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Opening Statement to the 9/11 Commission



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Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I thank the Commission for arranging this special session. I thank you for helping us to find a way to meet the nation's need to learn all that we can about the September 11th attacks, while preserving important constitutional principles.

The Commission, and those who appear before it, have a vital charge. We owe it to those that we lost, and to their loved ones, and to our country, to learn all that we can about that tragic day, and the events that led to it. Many of the families of the victims are here today, and I want to thank them for their contributions to this Commission's work.

The terrorist threat to our nation did not emerge on September 11th, 2001. Long before that day, radical, freedom-hating terrorists declared war on America and on the civilized world: the attack on the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983; the hijacking of the Achille Lauro in 1985; the rise of al-Qaida and the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993; the attacks on American installations in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996; the East Africa [embassy] bombings of 1998; the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. These and other atrocities were part of a sustained, systematic campaign to spread devastation and chaos and to murder innocent Americans.

The terrorists were at war with us, but we were not yet at war with them. For more than 20 years, the terrorist threat gathered, and America's response across several Administrations of both parties was insufficient. Historically, democratic societies have been slow to react to gathering threats, tending instead to wait to confront threats until they are too dangerous to ignore, or until it is too late.



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Despite the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and continued German harassment of American shipping, the United States did not enter the First World War until two years later. Despite Nazi Germany's repeated violations of the Versailles Treaty and provocations throughout the mid-1930s, the Western democracies did not take action until 1939. The U.S. government did not act against the growing threat from Imperial Japan until it became all too evident at Pearl Harbor. And, tragically, for all the language of war spoken before September 11th, this country simply was not on war footing.

Since then, America has been at war. And under President Bush's leadership, we will remain at war until the terrorist threat to our nation is ended. The world has changed so much that it is hard to remember what our lives were like before that day. But I do want to describe some of the actions that were taken by the Administration prior to September 11th.

After President Bush was elected, we were briefed by the Clinton Administration on many national security issues during the transition. The President-elect and I were briefed by George Tenet on terrorism and on the al-Qaida network. Members of Sandy Berger's NSC [National Security Council] staff briefed me, along with other members of the national security team, on counterterrorism and al-Qaida. This briefing lasted for about an hour, and it reviewed the Clinton Administration's counterterrorism approach and the various counterterrorism activities then under way. Sandy and I personally discussed a variety of other topics, including North Korea, Iraq, the Middle East, and the Balkans.

Because of these briefings and because we had watched the rise of al-Qaida over many years, we understood that the network posed a serious threat to the United States. We wanted to ensure that there was no respite in the fight against al-Qaida. On an operational level, therefore, we decided immediately to continue to pursue the Clinton Administration's covert action authorities and other efforts to fight the network. President Bush retained George Tenet as Director of Central Intelligence, and Louis Freeh remained the Director of the FBI. And I took the unusual step of retaining Dick Clarke and the entire Clinton Administration's counterterrorism team on the NSC staff. I knew Dick Clarke to be an expert in his field, as well as an experienced crisis manager. Our goal was to ensure continuity of operations while we developed new policies.

At the beginning of the Administration, President Bush revived the practice of meeting with the Director of Central Intelligence almost every day in the Oval Office -- meetings which I attended, along with the Vice President and the Chief of Staff. At these meetings, the President received up-to-date intelligence and asked questions of his most senior intelligence officials. From January 20th through September 10th, the President received at these daily meetings more than 40 briefing items on al-Qaida, and 13 of those were in response to questions he or his top advisers posed. In addition to seeing DCI Tenet almost every morning, I generally spoke by telephone to co-ordinate policy at 7:15 with secretaries Powell and Rumsfeld on a variety of topics. And I also met and spoke regularly with the DCI about al-Qaida and terrorism.



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Of course, we did have other responsibilities. President Bush had set a broad foreign policy agenda. We were determined to confront the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We were improving America's relations with the world's great powers. We had to change an Iraq policy that was making no progress against a hostile regime which regularly shot at U.S. planes enforcing U.N. Security Council Resolutions. And we had to deal with the occasional crisis; for instance, when the crew of a Navy plane was detained in China for 11 days.

