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'We Will Rally the World'

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Bush and His Advisers Set Objectives, but Struggled With How to Achieve Them

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Second in a series of eight articles.

At 7:30 a.m., half an hour after arriving for work in the Oval Office, President Bush phoned his friend Tony Blair, the British prime minister. He knew Blair would help buoy his spirits -- and might have some useful advice about what to do.

The president was driven by conflicting impulses that morning. He was anxious, even impatient, to strike back as quickly as he could at those responsible for the Pentagon and World Trade Center attacks less than 24 hours earlier. He wanted, as he said later, "to move yesterday." But the response had to be big enough to inflict pain on the terrorists and demonstrate to them and the rest of the world that there had been a fundamental change in U.S. policy.

Within Blair's government -- and in other European capitals -- there were widespread fears that Bush would be under irresistible political pressure at home to retaliate with an immediate military strike. Many Europeans believed that hasty military action not only would be ineffective in deterring future terrorism but also would shatter any hopes of building an international coalition.

Blair did not share those fears about the United States acting prematurely, confiding to an adviser his belief that American public opinion would give Bush breathing space and adequate time to prepare. But on the phone with Bush, he expressed shock and horror, pledged his "total support" to the president and said he assumed Bush was considering an immediate response.

"Obviously, you know, we're thinking about that," the president replied. But he added that he did not want to "pound sand with millions of dollars in weapons" to make himself feel good. He did not plan to shoot off a bunch of cruise missiles.

The two leaders agreed it was important to first move quickly on the diplomatic front to capitalize on international outrage about the terrorist attack. If they got support from NATO and the United Nations, they reasoned, they would have the legal and political framework to permit a military response afterward.

Before hanging up, Bush and Blair returned to the question of a military response. Blair told Bush he had to make a choice between rapid action and effective action. And effective action would require preparation and planning.

Bush agreed. For the second time, he said he didn't want to fire missiles at targets that did not matter.

In the first hours after the terrorist attacks Sept. 11, Bush and his top advisers had been preoccupied with the crisis at hand, assessing additional threats, grounding airplanes, moving government officials to safety, mobilizing emergency rescue crews, measuring the scope of the devastation in New York and Washington, determining who might be responsible. Now, on the day after, they began to turn their attention more systematically to the U.S. response.

Like many members of his national security team, the president believed the Clinton administration's response to Osama bin Laden and international terrorism, especially since 1998, had been so weak as to be provocative, a virtual invitation to hit the United States again. Most often, they believed, Clinton had chosen to respond to terrorist incidents by launching a cruise missile attack that did not jeopardize U.S. forces.

In an interview last month, Bush described his own thinking. "The antiseptic notion of launching a cruise missile into some guy's, you know, tent, really is a joke," he said. "I mean, people viewed that as the impotent America . . . of a flaccid, you know, kind of technologically competent but not very tough country that was willing to launch a cruise missile out of a submarine and that'd be it."

"I do believe there is the image of America out there that we are so materialistic, that we're almost hedonistic, that we don't have values, and that when struck, we wouldn't fight back," he said in the interview. "It was clear that bin Laden felt emboldened and didn't feel threatened by the United States."

Many months earlier, in the formative stages of his new administration, Bush had talked with his prospective secretary of defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, about their shared belief that America's deterrent strength had been eroded through misapplication of the country's military power. Rumsfeld recalls saying to Bush that whenever the United States was attacked or threatened, the Clinton administration had followed a pattern of "reflexive pullback." Rumsfeld said he believed that U.S. power was needed to help discipline the world.

"I left no doubt in his mind but that, at that moment where something happens, that I would be coming to him to lean forward, not back. And that I wanted [him] to know that," Rumsfeld said. "And he said, unambiguously, that that is what he would be doing, and we had a clear, common understanding."

However, until the attacks of Sept. 11, Bush had not put that thinking into practice. For months, his advisers had been developing a plan to fight terrorism, and specifically bin Laden and al Qaeda. Among the proposals was one by the CIA for expanded covert action against bin Laden. Its cost was \$ 200 million.

But formal recommendations had never been presented to the president. Nor had he demanded them.

"I know there was a plan in the works. . . . I don't know how mature the plan was," Bush said in the interview.

What was his state of mind about bin Laden?

"There was a significant difference in my attitude after Sept. 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."

