

## The Top 10 US Mistakes in Iraq

**Gen. Anthony Zinni**, retired former CentCom (Middle East, SW Asia, and NE Africa) commander and Marine Corps General. Remarks delivered to the Center for Defense Information's Board of Directors, May 12, 2004.

**General Zinni:** " I just came back from giving a lecture at UCLA yesterday, and the lecture was on the Middle East. I tried to step back and take a more strategic view of the Middle East and the issues out there and maybe give them a perception of the problems and issues from the eyes of those that live with it day to day: the Arabs, Israelis, all those that make up the peoples of the Middle East.

On the way back I was thinking about what to talk about here, and I know Iraq is a hot topic, and I thought I would stay with Iraq. And I thought on the airplane about how history is going to record what happened in Iraq, how we got into it, and obviously it's too early to tell. And oftentimes the outcome defines how history characterizes it.

But I thought about how much has been misconstrued about what has happened so far, especially at a time when I commanded CentCom and we were in the process of containing Iraq as part of the policy. And I thought about the mistakes we made, that, as Bruce [Blair, the president of Center for Defense Information] said, I've commented on before.

And what I thought I would do tonight is go through the 10 crucial mistakes to this point that we've made. Because I think it helps frame what, in fact, has happened over time ... and is going to be the first part of that history. And I will conclude with maybe some thoughts on the way ahead, at least from my point of view.

I think the first mistake that was made was misjudging the success of containment. I heard the president say, not too long ago, I believe it was with the interview with Tim Russert that ... I'm not sure ... but at some point I heard him say that "containment did not work." That's not true.

I was responsible -- along with everybody from General Schwarzkopf to his two successors that were my predecessors, myself, and my successor, General Franks -- up until the war, we were responsible for containment. And I would like to explain a little bit about that

containment, because I thought we did it pretty well, given the circumstances. And it began with Bush 41 [President George H.W. Bush] accepting the U.N. resolution to conduct the war, staying within the framework of the U.N. resolution, and not after the war going to Baghdad, breaking the coalition, ending up inheriting a country that I think he clearly saw would be a burden on us, our military, our treasury, and would break relations around the region, and would put him outside what he considered his international legitimacy for doing this -- the resolution by which he operated and conducted the war, and the resolution by which we established the sanctions.

Administering those sanctions was done pretty effectively I thought. In the entire U.S. Central Command, in my time there, on any given day we had less troops in the entire region than show up to work at the Pentagon any morning. Think about that. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, carriers, squadrons, battalions. On any given day ... on an average day in CentCom, we had about 23,000 troops, soup to nuts. Logistics, fighters ... and we ran that with these 23,000 troops. The whole region. To top it off, those troops were not assigned to CentCom. In other words, that structure wasn't created to be part of CentCom, like the troops are in the Pacific Command or in the European Command. These were troops that were on rotation. They came from other places, from the United States, from Europe, from the Pacific region. And they rotated through. Ships rotated through, battalions came in and out, squadrons came in and out. So we never created a structure. We did it with borrowed troops, so we could up the rheostat or lower it when we needed to.

It was, in my view, what we would call in the military an "economy of force theater" without these assigned forces. We had no American bases out there. We were sharing bases with allies in the region who provided for us. Any given year, those in the region ponied up \$300 million to \$500 million to support our presence out there. What we called "assistance in-kind." They provided the fuel, the food, the water, the things we needed. The Saudis built a \$240 million housing complex for our troops. Never once when we decided to take action against Saddam, when he violated the sanctions, or the rules by which the inspectors operated under, never once were we denied permission to use bases, or airspace, or to strike from those places. We built a wonderful coalition, without any formal treaties, without any particular arrangement.

During that time, when we asked allies in that region to join us in other conflicts, like Somalia, they came. Egyptians came. Pakistanis came.

The Saudis came. The Kuwaitis came. The Emirates came and provided forces. They joined us in the Balkans. They joined us elsewhere on operations when we needed them. We ran the largest military exercises in the world ... in this part of the world. In Egypt we did "Bright Star." We built a magnificent coalition of forces, without ever once signing a piece of paper. And we contained Saddam. We watched his military shrink to less than half its size from the beginning of the Gulf War until the time I left command, not only shrinking in size, but dealing with obsolete equipment, ill-trained troops, dissatisfaction in the ranks, a lot of absenteeism. We didn't see the Iraqis as a formidable force. We saw them as a decaying force.