We also moved to develop a new and comprehensive strategy to try and eliminate the al-Qaida network. President Bush understood the threat, and he understood its importance. He made clear to us that he did not want to respond to al-Qaida one attack at a time. He told me he was "tired of swatting flies." This new strategy was developed over the spring and summer of 2001, and was approved by the President's senior national security officials on September 4th. It was the very first major national security policy directive of the Bush Administration -- not Russia, not missile defense, not Iraq, but the elimination of al-Qaida.

Although this National Security Presidential Directive was originally a highly classified document, we've arranged for portions of it to be declassified to help the Commission in its work, and I will describe some of it today. The strategy set as a goal the elimination of the al-Qaida network and threat and ordered the leadership of relevant U.S. departments and agencies to make the elimination of al-Qaida a high priority and to use all aspects of our national power -- intelligence, financial, diplomatic, and military -- to meet that goal. And it gave Cabinet secretaries and department heads specific responsibilities. For instance:

- It directed the Secretary of State to work with other countries to end all sanctuaries given to al-Qaida.
- It directed the secretaries of the Treasury and State to work with foreign governments to seize or freeze assets and holdings of al-Qaida's and its benefactors.
- It directed the Central Intelligence -- the Director of Central Intelligence to prepare an aggressive program of covert activities to disrupt al-Qaida and provide assistance to anti-Taliban groups operating in Afghanistan.
- It tasked the Director of OMB [Office of Management and Budget] with ensuring that sufficient funds were available in budgets over the next five years to meet the goals laid out in the strategy.

And it directed the Secretary of Defense to -- and I quote -- "ensure that contingency planning processes include plans against al-Qaida and associated terrorist facilities in Afghanistan, including leadership, command-control and communications, training and logistics facilities; and against Taliban targets in Afghanistan, including leadership, command-control, air and air defense, ground forces and logistics; and to eliminate weapons of mass



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destruction which al-Qaida and associated terrorist groups may acquire or manufacture, including those stored in underground bunkers.”

This was a change from the prior strategy -- Presidential Decision Directive 62, signed in 1998, which ordered the Secretary of Defense to provide transportation to bring individual terrorists to the U.S. for trial, to protect DOD forces overseas, and to be prepared to respond to terrorist and weapons of mass destruction incidents.

More importantly, we recognized that no counterterrorism strategy could succeed in isolation. As you know from the Pakistan and Afghanistan strategy documents that we have made available to the Commission, our counterterrorism strategy was a part of a broader package of strategies that addressed the complexities of the region.

Integrating our counterterrorism and regional strategies was the most difficult and the most important aspect of the new strategy to get right. Al-Qaida was both a client of and a patron to the Taliban, which in turn was supported by Pakistan. Those relationships provided al-Qaida with a powerful umbrella of protection, and we had to sever that. This was not easy.

Not that we hadn't tried. Within a month of taking office, President Bush sent a strong, private message to President Musharraf, urging him to use his influence with the Taliban to bring bin Laden to justice and to close down al-Qaida training camps. Secretary Powell actively urged the Pakistanis, including Musharraf himself, to abandon support for the Taliban. I remember well meeting with the Pakistani Foreign Minister -- and I think I referred to this meeting in my private meeting with you -- in my office on June of 2001. And I delivered what I considered to be a very tough message. He met that message with a rote answer and with an expressionless response.

America's al-Qaida policy wasn't working because our Afghanistan policy wasn't working. And our Afghanistan policy wasn't working because our Pakistan policy wasn't working. We recognized that America's counterterrorism policy had to be connected to our regional strategies and to our overall foreign policy.

To address these problems, I had to make sure that key regional experts were involved, not just counterterrorism experts. I brought in Zalmay Khalilzad, an expert on Afghanistan who, as a senior diplomat in the 1980s, had worked closely with the Afghan Mujahedeen, helping them to turn back the Soviet invasion. I also ensured the participation of the NSC experts on South Asia, as well as the Secretary of State and his regional specialists. Together, we developed a new strategic approach to Afghanistan. Instead of the intense focus on the Northern Alliance, we emphasized the importance of the south -- the social and political heartland of the country. Our new approach to Pakistan combined the use of carrots and sticks to persuade Pakistan to drop its support for the Taliban. And we began to change our approach to India to preserve stability on the continent.