Just before 8 a.m., CIA Director George J. Tenet and a top aide arrived at the White House for the president's daily intelligence briefing. Vice President Cheney and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice joined them in the Oval Office.

Bush's father, the former president and former CIA director in the Ford administration, had once told him that the morning intelligence briefing was one of the most important things he would do every day as president.

As a new president without significant foreign policy experience, Bush had taken intelligence seriously from the start of his administration and invited Tenet for regular 20- to 30-minute sessions most mornings. It was a departure from the previous administration, when President Bill Clinton used to receive his briefing in writing.

Tenet's briefing for Bush this morning included a review of available intelligence tracing the attacks to bin Laden and his top associates in al Qaeda. One report out of Kandahar, 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 reports specifically identified Capitol Hill and the White House as targets on Sept. 11. One said a bin Laden associate -- erroneously -- "gave thanks for the explosion in the Congress building."

A key figure in the bin Laden financing organization called Wafa initially claimed "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. Sept. 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," as was another Chechen al Qaeda leader.

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 the terrorist attacks, had referred to "zero hour."

In addition, the CIA and the FBI had evidence of connections between at least three of the 19 hijackers, bin Laden and his training camps in Afghanistan.

For Tenet, the evidence on bin Laden was conclusive -- game, set, match. He then 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 Bush. The CIA was giving several

million dollars a year in assistance to the Northern Alliance, the loose amalgam of opposition forces in the northern part of the country that had been fighting with the ruling Taliban. 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.

Over the past few months, as part of the administration's review of its policy on terrorism, Tenet, along with Rice and other officials, had been working on a plan to vastly expand covert action in Afghanistan and throughout the world. Tenet told Bush an even more expanded plan would soon be presented for approval, and it would be expensive. Tenet said CIA paramilitary teams would be able to provide indispensable assistance to any U.S. ground forces that might follow.

"Whatever it takes," the president said.

After the intelligence briefing, Bush met with Karen P. Hughes, the White House counselor who served as the administration's communications czar and one of the president's closest confidants. Bush told Hughes he wanted a daily meeting to shape the administration's message to Americans about the fight against terrorism. It should be modeled, he said, on the meetings held in the spring during the administration's first international crisis, when the Chinese had held an American spy plane crew hostage for 11 days.

Hughes, who was focused on details of the day ahead, proposed that Bush make an early public statement and reminded him that he would need remarks for a visit to the Pentagon that had been scheduled for the afternoon.

"Let's get the big picture," he said, interrupting her. "A faceless enemy has declared war on the United States of America. So we are at war."

They needed a plan, a strategy, even a vision, he said, to educate the American people to be prepared for another attack. Americans needed to know that combating terrorism would be the main focus of the administration -- and the government -- from this moment forward.

Hughes returned to her corner office on the second floor of the West Wing to begin drafting a statement that reflected the president's instructions. But before she could open a new file on her computer, Bush called and summoned her.

"Let me tell you how to do your job today," he told Hughes when she came back to the Oval Office. He handed her two pieces of White House notepaper with three thoughts scratched out in his handwriting: "This is an enemy that runs and hides, but won't be able to hide forever."

"An enemy that thinks its havens are safe, but won't be safe forever."

"No kind of enemy that we are used to -- but America will adapt."

Hughes went back to work.

Bush convened his National Security Council in the Cabinet Room and declared that the time for reassuring the nation was over.

The enemy, he said, "hides in shadows and runs." The United States would use all its resources to find this enemy, but it would entail "a different kind of war than our nation has ever fought." He said he was confident that if the administration developed a logical and coherent plan, the rest of the world "will rally to our side." At the same time, he said, he was determined not to allow the threat of terrorism to alter the way Americans lived their lives. "We have to prepare the public," he said, "without alarming the public."

FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III began to describe the investigation underway to identify those responsible for hijacking the four airplanes the day before. Mueller said it was essential not to taint any evidence gathered so that if accomplices were arrested, they could be convicted.

But Attorney General John D. Ashcroft interrupted him. Let's stop the discussion right here, he said. The chief mission of U.S. law enforcement, he added, is to stop another attack and apprehend any accomplices or terrorists before they hit us again. If we can't bring them to trial, so be it.

The president had made clear to Ashcroft in an earlier conversation that he wanted to make sure an attack like the ones on the Pentagon and World Trade Center never happened again. Now, Ashcroft was saying, the focus of the FBI and the Justice Department should change from prosecution to prevention, a fundamental shift in priorities.