We couldn't account for all the weapons of mass destruction. The inspectors that were in there had to assume that the weapons of mass destruction that were in his original inventory that we could not account for might still be there. So that was always a planning factor. But when you look hard at that, these were artillery shells, rocket rounds, that he would have to be hiding somewhere that were getting old. And if he had to bring them out and use them, think about this, he's got to move them to artillery positions, to battery positions, under total dominance of the air by the United States. I sure as hell wouldn't have been ... want to be that battery commander that said tomorrow you're going to get five truckloads of chemical weapons to be stored in your area to shoot. Not under the air power we brought down and the ability to interdict them. And these were tactical capabilities

Much has been made, which confuses me, about unmanned aerial vehicles. We monitored the L-29 program ... a trainer that he was trying to put tanks on. Never once in my experience did he ever fly it unmanned. He usually crashed it even manned. And in order to even hit Kuwait, he would have to bring it into the no-fly zone and launch it from an air base where we didn't allow aircraft to fly from, and we would have taken it out -- preemptively.

We bombed him almost at will. No one in the region felt threatened by Saddam. No one in the region denied us our ability to conduct sanctions. Many countries joined us in sanctions enforcement, in the no-fly zones, and in the maritime intercept operations where we attempted to intercept his oil and gas smuggling.

So to say containment didn't work, I think is not only wrong from the experiences we had then, but the proof is in the pudding, in what kind of military our troops faced when we went in there. It disintegrated in

front of us. It didn't have the capabilities that were pumped up, that were supposedly possessed by this military. And I think that will be the first mistake that will be recorded in history, the belief that containment as a policy doesn't work. It certainly worked against the Soviet Union, has worked with North Korea and others. It's not a pleasant thing to have to administer, it requires troops full time, there are moments when there ... there are periods of violence, but containment is a lot cheaper than the alternative, as we're finding out now. So I think that will be mistake No. 1: discounting the effectiveness of the containment.

A side note on that. The process of containment created an "alliance," which I would put in quotation marks, in the region. We located our forces in all six GCC, Gulf Cooperation Council countries. When we deployed, we made sure that we got everybody in the region pregnant when we acted, and deployed, and enforced sanctions. We deliberately put our troops in positions and operating out of bases where everybody had to make a political commitment. That was the rule and everybody understood it. And we built an arrangement out there, a security arrangement, through the enforcement of those sanctions, that I think helped us create stability. I think we made a mistake in not capitalizing on that. I think the Clinton doctrine and policy of engagement was right, but we never really got the resources or authority to do it to its fullest extent. I think there was a reluctant Congress to provide those kinds of resources, but that would have been cheaper by half. The idea to regionalize our problems and allow us to build the forces within a region that can deal with these problems, I think is a much more powerful idea. We could have done that in Africa, we could have done that in the Middle East, in Central Asia, and elsewhere.

The second mistake I think history will record is that the strategy was flawed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing about the benefits of this strategic move. That the road to Jerusalem led through Baghdad, when just the opposite is true, the road to Baghdad led through Jerusalem. You solve the Middle East peace process, you'd be surprised what kinds of other things will work out.

The idea that we will walk in and be met with open arms. The idea that we will have people that will glom on to democracy overnight. The idea that strategically we will reform, reshape, and change the Middle East by this action -- we've changed it all right.

So we had a basic flawed strategy. All those that believed this was going to be the catalyst for some kind of positive change out there, or

some sort of revolutionary change in the region, I think got more than they bargained for and didn't understand the region, the culture, the situation, and the issues, and the effect that what they were about to do was going to have on those.

The third mistake, I think was one we repeated from Vietnam: We had to create a false rationale for going in to get public support. The books were cooked, in my mind. The intelligence was not there. I testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee one month before the war, and Senator [Richard] Lugar asked me: "General Zinni, do you feel the threat from Saddam Hussein is imminent?" I said: "No, not at all. It was not an imminent threat. Not even close. Not grave, gathering, imminent, serious, severe, mildly upsetting, none of those."

I predicted that the fighting would be over, the organized resistance in three weeks. To Tommy Franks' credit, he did it in 19 days. He beat my prediction. He did a magnificent job, as did our troops. But the rationale that we faced an imminent threat, or a serious threat, was ridiculous. Now, wherever history lays that, whether the intelligence was flawed or it was exaggerated, remains to be seen. I have my own opinions.

We failed, in No. 4, to internationalize the effort. To the credit of President Bush 41, he set a standard that held up throughout the post-Cold War period up until the Iraq war very well. He went to the United Nations before we undertook the operation to expel Saddam from Kuwait. Tremendous diplomatic effort to get a resolution from the United Nations to authorize the use of force and then a tremendous diplomatic effort on his part to create what I think is one of the most remarkable coalitions, the coalition we had in the Gulf War, where we had Arab countries, Islamic countries, European countries, contributions from the Far East all over the world. That model was extremely successful, and if you think about it, every intervention we had since we used the model, and it worked. We did it in Somalia, in Haiti, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, East Timor. There were variations on it, but it always started with that U.N. resolution.