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While we were developing this new strategy to deal with al-Qaida, we also made decisions on a number of specific anti-al-Qaida initiatives that had been proposed by Dick Clarke to me in an early memorandum after we had taken office. Many of these ideas had been deferred by the last Administration, and some had been on the table since 1998. We increased counterterrorism assistance to Uzbekistan; we bolstered the Treasury Department's activities to track and seize terrorist assets; we increased funding for counterterrorism activities across several agencies; and we moved to arm Predator unmanned surveillance vehicles for action against al-Qaida.

When threat reporting increased during the spring and summer of 2001, we moved the U.S. government at all levels to a high state of alert and activity. Let me clear up any confusion about the relationship between the development of our new strategy and the actions that we took to respond to the threats of the summer. Policy development and crisis management require different approaches. Throughout this period, we did both simultaneously.

For the essential crisis management task, we depended on the Counterterrorism Security Group, chaired by Dick Clarke, to be the interagency nerve center. The CSG consisted of senior counterterrorism experts from the CIA, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the Defense Department (including the Joint Chiefs of Staff), the State Department, and the Secret Service. The CSG had met regularly for many years, and its members had worked through numerous periods of heightened threat activity. As threat information increased, the CSG met more frequently, sometimes daily, to review and analyze the threat reporting and to coordinate actions in response. CSG members also had ready access to their Cabinet secretaries and could raise any concerns that they had at the highest levels.

The threat reporting that we received in the spring and summer of 2001 was not specific as to time, nor place, nor manner of attack. Almost all of the reports focused on al-Qaida activities outside the United States, especially in the Middle East and in North Africa. In fact, the information that was specific enough to be actionable referred to terrorist operations overseas. Most often, though, the threat reporting was frustratingly vague. Let me read you some of the actual chatter that was picked up in that spring and summer:

- "Unbelievable news coming in weeks," said one.
- "Big event -- there will be a very, very, very, very big uproar."
- "There will be attacks in the near future."

Troubling, yes. But they don't tell us when; they don't tell us where; they don't tell us who; and they don't tell us how.



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In this context, I want to address in some detail one of the briefing items that we did receive, since its content has been frequently mischaracterized. On August 6th, 2001, the President's intelligence briefing included a response to questions that he had earlier raised about any al-Qaida intentions to strike our homeland. The briefing team reviewed past intelligence reporting, mostly dating from the 1990s, regarding possible al-Qaida plans to attack inside the United States. It referred to uncorroborated reporting that from 1998 that a terrorist might attempt to hijack a U.S. aircraft in an attempt to blackmail the government into releasing U.S.-held terrorists who had participated in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. This briefing item was not prompted by any specific threat information. And it did not raise the possibility that terrorists might use airplanes as missiles.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of threat information we received was focused overseas, I was concerned about possible threats inside the United States. And on July 5th, Chief of Staff Andy Card and I met with Dick Clarke, and I asked Dick to make sure that domestic agencies were aware of the heightened threat period and were taking appropriate steps to respond, even though we did not have specific threats to the homeland. Later that same day, Clarke convened a special meeting of his CSG, as well as representatives from the FAA [verify Federal Aviation Administration], the INS [Immigration and Naturalization], [U.S.] Customs, and the Coast Guard. At that meeting, these agencies were asked to take additional measures to increase security and surveillance.

Throughout the period of heightened threat information, we worked hard on multiple fronts to detect, protect against, and disrupt any terrorist plans or operations that might lead to an attack. For instance:

- The Department of Defense issued at least five urgent warnings to U.S. military forces that al-Qaida might be planning a near-term attack, and placed our military forces in certain regions on heightened alert.
- The State Department issued at least four urgent security advisories and public worldwide cautions on terrorist threats, enhanced security measures at certain embassies, and warned the Taliban that they would be held responsible for any al-Qaida attack on U.S. interests.
- The FBI issued at least three nationwide warnings to federal, state, and law enforcement agencies, and specifically stated that, "although the vast majority of the information indicated overseas targets, attacks against the homeland could not be ruled out."
- The FBI tasked all 56 of its U.S. Field Offices to increase surveillance of known [or suspected] terrorists and reach out to known informants who might have information on terrorist activities.



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- The FAA issued at least five Civil Aviation Security Information Circulars to all U.S. airlines and airport security personnel, including specific warnings about the possibility of hijacking.
- The CIA worked round the clock to disrupt threats worldwide. Agency officials launched a wide-ranging disruption effort against al-Qaida in more than 20 countries.
- And during this period, the Vice President, the Director -- Director Tenet, and members of my staff called senior foreign officials requesting that they increase their intelligence assistance and report to us any relevant threat information.

