One afternoon in the autumn of 1995, there was an unexpected confrontation at the airport outside Sarajevo between then Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who was with his military aide, General Wesley Clark, and two leaders of the United Nations peacekeeping forces—a British general named Rupert Smith and a French general named Jean-René Bachellet. Two weeks earlier, Holbrooke had negotiated a ceasefire for the Sarajevo area, the first step toward a Bosnian peace accord. As part of this agreement, the Serbs had consented to open the road from Kiseljak to Sarajevo, essentially ending their siege of the city. But the UN peacekeepers hadn’t yet cleared the road, and Holbrooke was angry. “If Bosnian trucks aren’t moving on the Kiseljak road, we aren’t really testing this agreement,” he said. “And this agreement is the model for a general ceasefire.”

The British and French generals were strikingly handsome—action figures decked out in pristine camouflage fatigues and spit-polished boots. They sat in dignified silence as Holbrooke quietly berated them. Then they explained, sheepishly, that there was a section of the road, just near the airport, that was difficult to clear. There were mines and concertina wire, and perhaps booby traps; Bosnian Serb gunmen had clear fields of fire from adjacent apartment buildings. This was a very dangerous operation. But then General Clark, a taut terrier of a man, spoke up. “Why don’t we just go on over there and take a look?” he said. “I’ll help you figure out how to clear it.”

In my memory, Clark was taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves as he said this, but that couldn’t possibly be true. He did seem classically American at the moment, though: John Wayne in “The Fighting Seabees,” tough, smart, brash, enthusiastic, hands-on. These are the qualities most commonly associated with the American military—at least, in the national mythology that emanates from Hollywood. But they are, sadly, pretty far from the reality. In fact, the recent history of America’s national-defense apparatus is much closer to the by now familiar stymied, overdressed, risk-averse U.N. peacekeepers that day in Sarajevo than it is to the Hollywood ideal. (I should note that the two generals eventually did order their troops to clear the road, and got the job done.)

The United States military has accumulated a storehouse of spectacularly lethal equipment, which it has been willing to use from great distances—perhaps too often—over the past decade; it is probably the most effective conventional-war fighting force in history. But the basic assumptions, the culture, of the military–intelligence complex seem suddenly anachronistic. The nexus of national–defense and intelligence agencies may be as unsuited for a long-term offensive anti-terrorism campaign as they were unprepared to defend New York and Washington against the aerial attacks of September 11th. "The history of the American military ever since Ulysses S. Grant has been about the use
of mass and firepower and ‘redundancy’—the application of overwhelming force,” said Larry K. Smith, a defense strategist who was Counsellor to both Les Aspin and William Perry, the Secretaries of Defense during Bill Clinton’s first term. “Overwhelming force implies, almost by definition, a lack of precision. That won’t work now. What we’re going to need is a much greater emphasis on the concentrated application of street smarts. I call these sorts of operations ‘closework.’ They are extremely precise missions that are used when the results are absolutely crucial. They demand the very highest standards of intelligence, of training, of preparation, of timing and execution. We haven’t been particularly good at this in the past.”

Indeed, there seems to be near-unanimous agreement among experts: in the ten years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost every aspect of American national-security policy—from military operations to intelligence gathering, from border control to political leadership—has been marked by exactly the kind of institutional lassitude and bureaucratic arrogance that would inhibit the “closework” that Smith proposes. “The post-Cold War era ended on September 11th,” Barry Posen, a defense-policy analyst who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says. “The days of an inattentive, inexpensive American global hegemony are over. We were lulled by the Gulf War, which represented the apotheosis of high-tech warfare. We believed that we could get the job done from a great distance, with no casualties. People talk now about Bill Clinton’s unwillingness to engage, to get down and dirty, and there is some validity to those arguments. But low-risk, long-distance assaults were all that the public, and the military, and many of our allies would tolerate—and I didn’t hear very many Republicans, with the possible exception of John McCain on Kosovo, screaming about the need for closework then, either.”