"It was made very clear to me" by Bush, Ashcroft said in an interview, "that we had a responsibility to do everything in our power and to find ways to do those things that we might not otherwise think there are ways to do, to curtail the likelihood, to reduce the risks, to prevent this from happening again."

"My instruction was this: We've got to think outside the box. . . . We can't think outside the Constitution, but outside the box. . . . If there's a question between protecting a source and protecting the American people, we burn the source and we protect the American people. That's just the way it has to be."

After he finished with the NSC, Bush continued meeting with a smaller group of senior administration officials -- the half-dozen principals, including the vice president and the secretaries of state and defense who formed the war cabinet, without most of their deputies and aides.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said the State Department was ready to carry the president's message -- you're either with us or you're not -- to Pakistan and the Taliban.

Bush responded that he wanted a list of demands for the Taliban. "Handing over bin Laden is not enough," he told Powell. He wanted the whole al Qaeda organization handed over or kicked out.

Rumsfeld interjected. "It is critical how we define goals at the start, because that's what the coalition signs on for," he said. Other countries would want precise definitions. "Do

we focus on bin Laden and al Qaeda or terrorism more broadly?" he asked rhetorically.

"The goal is terrorism in its broadest sense," Powell said, "focusing first on the organization that acted yesterday."

"To the extent we define our task broadly," Cheney said, "including those who support terrorism, then we get at states. And it's easier to find them than it is to find bin Laden."

"Start with bin Laden," Bush said, "which Americans expect. And then if we succeed, we've struck a huge blow and can move forward." He called the threat "a cancer" and added, "We don't want to define it too broadly for the average man to understand."

Bush pressed Rumsfeld on what the military could do immediately.

"Very little, effectively," the secretary replied.

Bush told his advisers what he had told Blair -- that above all he wanted military action that would hurt the terrorists, not just make Americans feel better. He understood the need for planning and preparation but said his patience had limits. "I want to get moving," he said.

Powell drew an obvious conclusion from the president's words. "Focus is on winning the war," he scribbled on his pad.

When Bush posed the question of what military action could be taken immediately, Gen. Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later told others that he recalled feeling that the president might be heading down the same path that the Clinton administration had followed: Strike quickly, but with no follow-through.

Shelton, just three weeks away from retirement, knew there were two important problems in formulating a response. First was geography: The United States had no bases close to Afghanistan. Any large-scale military strike would entail multiple in-flight refuelings for helicopters or aircraft involved in an operation. The second problem was al Qaeda, a guerrilla organization whose members lived in caves, operated with mules and large sport-utility vehicles, and presented few desirable targets. Their training camps were mostly empty. Airstrikes might destroy a few buildings or tents but also send the message that the United States was looking to fight terrorism on the cheap.

Shelton was relieved as he rather quickly realized Bush was not looking for an easy or obvious response, not demanding military options on his desk by the next day.

Bush said he knew some of the generals might have had reservations about him. "I think General Shelton wasn't sure about the commander in chief at this point in time," Bush said last month. "He was a little uncertain as to whether or not we were going to create expectations for him that he couldn't live up to."

Bush said he knew the military would resist committing forces to an ill-defined mission. But he also believed he needed to push the Pentagon to think differently about how to fight this war. "They had yet to be challenged to think on how to fight a guerrilla war

using conventional means," he said. "They had come out from an era of strike from afar -- you know, cruise missiles into the thing."

Shelton, though he would soon be gone, was part of a national security team notable for its experience. Cheney was a former secretary of defense, White House chief of staff and leader in the House. Powell had served as national security adviser and as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, like Cheney, was an architect of the Persian Gulf War during the administration of Bush's father. Rumsfeld had been White House chief of staff and secretary of defense in Gerald Ford's administration a quarter-century earlier. Tenet was serving as CIA director under his second president. Rice had been a Russia specialist on the NSC staff in the first Bush administration. Ashcroft was a former state attorney general, governor and senator. Mueller was a highly respected former prosecutor.