This is a brief sample of our intense activity in the high threat period of the summer of 2001.

Yet, as your hearings have shown, there was no "silver bullet" that could have prevented the 9/11 attacks. In hindsight, if anything might have helped stop 9/11, it would have been better information about threats inside the United States, something made very difficult by structural and legal impediments that prevented the collection and sharing of information by our law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

So the attacks came. A band of vicious terrorists tried to decapitate our government, destroy our financial system, and break the spirit of America. And as an officer of government on duty that day, I will never forget the sorrow and the anger that I felt, nor will I forget the courage and resilience of the American people, nor the leadership of the President that day.

Now we have an opportunity and an obligation to move forward together. Bold and comprehensive changes are sometimes only possible in the wake of catastrophic events, events which create a new consensus that allows us to transcend old ways of thinking and acting. And just as World War II led to a fundamental reorganization of our national defense structure and the creation of the National Security Council, so has September 11th made possible sweeping changes in the ways we protect our homeland.

President Bush is leading the country during this time of crisis and change. He has unified and streamlined our efforts to secure the American homeland by creating the Department of Homeland Security, established a new center to integrate and analyze threat information -- terrorist threat information, directed the transformation of the FBI into an agency dedicated to fighting terror, broken down the bureaucratic walls and legal barriers that prevent the sharing of vital information between our domestic law enforcement and foreign intelligence agencies, and, working with the Congress, given officials new tools, such as the PATRIOT Act, to find and stop terrorists. And he has done this in a way that is consistent with protecting America's cherished civil liberties and with preserving our character as a free and open society.



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But the President recognizes that our work is far from complete. More structural reform will likely be necessary. Our intelligence gathering and analysis have improved dramatically in the last two years, but they must be stronger still. The President and all of us in his administration welcome new ideas and fresh thinking. We are eager to do whatever it is that will help to protect the American people. And we look forward to receiving this Commission's recommendations.

We are at war and our security as a nation depends on winning that war. We must and we will do everything we can to harden terrorist targets within the United States. Dedicated law enforcement and security professionals continue to risk their lives everyday to make us all safer, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. And let's remember that those charged with protecting us from attack have to be right 100% of the time. To inflict devastation on a massive scale, the terrorists only have to succeed once. And we know that they are trying every day.

That is why we must address the source of the problem. We must stay on the offensive to find and defeat the terrorists wherever they live, hide, and plot around the world. If we learned anything from September 11th, it is that we cannot wait while dangers gather. After the September 11th attacks, our nation faced hard choices. We could fight a narrow war against al-Qaida and the Taliban, or we could fight a broad war against a global menace. We could seek a narrow victory or we could work for a lasting peace and a better world.

President Bush has chosen the bolder course. He recognizes that the war on terror is a broad war. Under his leadership, the United States and our allies are disrupting terrorist operations, cutting off their funding, and hunting down terrorists one-by-one. Their world is getting smaller. The terrorists have lost a home-base and training camps in Afghanistan. The governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia now pursue them with energy and force.

We are confronting the nexus between terror and weapons of mass destruction. We are working to stop the spread of deadly weapons and to prevent them from getting into the hands of terrorists, seizing dangerous materials in transit, where necessary. Because we acted in Iraq, Saddam Hussein will never again use weapons of mass destruction against his people or his neighbors. And we have convinced Libya to give up all of its weapons of mass destruction-related programs and materials.

And as we attack the threat at its source, we are also addressing its roots. Thanks to the bravery and skill of our men and women in uniform, we have removed from power two of the world's most brutal regimes -- sources of violence, and fear, and instability in the world's most dangerous region. Today, along with many allies, we are helping the people of Iraq and Afghanistan to build free societies. And we are working with the people of the Middle East to spread the blessings of liberty and democracy as alternatives to instability and hatred and terror.



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This work is hard and it is dangerous, yet it is worthy of our effort and sacrifice. The defeat of terror and the success of freedom in those nations will serve the interests of our nation and inspire hope and encourage reform throughout the greater Middle East.

In the aftermath of September the 11th, those were the right choices for America to make -- the only choices that can ensure the safety of our nation for decades to come.

Thank you very much. And now I'm happy to take your questions.