It wasn’t long before television commentators began comparing the September 11th attacks to the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor. The initial intention was to convey the enormity and stealth of the attacks, but recriminations were implicit: the United States had been caught sleeping once again. Someone was to blame for that. (Eight days later, Condoleezza Rice, the national-security adviser, tried to squelch the comparison. “This isn’t Pearl Harbor,” she told the press.) With the exception of the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who immediately assigned blame for the attacks to homosexuals and abortionists, the recriminations were muted at first. One suspects that this will not be the case for long. The failures were too pronounced, at least in retrospect. The Clinton Administration’s lapses were the most obvious, but the Bush Administrations that preceded and followed Clinton are hardly blameless. And the general public’s understandable, but ultimately disastrous, lack of interest in—and lazy cynicism about—civic life during the most placid, prosperous decade in American history made thoughtful governance much harder.

There were plenty of warnings. In July of 1999, Bill Clinton’s third Secretary of Defense, William S. Cohen, wrote a startling op-ed piece in the Washington Post, flatly predicting a terrorist attack: “In the past year, dozens of threats to use chemical or biological weapons in the United States have turned out to be hoaxes. Someday, one will be real.” This was not routine language from a Secretary of Defense. “I watched carefully to see if anyone followed up on this,” Leslie H. Gelb, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said. “But none of the television networks and none of the elite press even mentioned it. I was astonished.”

Before and after Cohen’s article, there was a series of more elaborate reports about grand terrorism, by assorted blue-ribbon task forces, which warned of chemical, biological, and nuclear attacks (but never considered the possibility of airliners used as kamikaze bombs). The most recent report, issued in February by a bipartisan group chaired by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman and called the United States Commission on National Security/21st Century, was typical. The findings were grim. There was a need for a huge “homeland security” campaign, including intensive municipal civil-defense and crisis-response teams, new anti-terrorist detection technology, educa-
tion reform to produce more science and math whizzes, new Cabinet-level positions (Secretary of Homeland Security, for example, which President Bush finally proposed last week), and bureaucratic reform. In other words, there was a need to spend lots of money on an abstract—an unthinkable—threat, and to "reinvent" government yet again.

There can't be much controversy here. Nearly everyone—elected officials, the media, ideologues of every stripe—ignored these reports. Everyone was remiss. And we can now expect a significant bipartisan effort to devote lots of money and attention to tightening "homeland security." The recriminations are bound to be more virulent, however, on the military and foreign-policy fronts: Why was the terrorist threat allowed to grow unchecked? Why were the military responses so lame?

Two significant military events forged the Clinton Administration's policy on the use of force: the Gulf War and the disastrous attempt by Delta Force commandos to capture the warlord Muhammad Farah Aidid in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. The "lessons" of the Gulf War are well known: the efficacy of high-tech weapons; the need for a specific, circumscribed goal; the "Powell doctrine" of overwhelming force. The war proved to be a satisfying television show, but it was an incomplete victory—Saddam Hussein was allowed to remain in power. (This was a tacit continuation of the previous American policy in Iraq: Saddam in power was better than the instability that might occur if he was removed—Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds splitting off into states of their own, which might, among other things, greatly strengthen Iran and pose a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey.)

There was also the decision to allow American forces to remain stationed in Saudi Arabia, which has often been cited by Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders and fundamentalist clerics as an intolerable provocation.

This was the second time that Bush the Elder had failed to do the closework that comes with the end of a war. The first time was in Afghanistan. When the Russians were defeated, in 1989, the Americans—who had supplied military equipment to the Afghan rebels—simply left. There was no effort to help the Afghans rebuild, no effort to remain in careful contact. American attention was understandably fixed on the fall of the Soviet Union. The Taliban, the sons of the mujahideen who had helped defeat the Russians, feasted on the postwar despair and destruction, and on the sense that the West was corrupt and amoral: America had used the mujahideen as pawns in a greater game, and had absolutely no interest in the long-term welfare of the Afghan people.

