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Counterterrorism Policy

Secretary Colin L. Powell

Opening Remarks Before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Washington, DC

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(11:10 a.m. EST)

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a great pleasure to be before the Commission today, and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you regarding the events leading up to and following the murderous terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

It is my hope, as I know it is yours, that through the hard work of this Commission, our country can improve the way we wage the war on terror and, in particular, better protect our homeland and the American people.

I am pleased to have, of course, with me today Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage. Rich Armitage, Secretary Armitage was sworn in on March 26 of 2001, two months into the Administration and he has been intimately involved in the interagency deliberations on our counterterrorism policies. And, of course, he also participated in what are known as principals, as well as National Security Council meetings whenever I was on travel or otherwise unavailable.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I leave Washington this evening to represent President Bush and the American people at the memorial service in Madrid, Spain honoring the over 200 victims of the terrorists attacks of 3/11, March 11th, 2004. With deep sympathy and solidarity, our heart goes out to their loved ones and to the people of Spain.

And just last Thursday, in the garden of our embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, I presided at a memorial service in honor of two State Department family members, Barbara Green and her daughter Kristen Wormsley, who were killed two years ago by terrorists while they worshipped in church on a bright, beautiful spring morning.

I know that the families and friends of the victims of 9/11, some of whom are listening and watching today, grieve just as the Spanish are grieving and just as we at the Department of State did and still do for Barbara and Kristen.

Mr. Chairman, I am no newcomer to the horrors of terrorism. In 1983, Secretary Armitage and I were working for Secretary of Defense Cap Weinberger, as was Secretary Lehman, at that time, when 243 wonderful, brave Marines and Navy Corpsmen were killed in Beirut, Lebanon.

I was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993 when the first bombing of the World Trade Center took place.

In 1996, I may have been out of government, though I followed closely the events surrounding the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Khobar and all the other terrorist attacks over the years were very much part of my consciousness as I prepared to assume the office of Secretary of State under President George Bush.

I was well aware of the fact that I was going to be sworn in to office just three months after the USS COLE was struck in the harbor at Aden, Yemen, taking the lives of 17 sailors and wounding 30 others.

I was well aware -- very well aware -- that our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania had been blown up in 1998, injuring some 4,000 people and killing 220, 12 of them Americans -- the highest number of casualties in a single incident in the

State Department's history.

As the new Chief Executive Officer of the Department of State, I was acutely aware that I would be responsible to President Bush. He made this clear that this was my responsibility, for the safety of the men and women serving at our posts overseas, as well as for the safety and welfare of private American citizens traveling and living abroad.

The 1999 Crowe Commission Report on embassy security became our blueprint for upgrading the security of all of our facilities. Admiral Crowe had done an extensive review and made some scathing criticisms on how lax our country was in protecting our personnel who were serving abroad from terrorist attacks. And one of my first actions was to ask retired Major General Chuck Williams of the Army Corps of Engineers to come into the Department and head our building operation. We wanted him to move aggressively to implement the Crowe recommendations and to protect our people and our installations, and he has done a tremendous job of that.

At the beginning of this Administration, we were building one new, secure embassy a year. Today we are building 10 new secure embassies every single year.

As the President's principal foreign policy advisor, I was well aware, as was the President and all the members of the new national security team, that Communism and Fascism, our old foes of the past century, had been replaced by a new kind of enemy -- terrorism. We were all well aware that no nation is immune to terrorism. We were well aware that this adversary is not necessarily a state and that often has no clear return address. We knew that this monster is hydra-headed, and many-tentacled. We knew that its evil leaders and followers espouse many false causes, but have one common purpose -- to murder innocent people.

Mr. Chairman, President Bush and all of us on his team knew that terrorism would be a major concern for us, as it has been for the past several administrations. During the transition from the Clinton to the Bush Administration, we were pleased to receive the briefings and information that Secretary Albright and her staff provided us on President Clinton's counterterrorism policies and what they had done for the previous eight years before we came into office.

Indeed, on December 20th, four days -- four days after President Bush announced that I would be the next Secretary of State, I asked for and got a briefing on our worldwide terrorism actions and policies from President Clinton's Counterterrorism Security Group, headed by Mr. Dick Clarke. In addition to Mr. Clarke, at this briefing, my very first briefing during the transition, also present were the CIA's Counterterrorism Director Mr. Cofer Black, from the FBI, Dale Watson. Also present were representatives from the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and from within the State Department, representatives of our own Bureau of Intelligence and Research as well as our acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

A major component of this briefing was al-Qaida's growing threat to the United States, our interests around the world, and Afghanistan's role as a safe haven for al-Qaida. As a matter of fact, that part of the briefing got my attention, so much so that later I asked Mr. Armitage, when he got sworn in, to get directly involved in all these issues, and he did.