Where we felt that we had to lead because we were the only ones that could do it, or it was in our vital national interests, we led. But we had magnificent coalitions. When I was in Somalia, we had to cut off the number of contributing countries in the phase that we led to 26. We had 44 commitments when we had to say, "Enough! The law of diminishing returns is setting in here in Somalia." In East Timor, the Australians took the lead, and we supported it. But again it was the

international authority, the international legitimacy given to us by that U.N. resolution. And if you think about it, every time we were successful, not only did we get the U.N. resolution that we needed for the Gulf War, we got it again in '93 and in '98. When we needed to use force, we got the authorization in the wording we needed during the enforcement of the sanctions to use force.

Why would we believe that we would not get it this time? Why would we believe that this time for some reason, unlike before, the inspectors would not call the shots honestly? The inspectors don't make judgments, they just make reports of facts. We have Americans on inspection teams. Rolf Ekeus, Richard Butler, they always came across with an honest assessment of what was happening. Why, suddenly, were Mohamed ElBaradei and Hans Blix suspect? And what was the rush to war?

I think the fifth mistake was that we underestimated the task. And I think those of us that knew that region, former commanders in chief, I guess we can't use that term anymore -- part of transformation is to change the lexicon -- but former combatant commanders of U.S. Central Command, beginning with General Schwarzkopf, have said, You don't understand what you're getting into. You are not going to go through [former Reagan arms control director Ken] Adelman's "cakewalk"; you are not going to go through [Ahmed] Chalabi's Iraqis dancing in the streets to receive you. You are about to go into a problem that you don't know the dimensions and the depth of, and are going to cause you a great deal of pain, time, expenditure of resources and casualties down the road.

I can't understand why there was an underestimation when you look at a country that has never known democracy, that has been in the condition it's been in, that has the natural fault lines that it has and the issues it has. And to look at the task of reconstructing this country, not only reconstructing it, but the idea of creating Jeffersonian democracy almost overnight, is almost ridiculous, in concept, in the kind of time and effort that was given as an estimate as to what it would take.

The sixth mistake, and maybe the biggest one, was propping up and trusting the exiles, the infamous "Gucci guerrillas" from London. We bought in to their intelligence reports. To the credit of the CIA, they didn't buy into it, so I guess the Defense Department created its own boutique intelligence agency to vet them. And we ended up with a group that fed us bad information, that led us to believe that we would

be welcomed with flowers in the streets, that led us to believe that this would be a cakewalk.

When I testified before Congress in 1998, after a grilling from Senator [John] McCain and all those wonderful senators who supported the Iraqi Liberation Act, I told them that these guys are not credible and they are going to lead us into something they we will regret. At that time, they were pushing a plan that Central Command would supply air support and special forces, and we would put it into Iraq, and they would Pied Piper their way up to Baghdad and the whole place would fall apart. This plan was created by two Senate staffers and a retired general. I happened to be the commander of Central Command. Nobody bothered to ask me about how my troops would be used. And they were a little bit upset about me being upset about this. These exiles did not have credibility inside the country or in the region. Not only did they not have credibility, it was clear that the information they were providing us many times was not correct and accurate. We believed in them. We also brought them in with us and deemed them into the governing council, and the reception by Iraqis has been, to say the least, has not been great.

The seventh problem has been the lack of planning. I testified again during that period with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, right behind the panel of planners from the State Department and the Department of Defense, and I listened to them describe a "plan." I understood and knew that General Franks and CentCom would do their part. I knew damn right well the security piece would be taken care of, and I knew we had a good plan. I didn't hear anything that told me that they had the scope of planning for the political reconstruction, the economic reconstruction, social reconstruction, the development of building of infrastructure for that country. And I think that lack of planning, that idea that you can do this by the seat of the pants, reconstruct a country, to make decisions on the fly, to beam in on the side that has to that political, economic, social, other parts, just a handful of people at the last minute to be able to do it was patently ridiculous.

In my time at CentCom, we actually looked at a plan for reconstruction, and actually developed one at CentCom because I thought that we, the military, would get stuck with it. In my mind, we needed formidable teams at every provincial level. Eighteen teams. The size of the CPA was about the size we felt we needed for one province, let alone the entire country, to do those other parts.