But for all the experience around the table, this was a team that had not fully lived up to expectations. Cheney had struggled, particularly early in the administration, not to appear to be overshadowing his boss. His true role -- the power behind the throne or simply the sage, confidential adviser -- remained a mystery to outsiders. Rumsfeld had irritated lawmakers on Capitol Hill and many of his senior military officers at the department with his brusque and sometimes secretive style of management. Powell suffered from perceptions, fair or not, that he had been pushed to the edges of the new administration, a view encapsulated by a headline on the cover of the Sept. 10 Time magazine: "Where have you gone, Colin Powell?"

Rice and Tenet had become presidential confidants but were little known to the public. Ashcroft, attacked for his conservative views, had survived a bitter confirmation battle in the Senate, while Mueller had taken over the FBI just one week before the attacks.

The biggest unknown of all was Bush himself. He had come to the presidency with little foreign policy experience, and his early actions on global climate change and national missile defense had rattled U.S. allies in Europe. America's friends feared the administration was infected with a new strain of unilateralism, a go-it-alone attitude of looking inward rather than engaging the world as the lone superpower might be expected to do.

Bush described in the interview how he believed the rest of the world saw him in the months leading up to the attacks of Sept. 11. "Look," he said, "I'm the toxic Texan, right? In these people's minds, I'm the new guy. They don't know who I am. The imagery must be just unbelievable."

From his first trips abroad, Bush also had come to some conclusions about how the rest of the world saw the United States. "People respect us, but they like to tweak us," he said. "People respect America and they love our values, but they look for every excuse in the world to say that, because we didn't do exactly what, you know, the international community wanted, we became unilateralist. In other words, I had a very interesting taste of what it would mean to be the president of a great country. There is a certain sense of jealousy, I guess is one way to describe it."

He said the international community simply did not know what he was really like. "Nor does the nation, by the way, understand what it's like to have a commander in chief tested under fire like this," he added. "No one knew."

Reporters were ushered into the Cabinet Room. Dressed in a dark blue suit, light blue dress shirt and blue striped tie, Bush sat slightly forward in his chair. He wanted to escalate his public rhetoric from the previous night.

"The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror," he said. "They were acts of war."

He described the enemy as one America had never before encountered, an enemy who operated in the shadows, who preyed on innocent people, who hit and then ran for cover. "This is an enemy that tries to hide," he said, "but it won't be able to hide forever."

Hughes had taken the president's verbal instructions and hand-written statement from two hours earlier and drafted the language the president was now reading. But she had misread his handwriting, mistaking "havens" for "harbors." And so the president said, "This is an enemy who thinks its harbors are safe, but they won't be safe forever." Bush said the country would use all its resources to find those responsible. "We will rally the world," he said. "We will be patient, we will be focused, and we will be steadfast in our determination."

He closed by saying, "This will be a monumental struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail."

Bush's effort to "rally the world" had begun earlier that day. He had told his advisers Tuesday night that the crisis was not only a challenge but also an opportunity, a chance to change relationships with many countries. After his telephone call to Blair, the president called Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On the day of the attacks, Putin had canceled a planned military exercise after the United States had raised its defense condition to DefCon3, a gesture that not only impressed Bush but also convinced him that the terrorist attacks offered an opportunity to reshape U.S.-Russian relations.

During the five-minute call, Putin told the president he had signed a decree calling for a moment of silence the next day to express Russia's outrage over the attacks, and the two agreed to work together to combat terrorism.

Much of the work of assembling an international coalition was left to Powell, but on that day alone, Bush called the Russian president a second time and also spoke with French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

"My attitude all along was, if we have to go it alone, we'll go it alone; but I'd rather not," Bush said in the interview.

Bush met with the joint leadership of Congress. On the day of the attacks, Democrats on Capitol Hill had been plotting a fall offensive against the White House over the way its tax cuts had eaten away the surplus. Both parties were preparing for a long, partisan autumn of warfare.

Now all of that was swept aside. The congressional leaders had spent the previous day

thrown together in a secure facility outside Washington. For House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) and House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), the time spent in that bunker was more than they had spent together the previous two years. The leaders all understood that the attacks of the previous day required them to show a united front -- to the president and to the country.

The meeting itself, the president said, according to notes taken by people who were there, was a signal to the terrorists that they could not bring the country down however hard they tried. "The dream of the enemy was for us not to meet in this building," he said. "They wanted the White House in rubble."

He warned of additional attacks against the United States. "This is not an isolated incident," he said. "This is war." The public might lose focus, he added. A month from now Americans will be watching football and the World Series. But the government would have to carry out the war indefinitely.