In addition, in my transition book that was provided to me by Secretary Albright, there was a paper from Mike Sheehan, Secretary Albright's Counterterrorism Coordinator, and I read it very carefully. That transition paper, under the rubric, "Ongoing Threat Environment," stated that, "In close coordination with the intelligence community, we must ensure that all precautions are taken to strengthen our security posture, warn U.S. citizens abroad, and maintain a high level of readiness to respond to additional incidents" that might come along.

That paper informed me that, "The joint U.S. Yemeni investigation of the USS Cole bombing continues to develop new information and leads," but that "It is still too early to definitely link, definitively link, the attack to a sponsor, i.e. Usama bin Laden." And under "Taliban," the paper records that "We must continue to rally international support for a new round of UN sanctions, including an arms embargo against the Taliban." The paper further stated: "We should maintain the momentum of getting others, such as the G-8, Russia, India, the Caucasus states, Central Asia, to isolate and pressure the Taliban..." It continued: "If the Cole investigation leads back to Afghanistan, we should use it to mobilize the international support needed for further pressures on the Taliban."

Let me emphasize that the paper covered a range of terrorism-related concerns and not just al-Qaida and the Taliban.

So the outgoing Administration provided me and others in the incoming Administration with transition papers as well as briefings, based on their eight years of experience, that reinforced our awareness of the worldwide threat from terrorism.

All of us on the Bush national security team, beginning with President Bush, knew we needed continuity in counterterrorism policy. We did not want terrorists to see the early months of a new administration as a time of opportunity. And for continuity, President Bush retained Director Tenet at the CIA. Director Tenet's Counterterrorism Center remained under the leadership of Cofer Black. He was kept on there until he joined the State Department last year to become my Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism. Dick Clarke was retained at the National Security Council. I retained Ambassador Edmund Hull as Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism until I was able to bring a new team in a little bit later in the year, under the leadership of former Brigadier General Frank Taylor of the United States Air Force's Office of Special Investigations. He was Cofer Black's immediate predecessor. I also retained David Carpenter as Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security and kept Tom Fingar on as Acting Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research. Christopher Kojm, now a staff member of your Commission, was a political appointee from the prior Administration and we kept him on as well in order to show continuity during this period. And of course, FBI Director Louis Freeh provided continuity on the domestic side.

Early on, we made clear to the Congress and to the American people that we understood the scope and compelling nature of the threat from terrorism. For example, on February 7, 2001, just a few weeks into the Administration, my Acting Assistant Secretary for Intelligence, Tom Fingar, who had served in the same capacity in the previous Administration, testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence regarding "Threats to the United States." In the first part of his testimony, he highlighted the threat from unconventional forces, saying: "The magnitude of each individual threat is small, but, in aggregate, unconventional threats probably pose a more immediate danger to Americans than do foreign armies, nuclear weapons, long-range missiles or the proliferation, even, of weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems."

Fingar then went on, Mr. Fingar then went on to single out Usama bin Laden, saying that: "Plausible, if not always credible, threats linked to his organizations target Americans and America's friends or interests on almost every continent." Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, the Department of State was well aware of the terrorist threat.

The new Bush Administration, as had the Clinton Administration, created counterterrorism and regional interagency committees to study the counterterrorism issue in a comprehensive way. The committees, in turn, reported to a Deputies Committee, chaired by Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, on which Mr. Armitage was my representative. The Deputies, in turn, reported to cabinet-level Principals Committees, which answered to the National Security Council, chaired by the President. These committees, however, were not by any means the sum and substance of our interagency discussions on counterterrorism, nor did they represent all that was happening within the Administration on a day-to-day basis.

In order to keep in constant touch on counterterrorism issues, as well as all of the other items on our agenda, Secretary Rumsfeld, Dr. Rice and I held a daily coordination phone call meeting on every morning that we were in town at 7:15. In addition to our regular and frequent meetings, at the State Department every morning at 8:30 I met with my staff and immediately had available at 8:30, information from my INR section, my intelligence people, as well as my counterterrorism coordinator, as well as the Assistant Secretary in charge of Diplomatic Security. We formalized regular luncheons with the Dr. Rice, myself, the Vice President and Secretary Rumsfeld in order to make sure that we stayed in closest touch with each other, not only on terrorism, but on all issues.

