

national coordinator for security and senior adviser on counterterrorism. Bush had asked Clarke about Saddam's link to the attack. Clarke had said definitively there'd be no connection found—this was clearly al Qaeda, and al Qaeda and Saddam were natural enemies. Now, in a briefing with George Tenet on September 19, he and the Vice President made a more formal run at the issue. "I want to know about links between Saddam and al Qaeda," Bush said to Tenet. "The Vice President knows some things that might be helpful." He then turned to Cheney, who was participating in the meeting through a video link to a secure location.

Intelligence collection, like much of foreign policy, had been placed in the Vice President's portfolio from the first days of the administration. The breadth of Cheney's charge increased after 9/11. His office had nearly a dozen national security staffers and advisers. One of them, Cheney told Tenet, had picked up a report that one of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, had met in Prague, in the Czech Republic, with a senior Iraqi intelligence agent five months before the attacks. The DCI was surprised. "We'll get right on it, Mr. Vice President."

An hour later, Tenet was back at CIA headquarters, where several top deputies gathered in his office. He told Jim Pavitt, head of the Directorate of Operations, about the request. "It's a direct request from Cheney and Bush," Tenet said, as Pavitt looked on skeptically. "Let's get right on it." Pavitt "tasked out" the assignment immediately—calls were made that day to the CIA's station chief in Prague.

On the morning of September 21, the CIA director, with a file under his arm and a top staffer from the Directorate of Intelligence at his side, arrived at the White House for that morning's intelligence briefings. "What have you got for me today, George?" Bush said, his usual opener. Tenet got right to it. "Our Prague office is skeptical about the report. It just doesn't add up." He noted, as well, other evidence, including credit card records and phone records collected by FBI and CIA that seemed to place Atta in northern Virginia all during the period in question—in an apartment, in fact, a few miles from the agency's headquarters.