing nuclear material." We could not rule out that these vague, unsubstantiated streams of information were only partially right, and that Washington might be the intended target. It did not matter whether al-Qa'ida was indeed planning a WMD attack or a large-scale conventional attack, as many feared in those days and weeks after 9/11. In this period of high threat, the decision was made that the vice president and the president should not be in the same location, if at all possible. For the sake of continuity of government, the vice president was spending a lot of time at an "undisclosed location." Anyone who mocks the practice of securing the national leadership in times of crisis has not shared the reality of the threats we handled on a daily basis. None of us had any doubt that we were engaged in a war.

Our fears of imminent attack did not go away as 2001 slid into 2002.

Suleiman Abu Ghaith, a cleric of Kuwaiti origin and spokesman for al-Qa'ida, posted a statement on the Internet in June 2002 saying that "Al-Qa'ida has the right to kill four million Americans, including one million children, displace double that figure, and injure and cripple hundreds and thousands." Ghaith's rationale for such grisly figures was based on some sort of sick math extrapolating his estimates for the number of Muslims killed and wounded at the hands of the United States over the years. It would have been easy to dismiss his ranting as the hyperbole of a deranged man. But we had to consider the possibility that Abu Ghaith was attempting to justify the future use of weapons of mass destruction that might greatly exceed the death toll of 9/11.

Such weapons could be nuclear. They could be biological. They could be an unconventional massive attack on our infrastructure. But any attack would have to be big to deliver on al-Qa'ida's persistent promises to "destroy our economy."

To do so, they would need to develop a plan as intricate as the 9/11 plot, most likely planned over a long period of time by sleeper cells operating in the United States. We began what became an endless search for any leads to individuals who might fit this description. There turned out to be no shortage of radicalized Muslims who had been educated in American universities, who spoke flawless English, and who had the capability and perhaps the motive to hurt this country. Two individuals in particular represented this breed. There would be others to follow, who came to our attention in an endless stream of investigations by CIA and FBI.

Muhammed Bayazid, also known as Abu Rida al-Suri, and Mubarak al-Duri had attended the University of Arizona in the 1980s. As students, they became radicalized along with others who identified with the "jihadists" who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Bayazid and al-Duri attended prayer group meetings with students who would become al-Qa'ida associates—men like Wadi al-Hage, who was later linked to the 9/11 plot. With such friends, it was no surprise when we learned that al-Duri and Bayazid had joined Usama bin Ladin after he had relocated from Afghanistan to Sudan in the early 1990s.

A review of both men's dossiers revealed that they shared indicators of WMD concern. Bayazid, a Syrian, was trained as a physicist, and al-Duri, an Iraqi, was an agronomist. Both men enjoyed direct ties to Bin Ladin and helped manage his business interests in Sudan. Both men had developed business connections to Sudanese WMD-related entities, and both had established businesses that could have served as dual-use front companies for developing nuclear and biological weapons. After Bayazid's name surfaced in connection with al-Qa'ida's attempt to purchase uranium in Sudan, FBI sent agents to Sudan to interview the two

men. The agents reported back that, although their suspicions were great, they were unable to develop sufficient grounds for a case against either man that would justify an extradition request.

At one of our five o'clock meetings in mid-2002, a frustrated Rolf Mowatt-Larssen suggested that if we couldn't arrest the two men then perhaps we could get them to "flip"—to change sides, in intelligence and law enforcement jargon. I sent Rolf off to Africa with orders to approach the two American-trained scientists with the mandate to try to save lives rather than take them.

It was an unusual assignment and one that we thought best undertaken with the cooperation of the local intelligence service. Rolf found the locals willing to listen to our proposal—he requested their assistance to talk to both men separately, in a neutral location. There would be no compulsion, no threats, only persuasion. Rolf explained the stakes for all of us, if the road to any future nuclear or biological attack against the United States were paved through this country. The local intelligence officer stroked his beard, smiled, and said, "I understand American threats very well. And so I know this is not a threat. It is a standard to which you would hold any country . . . cooperation on such a question is sensible to preserve civilization as we both know it . . . for this reason, I will agree to your request."

The encounters were revealing. There would be no reconciliation, no common ground or shared sense of decency and humanity with the two al-Qa'ida associates. On the contrary, they articulated the hatred, the need for revenge, that they shared. Rolf appealed to both men to agree to disagree on our differences, and to focus on a narrow area of common interest, a shared sense of moral purpose to do whatever was in our means to prevent the escalation of a war that, if left unchecked, would result in the indiscriminate deaths of thousands of innocent women and children. After a long, brooding silence, one man replied in soft, sure tones, "No . . . I think it is legitimate to kill millions of you because of how many of us you have killed." Rolf looked deeply into his cold, dark eyes—Rolf now understood Abu Ghaith's math.