Above all, from the start, the President, by word and deed, made clear his interest and his intense desire to protect the nation from terrorism. He frequently asked and prodded us to do more. He decided early on that we needed to be more aggressive in going after terrorists and especially al-Qaida. As he said in early spring, as we were developing our new comprehensive strategy, "I'm tired of swatting flies." He wanted a thorough, comprehensive, diplomatic, military, intelligence, law enforcement and financial strategy to go after al-Qaida.

It was a demanding order, but it was a necessary one. There were many other compelling issues that were on our agenda that a new Administration has to take into account: A Middle East policy that had just collapsed, the sanctions on Iraq had been unraveling steadily since 1998, relations with Russia and China were complicated by the need to expel Russian spies in February, and the plane collision with a Chinese fighter in April. There were many foreign leaders who were coming to the United States or wanted us to visit them to get engaged with the new Administration.

Yes, we had to deal with all of these pressing matters and more. But we also were confident that we had an experienced counterterrorism team in place. President Bush and his entire national security team understood that terrorism had to be among our highest priorities. And it was.

Now, what did we do to act on that priority?

Our counterterrorism planning developed very rapidly considering the challenges of transition and of a new

Administration.

We were not given a counterterrorism action plan by the previous Administration. As I mentioned, we were given good briefings on what they had been doing with respect to al-Qaida and with respect to the Taliban. The briefers, as well as the principals, conveyed to us the gravity of the threat posed by al-Qaida. But we noted early on that the actions that the previous administration had taken had not succeeded in eliminating the threat.

As a result, Dr. Rice directed a thorough policy review aimed at developing a comprehensive strategy to eliminate the al-Qaida threat. This was in her first week in her new position as National Security Advisor. This decision did not await any Deputies or Principals Committee review. She knew what we had to do and she put us to the task of doing it.

We wanted the new policy to go well beyond tit-for-tat retaliation. We felt that lethal strikes that largely miss the terrorists, if you don't have adequate targeting information, such as the cruise missile strikes in 1998, might lead al-Qaida to believe that we lacked resolve. These strikes had obviously not deterred al-Qaida from subsequently attacking the USS Cole.

We wanted to move beyond the roll-back policy of containment, criminal prosecution, and limited retaliation for specific terrorist attacks. We wanted to destroy al-Qaida.

We understood that Pakistan was critical to the success of our long-term strategy. To get at al-Qaida, we had to end Pakistan's support for the Taliban. So we had to recast our relations with that country. But nuclear sanctions, caused by Pakistan's nuclear weapons tests and the nature of the new regime, the way President Musharraf took office, made it difficult for us to work with Pakistan. We knew, however, that achieving sustainable new relations with Pakistan meant moving more aggressively to strengthen and shape our relations with India as well. So we began this rather more complex diplomatic approach very quickly upon assuming office, even as we were putting the strategy on paper and deciding its other more complicated elements.

For example, in February of 2001, Presidents Bush and Musharraf exchanged letters. Let me quote a few lines from President Bush's February 16th letter to President Musharraf of Pakistan. This was just a few weeks after coming into office. The President said to President Musharraf:

"Pakistan is an important member of the community of nations and one with which I hope to build better relations, particularly as you move ahead to return to civilian, constitutional government. We have concerns of which you are aware, but I am hopeful we can work together on our differences in the years ahead...."

"We should work together," the President continued, "to address Afghanistan's many problems. The most pressing of these is terrorism, and it inhibits progress on all other issues. The continued presence of Usama bin Laden and his al-Qaida organization is a direct threat to the United States and its interests that must be addressed. I believe al-Qaida also threatens Pakistan's long-term interests. We joined the United Nations in passing additional sanctions against the Taliban to bring bin Laden to justice and to close the network of terrorist camps in their territory." The President concluded, "I urge you to use your influence with the Taliban to bring this about...."

President Bush was very concerned about al-Qaida and about the safe haven given them by the Taliban. But he knew that implementing the diplomatic roadmap we envisioned would be difficult.

The Deputies went to work reviewing all of these complex regional issues. Early on we realized that a serious effort to remove al-Qaida's safe haven in Afghanistan might well require introducing military forces, especially ground forces. This, without the cooperation of Pakistan, would be out of the question. Pakistan had vital interests in Afghanistan and was deeply suspicious of India's intentions. Pakistan's and India's mutual fears and suspicions threatened to boil over into nuclear conflict as the Administration got into the early months of its existence. To put it mildly, the situation was delicate and dangerous. Any effort to effect change had to be calibrated very carefully to avoid misperception and miscalculation.