The enemy was not only a particular group, he said, but also "a frame of mind" that fosters hate. "They hate Christianity. They hate Judaism. They hate everything that is not them." Other nations, he added, would have to choose, and he singled out Pakistan. That country's intelligence service, the ISI, had been instrumental in creating the Taliban in Afghanistan, and many of its intelligence officers maintained close ties to Taliban leaders. "We're talking to Pakistan in a way we've never talked to them before."

Hastert invited the president to address a joint session of Congress. Bush replied that he would accept when he had something significant to say.

Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) cautioned the president to use care in his rhetoric. "War is a powerful word," he said. Daschle pledged bipartisan support but asked that the administration make Congress a full partner with ongoing consultations.

Gephardt said the leaders had to work together to reduce the sense of fear in the country over additional attacks and find a new balance between freedom and security as they did so. He also told the president, "We've got to trust you and you've got to trust us" -- something that had been lacking for much of the previous eight months.

Near the end of the meeting, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), the 83-year-old president pro tempore of the Senate, took the floor and described his dealings with 10 presidents. He noted that Bush had said he did not want a declaration of war from the Congress but would be interested in a resolution endorsing the use of force. Byrd said he could not expect the kind of blank check Congress had given Lyndon Johnson with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution early in the Vietnam War. We still have a Constitution, he said, pulling a copy from his pocket.

Then Byrd recalled the night he and his wife dined with Bush at the White House. Bush had said grace before dinner, without asking. "It impressed me," Byrd said. He talked about Hollywood's negative influence on the culture, the slide America had taken toward permissiveness and materialism. "I'm praying for you," Byrd said. "Despite Hollywood and TV, there's an army of people who believe in divine guidance and the creator." His closing line brought silence to the room: "You stand there," he said. "Mighty forces will come to your aid."

During the morning meeting with his national security team, Bush had asked for a draft statement of objectives in the war on terrorism. It was the administration's first attempt to distill the sometimes random and unfocused discussions of the morning and the previous night -- including some of his visceral remarks -- into a set of principles that would shape the war on terrorism.

About 12:30 p.m., the so-called deputies committee, a little-known but powerful group that includes the No. 2 officials at State, Defense, the Joint Chiefs, the CIA and NSC, convened in the Situation Room to take a first cut at defining the scope of the war.

Deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley chaired the meeting. The president had spoken in grandiose terms in his public statements, but the group quickly agreed that a goal of wiping out all terrorism everywhere was too broad and simply unrealistic. Instead, they concluded that the objective should be defined as eliminating terrorism as a threat "to our way of life," and proposed adoption of a comprehensive strategy that would use all elements of national power: diplomatic, intelligence, financial, military.

At 4 p.m., the NSC reconvened. Bush reviewed the draft statement, which now said that the goal was to "eliminate terrorism as a threat to our way of life, including terrorist organizations, networks, finances and access to weapons of mass destruction."

Bush said it was inadequate. It's not just us, he said, referring to the "our way of life" phrase, but a cause on behalf of all our friends and allies around the world. He wanted the statement to capture that idea. Others suggested making it read, "our way of life and U.S. interests."

"That still doesn't get it," Bush said.

What about "and to all nations that love freedom," he said.

Not surprisingly, the president's language was adopted.

However, the statement left unanswered some important questions, which then dominated much of the discussion during the afternoon meeting. One was how broadly to define the mission. Who or what was the real target of a war on terrorism? The second was the role of an international coalition. The country's principal reference point was the 1991 Gulf War launched by Bush's father, but the president believed -- and others shared his view -- that this war and, therefore, this coalition would have to be different.

As the meeting continued, Rumsfeld hammered on a point he had made before. He asked, "Are we going against terrorism more broadly than just al Qaeda? Do we want to seek a broader basis for support?"

Bush said his instinct was to start with bin Laden. If they could strike a blow against al Qaeda, everything that followed would be made easier. But Rumsfeld worried that a coalition built around the goal of taking out al Qaeda would fall apart once they succeeded in that mission, making it more difficult to continue the war on terrorism elsewhere.

Powell argued that it would be far easier initially to rally the world behind the specific

target of al Qaeda. They could win approval of a broad U.N. resolution by keeping it focused on al Qaeda.

Cheney again focused on the question of state sponsorship of terrorism. To strike a blow against terrorism inevitably meant targeting the countries that nurture and export it, he said. In some ways the states were easier targets than the shadowy terrorists.