In any case, the Bush Administration—and its Powell doctrine—began the rush toward a remote-control, arcade-game military; virtual warfare was a pleasing antidote to the "lessons" of Vietnam. General Clark, who is now a reluctant civilian—his career ended after he served as NATO commander during the Kosovo bombing campaign—but still a vigorous advocate of closework, recently told me, "We paid too much attention to the 'lessons' of Desert Storm and too little to Operation Just Cause."

I admitted to General Clark that I'd forgotten what Operation Just Cause was. "Panama," he said. "The capture of Noriega. We did twenty-seven near-simultaneous insertions. We faced people off, took risks, took control on the ground; we 'talked' folks out of things." The last phrase was intended, I think, as understatement. "It was very successful. And then, a few months later, came Desert Storm, and we forgot all about that. Even the ground component of Desert Storm—VII Corps advancing kilometre by kilometre across a very broad front—indicated that we were not ready to conduct a freewheeling, unpredictable campaign. Of course, there wasn't much need to be creative in that case. But since then we've become obsessed with fixed targets, with anti-materiel warfare rather than anti-personnel operations. We have become allergic to close combat."

The Bush Administration left one other military legacy for Bill Clinton to deal with: the 1992 humanitarian mission to feed the hungry in Somalia. It was stunning how quickly the Powell doctrine was violated—how the specific goal of food aid was allowed to melt into an amorphous military mission, how the most sophisticated American soldiers, the Delta Force, were sent in to serve as a free-range posse dedicated to the capture of Muhammad Farah Aidid. Perhaps the most startling aspect of this unplanned, undisciplined operation was its architect: Colin Powell. "It was a warrior response," said a Pentagon official who attended the meetings where the decisions were made. "Twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers were killed by the Somalis, and Powell just flipped his position and began arguing for the insertion of more units, and ultimately Delta Force."

This proved to be one of Colin Powell's less distinguished moments. His term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ended while the operation was still in progress. He might have delayed his departure to see the mission to its end; Bill Clinton certainly wanted him to stay. But Powell departed on October 1st, and two days later there was a botched Delta Force operation in which eighteen Americans were killed. The Clinton Administration, under intense pressure from Congress, abandoned Somalia.

During an interview in July of 2000, President Clinton implicitly blamed Powell for the disaster. "There was an operational decision made there, which if I had to do it again I might do what we did then, but I'd do it in a different way. General Powell came in"—after the Pakistani peacekeepers were lost—"and said you ought to do this" (insert the Delta Force). "And then he retired. He left the next week. And I'm not blaming him—I'm just saying he was gone... If we were going to do that now, I'd say I need to know what's involved here, and let's do this the way we planned out the military action we took against Saddam Hussein, for example, or the military action I took to try to get Osama bin Laden's training camps."

The striking thing about Clinton's statement is that both of the operations he cited involved the long-distance use
of cruise missiles and no risk to American lives, and both are now widely considered to be abject failures. Indeed, a compelling argument can be made that the futile campaigns against Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden served only to strengthen their reputations in the Arab world. “To personalize a conflict against an Arab leader is to enhance his stature,” said Dr. Jerold Post, a specialist in the psychology of terrorism, who has profiled both Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. “The worst thing we could do was to portray this as a struggle between then President George Bush and Saddam Hussein, because every time we struck and failed to defeat him he could say that he had beaten the United States once again.”

There was, from the start, a wariness and a lack of rigor about the Clinton Administration’s use of force. “Clinton spent less concentrated attention on national defense than any other President in recent memory,” one former Administration official said. “He could learn an issue very quickly, but he wasn’t very interested in getting his hands dirty with detail work. His style was procrastination, seeing where everyone was, before taking action. This was truer in his first term than it was in the second, but even when he began to pay attention he was severely constrained by public opinion and his own unwillingness to take risks.”