Under the leadership of Steve Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, the Deputies met a number of times during the spring and summer to craft this strategy for eliminating the al-Qaida threat and dealing with the complex implications for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

So we began to develop this more aggressive and more comprehensive strategy. And while we did so, we continued activities that had been going on in the previous Administration aimed at al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, including intelligence activities. For example, during the summer of 2001, the CIA succeeded in a number of disruption activities against terrorist groups. These are activities where our agents create turmoil among those groups they know to be

associated with terrorists so that the terrorists cannot assemble, cannot communicate, can't effectively plan, receive any support or money, and are generally unable to act in a coordinated fashion. You will hear more about these activities from Director Tenet tomorrow, but I want to emphasize that notwithstanding all these intelligence activities that were underway, at no time during the early months of our Administration were we presented with a vetted, viable operational proposal, which would have led to an opportunity to kill, capture or otherwise neutralize Usama bin Laden -- never received any targetable information.

Let me return now to our diplomatic efforts. From early 2001 onward, we pressed the Taliban directly and sought the assistance of the Government of Pakistan and other neighboring states to put additional pressure on the Taliban to expel bin Laden from Afghanistan and to shut down al-Qaida.

On February 8, 2001, less than three weeks into the Administration, we closed the Taliban office in New York, implementing the UN resolutions passed the previous month, I must say, with the strong support and the dedicated efforts of Secretary Albright and Under Secretary Pickering.

In March, we repeated the warning to the Taliban that they would be held responsible for any al-Qaida attack against our interests.

In April 2001, senior Departmental officials traveled to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan to lay out our key concerns, including about terrorism and Afghanistan. We asked these Central Asian nations to coordinate their efforts with the various Afghan players who were opposed to the Taliban. We also used what we call the "Bonn Group" of concerned countries to bring together Germany, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and the United States to build a common approach to Afghanistan. At the same time, we encouraged and supported the "Rome Group" of expatriate Afghans to explore alternatives to the Taliban.

In May, Deputy Secretary Armitage met with First Deputy Foreign Minister Trubnikov of the Russian Federation to renew the work of the U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan. These discussions had previously been conducted at a lower level. We focused specifically on what we could do together about Afghanistan and about the Taliban. This, incidentally, laid the groundwork for obtaining Russian cooperation on liberating Afghanistan immediately after 9/11.

CHAIRMAN KEAN: Mr. Secretary --

SECRETARY POWELL: Mid-June --

CHAIRMAN KEAN: We are going to run out of time if --

SECRETARY POWELL: Yes. I will -- I will get -- shortly.

CHAIRMAN KEAN: Thank you, sir.

SECRETARY POWELL: I just wanted to make the point that in June and July and August, we took every effort that was available to us to put pressure on Pakistan to cut its losses with the Taliban and to take every effort possible to make sure that Pakistan understood the need to bring Afghanistan around to eliminating the threat provided by al-Qaida and its presence in Afghanistan.

We also put into play a number of other options that were available to us. As we know, during this period, we looked at some of the ideas that Mr. Clarke's team had presented that had not been tried in the previous administration. These activities fit the long-term time frame of our new strategy and were presented to us that way by Mr. Clarke. In other words, these were long-term actions that he had in mind and not immediate actions that would produce immediate results. If these ideas made sense, we explored them. If they looked workable, we adopted them.

For example, we provided new counterterrorism aid to Uzbekistan because we knew al-Qaida was sponsoring a terrorist effort in that country led by the Islamic Movement. We looked at the Predator. The Predator, at that time, in early 2001, was not an armed weapon that we used to go after anyone. And Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Tenet will talk more about this. But by the end of that summer period, and as we entered September and October, it was a weapon that was usable and it was used extensively and effectively after 9/11 when it was ready.

Other ideas, such as arming the Northern Alliance with significant weaponry or giving them an added capability did not seem to be a practical thing to do at that time, for the same sorts of reasons that Secretary Albright discussed earlier.

The basic elements of our new strategy, which came together during these early months of the Administration, first and foremost, eliminate al-Qaida. It was no longer to roll it back or reduce its effectiveness; our goal was to destroy it. The strategy would call for ending all sanctuaries given to al-Qaida. We would try to do this first through diplomacy, but if diplomacy failed and there was a call for additional measures, including military operations, we would be prepared to do it, and military action would be more than just launching cruise missiles at already-warned targets. In fact, the strategy called for attacking al-Qaida and the Taliban's leadership, their command and control, their ground forces, and other targets.