The concern about al-Qa'ida's interest in WMD was more than academic. We had long worried about the security of nuclear material from the former Soviet Union. Whenever we asked the Russians for assurances that nothing of theirs had gone missing, we would receive a perfunctory response that everything was "under control." President Putin had been more candid not long after 9/11, when President Bush showed his own briefing on UTN and asked Putin point blank if Russia could account for all of its material. Choosing his words carefully, the Russian president said he was confident he could account for everything—under his watch. He was unwilling to vouch for the period before that, during Yeltsin's regime. It was a deliberately ambiguous response but, nonetheless, one that suggested we needed to pay especially close attention to smuggling incidents in the early years following the breakup of the USSR.

From the end of 2002 to the spring of 2003, we received a stream of reliable reporting that the senior al-Qa'ida leadership in Saudi Arabia was negotiating for the purchase of three Russian nuclear devices. Saudi al-Qa'ida chief Abu Bakr relayed the offer directly to the al-Qa'ida leadership in Iran, where Sayf al-Adl and Abdel al-Aziz al-Masri (described as al-Qa'ida's "nuclear chief" by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed) were reportedly being held under a loose form of house arrest by the Iranian regime. The al-Qa'ida leadership had obviously learned much from their ventures into the nuclear market in the early 1990s. Sayf al-Adl told Abu Bakr that no price was too high to pay if they could get their hands on such weapons. However, he cautioned Abu Bakr that al-Qa'ida had been stung by scams in the past and that Pakistani specialists should be brought to Saudi Arabia to inspect the merchandise prior to purchase.

As soon as I got wind of al-Qa'ida negotiations to purchase nuclear components in Saudi Arabia, I contacted the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar, and gave him all the details we had.

Like most people when first exposed to this threat, Bandar was

incredulous. He questioned both the capability of al-Qa'ida to obtain a device and their willingness to use one within the kingdom. "Look," I said, "we don't know if they intend to detonate a device inside your country or just use Saudi Arabia as a transit point. But in either case, you have big trouble." I explained that Saudi and U.S. intelligence had recent information from clerics favorable to al-Qa'ida debating the wisdom of attacking the Saudi royal family. They were discussing in vague terms the morality under the Quran of using new weapons that did not discriminate among their victims. "Even if they don't go after the Saudi leadership," I impressed upon Bandar, "a nuke going off in the middle of your major oil distribution facility would devastate your economy and ours. Al-Qa'ida would like nothing better." Visibly shaken by the implications of the gathering threat, Bandar agreed and persuaded his government to track down and arrest al-Qa'ida within the kingdom. It was another turning point in Saudi resolve to deal with the extremist threat as a problem affecting their own survival.

From the spring through the summer of 2003, with unprecedented CIA assistance, the Saudis staged a remarkable series of preemptive actions that thwarted a number of terrorist attacks in the kingdom, and which gutted the al-Qa'ida leadership in Saudi Arabia in the process. Although al-Qa'ida had maintained its predilection for mounting conventional attacks, for the first time we uncovered clear indications of their interest in using cyanide weapons in future attacks. Cyanide had been found in a terrorist safe house.

Across the straits in Bahrain, we learned that terrorists with strong Saudi extremist connections had been planning to conduct a cyanide gas attack on the New York City subway system. The extremists had created a clever homemade dispersal device called the "mobtaker"—Arabic roughly translated as "invention"—a lethal device that could be constructed entirely from readily available material. Although the Bahrain cell operated independently of al-Qa'ida, they followed the unwritten proto-

col between extremists by requesting permission from al-Qa'ida central leadership to conduct the attack. Chillingly, word came back from Ayman al-Zawahiri himself in early 2003 to cancel the operation and recall the operatives, who were already staged in New York—because “we have something better in mind.”

There was endless speculation at the highest levels as to the proper interpretation of al-Zawahiri's cryptic comment. We still do not know what he meant. However, we do know that the “mobtaker” cyanide device was not sufficiently inspiring to serve al-Qa'ida's ambitions. For that, the group consulted with several radical Saudi clerics in an effort to obtain Quranic justification—a “fatwa”—that would legitimize the use of weapons of mass destruction. Even Safar al-Hawali, a radical cleric who had written an open letter to President Bush after 9/11, reportedly balked at lending his name to such a fatwa. The terrorists found their cleric, however, in Shaykh Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd, who helpfully gave al-Qa'ida just what they needed. In a document published in May 2003 called, “A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels,” al-Fahd argued that a large number of civilian deaths, numbering in the millions, would be justifiable if they came as part of an attack aimed at defeating an enemy.

Following the al-Qa'ida attacks in Riyadh in May 2003, the Saudis captured several top al-Qa'ida leaders responsible for planning the assaults. Arrested along with them was Shaykh Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd. In custody, he confirmed that al-Qa'ida had been negotiating for the purchase of Russian devices, but he claimed ignorance regarding the nature of these devices and whether al-Qa'ida had in fact obtained them. After about six months in custody, al-Fahd appeared on Saudi television rescinding his fatwa and expressing regret for the error of his religious interpretation.