The eighth problem was the insufficiency of military forces on the ground. There were a lot more troops in my military plan for operations in Iraq. I know when that plan was presented, the secretary of defense said it was "old and stale." It sounded pretty new and fresh to me, and looking back at it now, because there were a hell of a lot more troops. It was more the [former Army Chief of Staff Eric] Shinseki model that I think might have been a hell of a lot more effective to freeze the situation. Those extra divisions we had in there were not to defeat the Republican Guard; they were in there to freeze the security situation because we knew the chaos that would result once we uprooted an authoritarian regime like Saddam's.

The ninth problem has been the ad hoc organization we threw in there. No one can tell me the Coalition Provisional Authority had any planning for its structure. One hundred forty-four bodies scraped from embassies around the world, people that I know, for a fact, walked in and were selected and picked and put in the positions. Never quite fully manned-up until well into the operation. Never the kinds of qualifications or the breadth, and scope and depth it needed to work the problems down to the grassroots level. Changing horses in midstream, General Garner, I guess we can't say that he's fired. I found out tonight from Mark Thompson that the Defense Department claims he wasn't fired. But Jay Garner leaves, and in comes Jerry Bremer. Third quarter, you're down seven, bring in the backup quarterback and part of his job is to create the game plan while he's out there.

And that ad hoc organization has failed, leading to the 10th mistake, and that's a series of bad decisions on the ground. De-Baathifying down to a point where you've alienated the Sunnis, where you have stopped having qualified people down in the ranks, people who don't have blood on their hands but know how to make the trains run on time. Businessmen who I ran into in the region ... who wanted to restart their business, get jobs. They were told by the CPA, "You can't do business because you were a Baathist!" They said to me, "I had to say I was a Baathist." You don't do business in Iraq under Saddam if you're not a Baathist. Imagine throwing the Communists out of Russia at the end of the war.

Disbanding the [Iraqi] army, this is one I'll never understand, because when I arrived at CentCom as the commander, there was an ongoing program started by my predecessors to run a psychological operations campaign against the regular army. Every time we struck Iraq, we dropped leaflets on regular army formations and garrisons saying, "If

you don't fight when the time comes, we'll take care of you." We sent messages to them to this effect through people in the region. When I did interviews on al- Jazeera TV and other Arab networks, I would always mention the poor Iraqi soldiers of the regular army -- victims of Saddam. We had always intended if they didn't fight, we'd get rid of the leadership, we'd keep them intact, we'd provide for some of their training, and we would have the basis for a ready-made force to pick up some of the security requirements. But they were disbanded.

And on and on and on, we've had this series of mistakes. Lack of a dialogue or identification of the leadership in the Sunni and the Shia areas. The inability to connect with the leadership down there. Somebody like Sistani, who doesn't even talk to Jerry Bremer -- I don't think they've ever had a conversation, he refuses to see him. We have now found ourselves in a position to date for these series of mistakes and many, many more, where we are. Which I think is clearly evident.

Almost every week, somebody calls me up, if it's not [Time reporter] Mark Thompson, it's somebody else, and says, "What would you do now?" You know, there's a rule that if you find yourself in hole, stop digging. The first thing I would say is, we need to stop digging. We have dug this hole so deep now that you see many serious people, [Rep.] Jack Murtha, General Odom, and others beginning to say it's time to just pull out, cut your losses. I'm not of that camp. Not yet. But I certainly think we've come pretty close to that.

I would do several things now. But clearly the first and most important thing you need is that U.N. resolution. That's been the model since the end of the Cold War, that has given us the basis and has given our allies the basis for joining us and helping us and provided the legitimacy we need.

We can't keep dropping paper on the U.N., it's time for a group of adults, called the Perm Five, the permanent five members of the Security Council, to sit down and come up with some agreeable, mutually developed U.N. resolution that would allow other countries now to participate. And I think there are many out there at different levels, especially in the region, that would want to participate and help, and before it comes too tough and too costly, we need to get them in. It will probably mean some of these Perm Five members and others will want to have a say in the political reconstruction and economic reconstruction, but so what?

If we create a free economy in Iraq, someday, probably sooner than later, some oil minister is going to cut a contract with the French. Guess what? That's inevitable. So why not start up front, admitting that. We need the U.N. resolution, that's the No. 1 priority.