The strategy would recognize the need for significant aid, not only to the Northern Alliance, but to other tribal groups that might help us with this. It would also include greatly expanding intelligence authorities, capabilities and funding. While all this was taking place, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, we did everything we could to protect the lives of American citizens around the world.

As you know, the threat information that we were receiving from the CIA and other sources suggested that we were increasingly at risk and the risk was -- looked to be mostly overseas. And while that is my responsibility, others in our Administration were looking at the threat within the United States. But in response to these overseas threats, we issued threat warnings constantly. Every time the threat level went up, we would respond with appropriate threat warnings to our embassies, to our citizens around the world who were traveling or living in foreign countries, warning them of the nature of the threat and encouraging them to take the necessary cautions.

So it is not as if we weren't responding to the threat. We were responding to the threat in the way that we could respond to the threat: with warnings, with emergency action, committee meetings in our embassies to make sure that we were buttoning down and buttoning up.

Mr. Chairman, this all continued throughout the summer. It reached a conclusion in early September, when all the pieces of our strategy came together -- the intelligence part, the diplomatic part, the military components of it, law enforcement, the nature of the challenge we had before us, which was to eliminate al-Qaida -- it all came together on the 4th of September at a Principals meeting where we concluded our work on the National Security Directive that would be telling everybody in the Administration what we were going to do as we move forward.

It took us roughly eight months to get to that point, but it was a solid eight months of dedicated work to bring us to that point. And then, as we all know, 9/11 hit and we had to accelerate all of our efforts and go onto a different kind of footing all together.

I just might point out that with respect to Pakistan, consistent with the decisions that we had made in early September, after 9/11, within two days, Mr. Armitage had contacted the Pakistani intelligence chiefs who were -- happened to be in the United States, and laid out what we now needed from Pakistan. The time for diplomacy and discussions were over; we needed immediate action. And Mr. Armitage laid out seven specific steps for Pakistan to take to join us in this effort. We gave them 24 to 48 hours to consider it, and then I called President Musharraf and said, "We need your answer now. We need you as part of this campaign, this crusade." And President Musharraf made a historic and strategic decision that evening when I spoke to him, changed his policy and became a partner in this effort as opposed to a hindrance to the effort.

Mr. Chairman, I have to also say that we were successful during this period in rounding up international support. The OAS, Organization of the Islamic Conference, the United Nations, NATO, the entire international community rallied to our effort.

To summarize all of this, Mr. Chairman, I might say that this Administration came in fully recognizing the threat presented to the United States and its interests and allies around the world by terrorism. We went to work on it immediately. The President made it clear it was a high priority. The interagency group is working. We had continuity in our counterterrorism institutions and organizations. We kept *démarching* as was done in the previous Administration, but while we were *démarching*, and while we were doing intelligence activities to disrupt, we were putting in place a comprehensive strategy that pulled all of these things together in a more aggressive way and in a way that would go after this threat in order to destroy it and not just keep *démarching* it.

We had eight or so months to do that, and in early September, that strategy came together. And when 9/11 hit us, and brought us to that terrible day that none of us will ever forget, that strategy was ready, and it was the basis upon which we went forward and we could accelerate all of our efforts. While I was warning embassies -- and taking cover in our embassies -- in response to the threats, Secretary Rumsfeld was doing the same thing with military forces. Director Tenet

was doing the same thing with his assets around the world. And our domestic agencies, the FBI, the FAA, were also looking at what they needed to protect the nation.

Most of us still thought that the principal threat was outside the country. We didn't know, while we were going through this procedure and through these policies, and putting together this comprehensive strategy, that those who were going to perpetrate 9/11 were already in the country, had been in the country for some time and were hard at work. Anything we might have done against al-Qaida during this period or against Usama bin Laden may or may not have any influence on these people who were already in the country, already had their instructions, already burrowed in, and were getting ready to commit the crimes that we saw on 9/11. Nevertheless, we knew that al-Qaida was ultimately the source of this kind of terror and were determined to go after it.

As Secretary Albright said earlier, we have many other things we have to do in the months and years ahead. We have to get our message out. We have to do more with public diplomacy. We have to do more with our allies and with our partners around the world. We are working on all these issues. But al-Qaida no longer has a safe haven in Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan are on their way to democracy. I was there last week. There are going to be no more weapons of mass destruction or safe havens in Iraq. The people of Iraq have been liberated, and they're on their way to a democracy. And so I think we're trying to create conditions where we will bring the whole civilized world together against the threat of terrorism.

Mr. Chairman, I will end at this point, and my entire [statement](#) is available for your record.

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