Having done all that was possible to neutralize any threats in Saudi Arabia, we turned our attention to the al-Qa'ida leader-

ship in Iran. We pursued learning more about al-Qa'ida's interest in WMD through every means available to us. Many al-Qa'ida operatives had something to say about the organization's interest in WMD. Many would also quickly recant much of what they told us. Despite the considerable uncertainties, we were concerned about what we were able to corroborate from other information available to us. One senior al-Qa'ida operative told us that Mohammed Abdel al-Aziz al-Masri, who had been detained in Iran, managed al-Qa'ida's nuclear program and had conducted experiments with explosives to test the effects of producing a nuclear yield. We passed this information to the Iranians in the hope that they would recognize our common interest in preventing any attack against U.S. interests.

Our inability to determine the fate of the Russian devices presented great concern, not only for me but for the White House. I took Rolf to a meeting with the president and Condoleezza Rice in the early summer of 2003, at the height of the Saudi takedowns and the threat stream related to possible attack planning in the United States. The president was unusually pensive. He asked me how the Russians were doing in the war on terrorism. I told him their contribution was a disappointment—they were preoccupied with Chechnya and were not players in the global war against terrorism, certainly not as we had defined it. Clearly frustrated, the president asked Condi Rice what needed to be done to engage the Russians and get to the bottom of the current threat. She recommended that I call Defense Minister Ivanov, explain the president's concerns, and obtain Ivanov's assurances that our respective intelligence agencies would intensify their work to resolve the WMD threats.

Defense Minister Ivanov was receptive to our concerns and agreed immediately to receive CIA's representatives in Moscow. I instructed Rolf to travel to Moscow and coordinate meetings with Russian intelligence. At the old KGB headquarters in Moscow, under a watchful portrait of former KGB chairman Andropov,

Rolf pressed our Russian counterparts to work with us in ways that would have been unfathomable during the cold war. Heads nodded as all sides agreed that our two countries' national security interests were closer than one might think. Having moved past the promising opening remarks, however, it soon became evident that even high-level pressure had not prepared them for the intimate forms of concrete cooperation required to deal with the WMD threat. In the final analysis, it was still a game of spy versus spy. Both sides had spilled too much blood for too many years to expect a breakthrough on such an issue. As expected, the Russians took copious notes and asked penetrating questions regarding the information we had come to share. But the conversation became awkward as we began asking questions. The Russians could not shed light on reports we had received of missing material from the former Soviet Union. They did not recognize the names of former Soviet scientists who had reportedly collaborated with al-Qa'ida. They refused to delve into any matters related to the security of their nuclear facilities and nuclear weapons, including reports sourced to Russian officials concerning possible thefts of Russian "suitcase nukes."

As disappointed as Rolf was upon returning to Washington, he advised me that it would have been unreasonable to expect much more from the Russians on such sensitive internal security matters. If we were to improve the quality of our intelligence interaction we would need a fundamental shift in policy. At the time of my retirement, we were still trying to cross that bridge.

As luck would have it, not long after this meeting we obtained the proof we had hoped did not exist concerning the availability of fissile material for sale. In the summer of 2003, we learned that officials had arrested an individual crossing the border from Georgia to Armenia carrying a small amount of highly enriched uranium (HEU). Although the amount of material seized was far short of that required for a nuclear weapon, we could no longer ignore the fact that organized crime, smuggling networks, and corrupt officials inside nuclear facilities were working in concert

to find a customer—any customer—willing to pay the going rate for such merchandise. Although this particular shipment was interdicted, I am not convinced we can rule out the possibility that a terrorist group might one day purchase enough fissile material to construct a viable nuclear device.

As much as we were worried about nuclear plots, we were also feverishly trying to get everything we could on Bin Ladin and his lieutenants' attempts to obtain biological and chemical weapons. Their interest in crude poisons and toxins—cyanide, botulinum, ricin, and the like has been well established.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a senior al-Qa'ida associate, made a name for himself by running a chemical and poisons laboratory and training facility in the northern Iraqi town of Khurmali from May 2002 through early 2003. Al-Zarqawi established his ruthless reputation early on by testing the lethality of cyanide he had developed in Khurmali on a hapless associate—the poison worked, and the unsuspecting extremist died an agonizing death. Al-Zarqawi had brought his lieutenants with him from his days when he ran a training camp for jihadists, in Herat, Afghanistan. He was able to forge ties between Algerians, Moroccans, Pakistanis, Libyans, and other Arab extremists located throughout Europe. Over several months of tireless link analysis we identified al-Zarqawi-connected terrorist cells in more than thirty countries.