After getting that, I would first go to the countries in the region asking their help. I would do things like ask the countries to give us five or six officers for each of our battalions and regiments and brigades and above, five or six Arab officers that have attended our schools. For each of those units that have gone to our command and general staff colleges, that not only speak English but know us, and we know them. And I'd put them on the planning staffs of these units, as advisors, as planners. If I'm a battalion commander down there in the middle of Fallujah or Najaf, I need more than some kid who happens to be of Arab descent and speaks Arabic that I dragged over there and probably doesn't speak the dialect. I would like to have five or six of these guys that I went to school with, that I know, that would be there, that would be seconded there for me as planners, advisors, and to help me in these situations.

I would ask these countries in the region to allow us to build camps along the borders of Iraq, to train police, border security, and army. I would lure the young men into these positions by considerable pay for what they are about to do, and they would deserve it. I would ask the Europeans and the others to help us build a training program, one that would last a long time, maybe even a year, to develop truly competent security forces with high morale, organizational coherence, the equipment and the pay that would make them proud. It may mean we're going to have to gut it out for a while. But it means that we have at least an end-state where we are going to put credible security forces and Iraqi forces on the ground. I would ask those countries that can commit those forces to help us, not only in patrolling cities that may be casualty traps, but in securing the borders.

There is a Ho Chi Minh trail here. Somewhere, somehow people are getting in the jihadis. I don't believe the Iraqis are blowing themselves up. They're coming from outside. We have insufficient forces to protect borders. I can't believe that we control all the major routes in and out from Kuwait and Jordan, when every day I see another IED, improvised explosive device, blow up another fuel convoy coming down that road. Forces that protect road networks -- that isn't a casualty-intensive or difficult task -- those are the kinds of forces under a U.N. agreement that I think we can get in there to perform those missions,

to use the Powell doctrine and put some overwhelming force on the critical nodes, and the critical routes, and the critical infrastructure we need to protect. I would hold a conference somewhere in the region, ask the Arabs to sponsor it, although I would provide support.

I would invite every Iraqi businessman I can convince to come, and I would invite foreign investors, and I would ask them to come together, hold this conference over a period of weeks, to define what these businessmen need to establish their business, to make it grow, to re-establish it, to protect it, the kind of investment they need, the infrastructure, but the key is jobs, jobs, jobs. Jobs for Iraqis. I would go to the contractors in there, and say, I don't want to see truck drivers that are coming from Peoria, Illinois. I want to pay truck drivers that are Iraqis. It doesn't take a hell of a lot of talent to drive a truck. Why aren't Iraqis driving trucks for their own reconstruction and redevelopment? Why are people from outside coming in, where they have no investment in protecting and providing for the security and the movement of those goods?

The Halliburtons and Bechtels and, and others ought to be encouraged to hire locally, unless there is a skills set that isn't present there. But I almost can't believe that you couldn't find that in there. I think we need to start talking about the kind of government we're going to eventually have in this nation. Is it a confederation? A federation? What kind of local autonomy are the Shi'a, the Kurds, the Sunnis, going to have? What will be the status of Baghdad? No one has talked about that structure publicly. We're about to turn this over to some interim council and we're heading towards, six months from now, an election, an election where the electorate is educated on how to vote Friday prayers from the pulpit.

There's no system of education for the electorate. There are no political parties that I see and have been developed openly -- there are certainly some growing that I would be suspicious of. And I think that unless we come to grips with the form of government, unless we work openly and in a transparent manner to develop political parties, and this has to be under international U.N. supervision, and unless we run a program of education for the electorate, we're not going to like the results we see by the end of January when the supposed elections are going to take place.

Those are just a few ideas. But I think it takes quality people on the ground to be able to implement these, it takes international authority and not the U.S. stamp on it, because that's not acceptable anymore.

It's going to be a period of time where we're going to have to bear the burden of the most severe security responsibilities. But we ought to at least plan for a time when we can turn that over, and at least share some of the less demanding security experiences and variances. And I'm convinced that if we open this up and get the U.N. resolution, there will be those that will come in and stand by our side, boot-to-boot, on some of the tougher missions.

We also have to stop the tough-talk rhetoric. One thing you learn in this business is, don't say it unless you're going to do it. In this part of the world, strength matters. And if you say you are going to go in and wipe them out, you better do it. If you say you're going to do it and then you back off and find another solution, you have lost face. And we have got to stop the kind of bravado and talk that only leads us into trouble out there. We need to be more serious and more mature in what we project as an image. Our whole public relations effort out there has been a disaster. I read the newspapers from the region every night online, and if you watch al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, or even some of the more moderate stations out there, and you read the editorials in the newspaper, there is a different war being portrayed in that region. A different conflict than we're getting from Fox, CNN, CBS, et cetera. And we better get the two jibed somehow, because that has been a massive failure. And there again, we could use advice from the region as to how to go about it. Thank you for your attention.



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