Bush worried about making their initial target too diffuse. Let's not make the target so broad that it misses the point and fails to draw support from normal Americans, he said. What Americans were feeling, he added, was that the country had suffered at the hands of al Qaeda.

As the discussion turned to the shape of the international coalition, several things became clearer. Everyone believed that a coalition would be essential, particularly to keep international opinion behind the United States. But Bush was prepared, if necessary, to go it alone. The United States had an absolute right to defend itself, he believed, no matter what others thought; although he believed that the rightness of the cause would bring other nations along.

Cheney argued that the coalition should be a means to wiping out terrorism, not an end in itself -- a view that others shared. They wanted support from the rest of the world, but they did not want the coalition to tie their hands: The mission should define the coalition, not the other way around.

In that case, Rumsfeld argued, they wanted coalition partners truly committed to the cause, not reluctant participants. Powell offered what a colleague later described as the "variable geometry" of coalition-building. The coalition should be as broad as possible, but the requirements for participation would vary country by country. This would entail, as Rumsfeld put it, a coalition of coalitions.

Rumsfeld then raised the question of Iraq, which he had mentioned in the morning meeting. Why shouldn't we go against Iraq, not just al Qaeda? he asked. Rumsfeld was not just speaking for himself when he raised the question. His deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, was even more committed to a policy that would make Iraq a principal target of the first round in the war on terrorism and would continue to press his case. Arrayed against the policy was the State Department, led by Powell, and among those who agreed with him was Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Everyone around the table believed that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was a menace, a leader bent on acquiring and perhaps using weapons of mass destruction. Any serious, full-scale war against terrorism would have to make Iraq a target -- eventually. The issue Rumsfeld raised was whether they should take advantage of the opportunity offered by the terrorist attacks to go after Hussein immediately.

Powell countered that they were focused on al Qaeda because the American people were focused on al Qaeda, and the president agreed. "Any action needs public support," Powell said. "It's not just what the international coalition supports; it's what the American people want to support. The American people want us to do something about al Qaeda."

Bush made clear it was not the time to resolve the issue. And he underscored again that

his principal goal was to produce a military plan that would inflict real pain and destruction on the terrorists.

"I don't want a photo-op war," he told his advisers. He also wanted "a realistic scorecard" and "a list of thugs" who would be targeted. Everyone was thinking about the Gulf War, he said, which was the wrong analogy. "The American people want a big bang," he said. "I have to convince them that this is a war that will be fought with many steps."

Although they were moving quickly, Bush was still impatient. In the December interview, he said that he recalled the problems of Vietnam as the U.S. military fought a conventional war against a guerrilla enemy and that he "instinctively knew that we were going to have to think differently" about how to fight terrorists. "The military strategy was going to take awhile to unfold," he said. "I became frustrated."

After the meeting, Bush left the White House and headed for the Pentagon for a look at the damage caused by the terrorist attack. Rescue workers had hung a huge American flag from the side of the building, and the president was overwhelmed by what he saw. "Coming here makes me sad, on the one hand," he told reporters. "It also makes me angry."

He went inside to meet some of the military planners and acknowledged that his emotions were just below the surface. But he wanted to put the military on notice, he said, that the nation was now at war with terrorism. With the same determination he had demonstrated since the early hours of the crisis, he said, "I wish it was tomorrow and I could announce to the nation, we're going to wipe it off the face of the Earth."

Rumsfeld said in a later interview that the first 36 hours of the crisis -- the meetings and debates -- were crucial. "You cannot micromanage something like this," he said. "You've got to think of concepts and strategic direction."

By the end of the second day, some of those concepts were taking shape. The war would be comprehensive, employing all instruments of national power, not just conventional military force; building a coalition was essential, but other nations would not dictate the terms of battle; the targets would be terrorists and terrorist states; they would seek to destroy al Qaeda worldwide, starting in Afghanistan.

Bush and his team were scrambling, and although they had made progress, they were far from having anything that remotely resembled a plan of action. They worried about more terrorist attacks. Some saw Afghanistan as a potential quagmire. They knew little about the real strength of the Taliban. They feared that Pakistan could unravel. For all their resolve and determination -- and rhetoric -- they still had an enormous amount of work to do and decisions to make.

Staff researcher Jeff Himmelman contributed to this report.

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