Clinton also surrounded himself with people who were uncomfortable with the use of power (“It just wasn’t in their DNA,” one former Pentagon official says), particularly in his first term. The Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, was the soul of caution—“consulting” allies and cajoling enemies rather than telling them what America wanted and why it would be wise for them to do it. By early 1996, he had visited Syria seventeen times without gaining a single public concession from President Hafez al-Assad. Clinton’s first Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, a disorganized policy wonk, was disdained by the uniformed military (his successor, William Perry, was another intellectual, quieter and more efficient, but not a very forceful public advocate). The national-security adviser, Tony Lake, was a truly bizarre case—extremely intelligent and extremely constrained, rarely willing to defend the Administration on television, eternally anguished. A rare insight into the tortured Lake style can be found in a recent article in The Atlantic Monthly, by Samantha Power, in which Lake discusses his own failure to address the genocide in Rwanda:

One scenario is that I knew what was going on and I blocked it out in order to not deal with the human consequences. Here I’m absolutely convinced that I didn’t do that, but maybe I did and it was so deep that I didn’t realize it. Another scenario is that I didn’t give it enough time because I didn’t give a damn about Africa, which I don’t believe because I know I do. My sin must have been in a third scenario. I didn’t own it because I was busy with Bosnia and Haiti, or because I thought we were doing all we could.

The level of hand-wringing diminished, and the willingness to act improved somewhat, during Clinton’s second term. The new national-security people—Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, and the national-security adviser, Samuel Berger—were less different than their predecessors, but they were constrained by political “realities” and by severe internal riptides. “After Somalia, the military leaders were extremely frightened,” General Clark admits. “The attitude was ‘If you take losses, you’re a loser. Your career is over.’ It was assumed that politicians wouldn’t support you, that they’d run away as soon as there were body bags. That became an article of faith.”

The Clinton national-security team was extremely frustrated by the military’s reluctance to act. “When it came to closework, the culture and mind-set of the military was ‘That’s what the C.I.A. is for,’” one former official said. “When we asked them—the military—to capture Radovan Karadzic, they wouldn’t go near it. When we asked them to do special ops on terrorists operating in a semi-urban environment, their response was ‘That’s not what we do. We’re not organized for that. We need a brigade.’”

Berger, however, passionately defended the Clinton record on terrorism. “After Osama bin Laden’s organization bombed the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, terrorism became my No. 1 priority. I believed it was the single greatest threat. We worked on it
every day—and we tried very hard to get bin Laden. We had excellent intelligence that there was an event, a meeting that he would be attending with three hundred of his closest associates. We attacked with cruise missiles and we just missed him. By an hour, perhaps. I'm not sure. We never had a clear shot after that.”

But there were other possible “shots” to be taken that were foiled by bureaucratic opposition. The most vexing concerned the use of cyberwarfare against bin Laden’s financial assets. Proposals were developed to electronically lock up bank accounts used by Slobodan Milosevic and, later, by bin Laden and others to finance terrorist activities. Treasury sources say that none of the accounts in question were very large. “Those were the most frustrating conversations I've ever had in public service,” said one of four Clinton Administration officials who confirmed that the Treasury Secretaries Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers opposed the financial cyberwarfare on the ground that it might threaten the stability of the international financial system. National-security team members argued back that terrorists like bin Laden probably had “sleepers” in the financial system, who were poised to wreak havoc on American assets, and that cyberwarfare would be one way to constrain terrorist operations. Samuel Berger was particularly vehement in favoring the use of this weapon. “But this was a neuralgic issue for Treasury,” an official said. (Summers declined to comment, citing the sensitive nature of the issue.) Berger would not comment directly, either, but he did say, “The risk equations have changed now. There are thresholds we can now break through—getting our allies in Europe to roll out networks they know about, opening up the banking system, greater intelligence sharing, greater cooperation with the Russians and others.”

One major threshold that was immediately crossed by the new Bush Administration was the prevailing notion that terrorism was a law-enforcement issue rather than a national-security threat. Former Senator Bob Kerrey, who served on the Senate Intelligence Committee through most of the nineties, says, “Before September 11th, we had three terrorist attacks on America—the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, the Embassy bombings in Africa in 1998, the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000—and in each case the lead agency investigating the case was the F.B.I. To my mind, these were acts of war, not just law-enforcement issues.” In other words, these terrorist operations demanded a military response as well as law-enforcement investigation.