This loose association of groups planned a string of poison plots across Europe that began to mature in December 2002. The coordinated disruption of this European-based network represented one of the great successes of the post-9/11 war on terrorism. A global coalition of more than two dozen countries shared intelligence information on a near real-time basis. Numerous operatives and couriers were captured. Plots were disrupted in the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Italy, among others, and lives were saved. We were able to keep the president, vice president, and other senior administration officials constantly updated as to the threats and our unfolding responses.

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq, al-Zarqawi's camp in Khur-

mal was bombed by the U.S. military. We obtained reliable human intelligence reporting and forensic samples confirming that poisons and toxins had been produced at the camp. As for al-Zarqawi's fate, information from a source indicated that he may have escaped to Baghdad, where he planned to lead an insurgency against U.S. forces. (Zarqawi went on to play a leading role in the insurgency until his death in mid-2006.)

Another key al-Qa'ida connection to biological weapons was Yazid Sufaat, the Jemaah Islamiya associate who hosted the first operational meeting of the 9/11 hijackers at his apartment in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in January 2000. In fact, Sufaat had provided commercial cover for Zacarias Moussaoui's trip to the United States. Sufaat was also the self-described "CEO" of al-Qa'ida's anthrax program. U.S. educated and with a Malaysian military background, Sufaat had impeccable extremist credentials. In 2000, he had been introduced to Ayman al-Zawahiri personally, by Hambali, as the man who was capable of leading al-Qa'ida's biological weapons program.

Al-Qa'ida spared no effort in its attempt to obtain biological weapons. In 1999, al-Zawahiri had recruited another scientist, Pakistani national Rauf Ahmad, to set up a small lab in Kandahar, Afghanistan, to house the biological weapons effort. In December 2001, a sharp WMD analyst at CIA found the initial lead on which we would pull and, ultimately, unravel the al-Qa'ida anthrax networks. We were able to identify Rauf Ahmad from letters he had written to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Later, we uncovered Sufaat's central role in the program. We located Rauf Ahmad's lab in Afghanistan. We identified the building in Kandahar where Sufaat claimed he isolated anthrax. We mounted operations that resulted in the arrests and detentions of anthrax operatives in several countries.

The most startling revelation from this intelligence success story was that the anthrax program had been developed in parallel to 9/11 planning. As best as we could determine, al-Zawahiri's project had been wrapped up in the summer of 2001, when the al-

Qa'ida deputy, along with Hambali, were briefed over a week by Sufaat on the progress he had made to isolate anthrax. The entire operation had been managed at the top of al-Qa'ida with strict compartmentalization. Having completed this phase of his work, Sufaat fled Afghanistan in December 2001 and was captured by authorities trying to sneak back into Malaysia. Rauf Ahmad was detained by Pakistani authorities in December 2001. Our hope was that these and our many other actions had neutralized the anthrax threat, at least temporarily.

But of all al-Qa'ida's efforts to obtain other forms of WMD, the main threat is the nuclear one. I am convinced that this is where UBL and his operatives desperately want to go. They understand that bombings by cars, trucks, trains, and planes will get them some headlines, to be sure. But if they manage to set off a mushroom cloud, they will make history. Such an event would place al-Qa'ida on a par with the superpowers and make good Bin Ladin's threat to destroy our economy and bring death into every American household. Even in the darkest days of the cold war, we could count on the fact that the Soviets, just like us, wanted to live. Not so with terrorists. Al-Qa'ida boasts that while we fear death, they embrace it.

We have learned that it is not beyond the realm of possibility for a terrorist group to obtain a nuclear weapon. I have often wondered why this is such a hard reality for so many people to accept. In a scene in a book called *American Prometheus*, by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, in 1946 the father of the U.S. atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, describes the specter of nuclear terrorism. Asked in a closed Senate hearing room "whether three or four men couldn't smuggle units of an atomic bomb into New York and blow up the whole city," Oppenheimer responded, "Of course it could be done, and people could destroy New York." The surprised senators then asked, "What instrument would you use to detect an atomic bomb hidden somewhere in the city?" Oppenheimer replied, "A screwdriver [to open each and every crate or suitcase]." Oppenheimer instinctively understood what

we learned the hard way: that nuclear terrorism was then, and remains now, a terrifying possibility, and extraordinarily hard to stop.

The terrorists are endlessly patient. The first plans to attack the World Trade Center were made a decade before the Twin Towers fell. The plot to bring down aircraft traveling between the United Kingdom and United States that was thwarted in the summer of 2006 parallels Project Bojinka. How hard is al-Qa'ida willing to work and how long are they willing to wait to pull off the ultimate attack? What was the attack Ayman al-Zawahiri described as "something better" when he called off the 2003 attack on the New York City subway?

One mushroom cloud would change history. My deepest fear is that this is exactly what they intend.