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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Meeting with Undersecretary of Defense for Policy  
 Douglas Feith  
 Type of Event: Briefing  
 Date: August 18, 2003  
 Special Access Issues: Treat as Confidential  
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 Prepared by: Mike Hurley  
 Reviewed by: Philip Zelikow  
 Team Number: Three (Counterterrorism Policy)  
 Location: U/S Feith's office, the Pentagon  
 Participants - Commission: Philip Zelikow, Mike Hurley

At the outset, U/S Feith said he could not speak for the previous [Clinton] administration. He then addressed the question whether al-Qaida's simultaneous attacks on U.S. embassies in east Africa in August 1998 constituted strategic warning of a threat against the U.S. homeland. He said that it did not necessarily follow that an enemy that attacked U.S. personnel and installations overseas had the intention, or was capable, of causing wanton and indiscriminate destruction, on the scale of the 9/11 attacks, on U.S. soil. He said that terrorism was politically motivated, and that between 1998 and 9/11 it was unclear whether the politically violent aims of al-Qaida included so bold an attack. He said that there was a factual question whether the U.S. was "on notice" or not.

U/S Feith confirmed that he was not sworn in to his office until July 16, 2001. On September 9, 2001, he was in Moscow meeting with Russian counterparts regarding a missile treaty when he learned of the attacks on New York. When the English-speaking press asked him to confirm what had happened he told them he was unable to. In his briefing to Commission staff, U/S Feith explained that first reports of any event of this nature were notoriously inaccurate, an understanding which inclined him not to speculate at the time, until more reliable facts were available.

At the same time as his visit to Moscow, U/S Feith said, the Russian military was engaging in fairly large-scale exercises. He said that he was generally aware that

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after learning of the 9/11 attacks, the Government of Russia, as a gesture of goodwill and to reduce any perception of threat or callousness, called off the exercises. U/S Feith said the Bush administration regarded this action as positive. He added that it was clear to him that Russian officials understood that Russia could be the next terrorist target and they felt some solidarity with the wounded U.S.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, U/S Feith traveled from Moscow to Frankfurt, where other senior DoD officials, returning from different meetings in Central Asia and other locations, convened to arrange military airlift back to the U.S. At this time commercial airports in the U.S. were closed and these senior officials could only fly into military airbases. Thus, Feith was joined on the flight by DoD officials Peter Rodman, Bill Leuti, General John Abizaid (the J-5), and others. During their transatlantic flight, these officials began mapping out what came to be DoD's first strategic policy on responding to the terrorists post-9/11. U/S Feith and his colleagues were aware that President Bush had already advised Principals that "we are at war".

U/S Feith and his colleagues considered the questions: What does it mean to be at war with terrorists? Who is the enemy? How will we know when the enemy is defeated? Should the U.S. also wage war against the state sponsors of terrorism? What should our war aims be?

This group believed it important to define the enemy as an "activity" rather than as simply an organization of terrorists. With regard to war aims, U/S Feith said that they can lock in policies and limit an administration's options. Therefore, the aim in combating the perpetrators of 9/11 had to be limited and achievable. For example, in the Gulf War, the U.S. objective was clear: the liberation of Kuwait. An inappropriate war aim, the Feith-led group reasoned, would be "the elimination of terrorism", as this could never be completely accomplished. So, the group settled on the formulation: "The elimination of terrorism as a threat to our way of life." He noted that Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld adopted this language in his early statements on war aims.

This group ruled out a purely defensive strategy—the U.S. just going into lock-down—because it would be

impossible to fight a defensive war without changing the fundamental nature of U.S. society and seriously degrading civil liberties. Thus, there had to be an offensive component of the strategy. Taking the offensive was a worthy and noble course of action for a democracy threatened by terrorism; but it was recognized it would not be sufficient.

The end result of the thinking done on the transatlantic flight was a strategy with three principal pillars. First, the U.S. would go on offense and attack al-Qaida, destroy and disrupt its training camps, centers, and safehavens, and take down its other infrastructure. The officials with him, U/S Feith said, understood this would be a major challenge, as terrorists could replace infrastructure with relative ease. Second, the U.S. would have to address the issue of new recruits flowing into the ranks of terrorists. Part of this demanded shaping an anti-terrorist global environment. The DoD officials called this "the battle of ideas". Finally, the U.S. also needed to focus on homeland security.

The 9/11 attacks, U/S Feith realized, had to be viewed in the context of war and addressed by the military, rather than as a law enforcement problem. He noted that for years, U.S. counterterrorism policy makers viewed terrorism as residing in a twilight zone between crime and war; but that, in general, they had relied on law enforcement as the principal means of combating terrorism. That approach was now inadequate.

Soon after arriving in the U.S., U/S Feith prepared a memo articulating this strategy to Secretary Rumsfeld. The Secretary, U/S Feith said, approved the memo and it formed the basis of the DoD's initial response to the 9/11 attacks.