The relationship between Bill Clinton’s White House and Louis J. Freeh’s F.B.I. was notoriously rocky. As reported by Elsa Walsh in this magazine, the F.B.I. was furious over the Administration’s unwillingness to force the Saudis to cooperate more fully in the Khobar Towers investigation. “You wonder why we didn’t push the Saudis harder,” Leslie Gelb, of the Council on Foreign Relations, says. “You wonder why we didn’t say to them, ‘If you don’t turn over the people we need to talk to, we’re going to stop supplying you with military equipment.’

But the Administration was pressured by other forces—American diplomats in Saudi Arabia, American oil companies—not to jeopardize the relationship with Saudi Arabia or the détente with Iran, and the Clinton security team was equally furious with the F.B.I. “Their standard line was that Osama bin Laden wasn’t a serious domestic-security threat,” one former Clinton Administration official says. “They said that bin Laden had about two hundred guys on the ground and they had drawn a bead on them. Actually, after the F.B.I. helped break up the millennium operation—the attempt to bomb Los Angeles International Airport and perhaps other sites—they had a fair amount of credibility. The other problem we had with the F.B.I. was a real unwillingness to share information. They insisted upon a ‘chain of custody.’ If other government agencies—the military, for example—acted on information about terrorists gathered by the F.B.I., those actions could be considered illegal in future court cases.

There was always something, it seemed, preventing the Clinton Administration from taking effective action—the Pentagon, the Treasury, the friends of the Saudis, the F.B.I. “This is a phenomenon that goes back well beyond the Clinton Administration,” Richard Holbrooke says. “Bureaucracies have a natural tendency not to cooperate, coordinate, or to consolidate with each other. Think about the hijacker Muhammad Atta—the terrorist who directed the first jetliner into the World Trade Center. They had his name. His was on the ‘watch’ list. Somehow that didn’t get communicated from the F.B.I. to the F.A.A. or to the airlines. For years, people have tried to create a single coordinated agency involving Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the F.B.I., the C.I.A., the F.A.A., the Coast Guard, but it has never happened. Why? Because bureaucracies won’t cooperate with each other—unless they are forced to do so by political-level authority.” Holbrooke emphasized again that this was not a problem unique to the Clinton Administration. “But the real
story here is the failure of political leaders to force bureaucrats to meet political goals."

Indeed, Clinton could have ordered the military or the Treasury or the F.B.I. to do anything he wanted them to do. His defenders say that his options were severely limited by politics—the public wasn’t ready for body bags, nor were the politicians, nor were the Europeans, nor was much of the Middle East. Until September 11th, the threat of domestic terrorist attacks remained the province of writers like Tom Clancy and a few obscure defense analysts. Clinton’s defenders also say that there were some significant successes—terrorist attacks foiled in America and elsewhere—that can’t be discussed in detail because covert methods, sources, and alliances might be revealed. (The work of the anti-bin Laden war room at the C.I.A. falls into this category.) But in the end Clinton wasn’t very interested in the closework of foreign policy—the contrast between his cursory attention to national-security issues and his obsession with domestic policy and politics, his line-by-line battles against the Republicans over the federal budget, is striking. It should also not be forgotten that the cruise-missile attack on sites connected with Osama bin Laden took place on August 20, 1998, three days after the President’s grand jury testimony in the Monica Lewinsky case. Yet another futile aerial bombardment of Iraq began on December 16th, just as he was being impeached. Clinton’s personal problems may have limited his responses in both cases, or perhaps not. When it came to foreign policy, he was more concerned with gestures than with details.

It is odd, then, that the Clinton foreign-policy template—the liberal multilateralism, the support for international treaties, the tendency to consult with allies—is probably a much better model for conducting the struggle against terrorism than the arrogant, unilateral disdain that seemed to mark the first eight months of the Bush Administration. "If the Bushies aren't prepared to swallow hard and adopt Clintonian multilateralism, they may find it difficult to attract long-term support for their alliance against terrorism," Barry Posen, of M.I.T., says. "This is a very, very seri-