

CHAPTER ONE



DESERT FOX

THE TOMAHAWKS WERE SPINNING up in their tubes.

It was November 12, 1998. U.S. Marine General Tony Zinni, the commander in chief of United States Central Command (CENTCOM), was standing in his command room overlooking the command center at CENTCOM's Tampa, Florida, headquarters, leading the preparations for what promised to be the most devastating attack on Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War.

The spacious command center was fitted out with desks, phones, computers, maps, and large and small screens showing updates and the positions of aircraft and ships. In addition to the usual office-type furnishings, the windowed room had secure phones and video communications with Zinni's superiors and his commanders in the field. It was Zinni's battle position—the bridge of his ship.

At the end of the First Gulf War, Iraq had agreed to the UN-supervised destruction of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the programs to develop and build them. That agreement had been a lie. The Saddam Hussein regime had never intended to give up its WMD program, and for the next seven years it had conducted a running battle with UNSCOM, the UN inspection operation in Iraq, to protect its programs in any way

possible . . . by hiding them, moving them around, lying, stonewalling, delay, and noncooperation.

The two essential issues covered by the UN mandate were compliance and accountability. That is, the inspectors had to ask and get satisfactory answers to these questions: “Are the Iraqis in compliance with the UN requirement to destroy their WMD and completely dismantle their WMD programs? And are they satisfactorily accounting for the programs and WMD they claim to have destroyed?” The absence of Iraqi cooperation on both of these issues led UNSCOM to make the obvious assumption that the Iraqis were hiding something—either that the weapons still existed or that the Iraqis at least wanted to maintain their capability to make them. UNSCOM had to look hard at the worst case.*

When UNSCOM had persisted in carrying out the UN mandate, the Iraqis had raised the stakes—by making it ever harder for UNSCOM to do its job. There had been greater and greater threats and intimidation, lies, obstruction, and hostility . . . allied with a diplomatic assault aimed at splitting off powerful states friendly to Iraq (principally France, Russia, and China) from the rest of the Security Council and using their support to sabotage the disarmament effort.

With each Iraqi escalation came a counterthreat from the United States: “If UNSCOM is forced to leave Iraq with their work unfinished, the U.S. will hit Iraq and hit it hard.” The threat caught the Iraqis’ attention. As each escalation neared its climax, and the inspectors started to pull out of the country, the Saddam Hussein regime blinked, backed down, and let them return—though each time with fewer teeth.

But now it looked like the Iraqis were not going to blink. The day before, November 11, the UN inspection teams had left once again, apparently for good. As they left, President Clinton had given Zinni the signal to go. The twenty-four-hour launch clock had started.

Zinni knew the moment was approaching for the cruise missile

*

In 2003, during and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it became clear that at that time the Iraqis actually possessed few, if any, WMD. The point of all their many games during the years of inspection now seems to have been to hide their ability to restart their

launch—the moment of truth. These weren't airplanes. Once the Tomahawks were in the air, they could not be recalled.

Before him was an open line to the White House, where the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) vice-chairman, Air Force General Joe Ralston, was sitting. Before him, too, was another line to his Navy component commander, Vice Admiral Willy Moore, in Bahrain. Moore was in constant communications with the eight ships that would launch the initial cruise missile salvo. The clock ticked on.

The twenty-four hours passed. Zinni had told the President that the strike could be stopped at any moment up to six hours before the bombs were scheduled to hit. That was the drop-dead time for a no-go decision. As it happened, he had built in fifteen minutes of fudge time as a safety margin.

But the no-go deadline had passed. And so had Zinni's fifteen minutes of fudge time.

He took a deep breath—and then the line from the White House lit up: Saddam was backing down again. He'd agreed to UNSCOM's demands.

General Ralston's voice came down the wire: "It's a no-go. Don't shoot," he told Zinni. "Do we have any time left? Is it okay?"

Zinni honestly didn't know. All he could do was grab the phone and call Willy Moore. . . .

FOR ZINNI, this story had begun fifteen months before, on August 13, 1997, when he'd been appointed the sixth CINC (commander in chief) of CENTCOM.*

As commander, Zinni watched over a vast region including most of the Middle East, East Africa, and Southwest and Central Asia. His challenges

*

His predecessors included Army General Norman Schwarzkopf, the Coalition commander during the First Gulf War; Marine General Joe Hoar, one of Zinni's oldest friends; and Army General Binnie Peay. He was succeeded in 2000 by Army General Tommy Franks, the CENTCOM commander for the 2001 war in Afghanistan and the

were legion: the delicate, complex relationships with his regional allies; the rising threat of terrorism, led by the not yet world-famous Osama bin Laden; the growing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the chronic problems of failed or incapable states, civil wars, border disputes, and criminal activities such as drug trafficking and smuggling; and the difficult task of containing the two regional hegemon, Iran and Iraq.

Though he would have preferred a balanced approach to all the regional issues rather than having to concentrate his energies and CENTCOM's capabilities on America's obsession with Saddam Hussein, by far Zinni's biggest challenge proved to be enforcing the UN-imposed post-Gulf War sanctions on Saddam's regime. In his view, Saddam could be contained and marginalized; making him *the* issue only gave him more clout and distracted the U.S. from more important regional issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Iran, terrorism, and the building of security relationships.

Not long after he became CINC, he proposed a six-point strategic program to William Cohen, President Clinton's Secretary of Defense, aimed at this more balanced approach. After a polite hearing with Cohen and a session with the Senate Majority and Minority Leaders and the Speaker of the House, Zinni was told to stay out of policy and to stick to execution. "Yes, sir," he said—always a good Marine.

Meanwhile, the magnitude of the Iraq problem was once again brought home only five days after he took command, at an extended meeting at CENTCOM headquarters with Ambassador Richard Butler, the new head of UNSCOM. CENTCOM provided support for UNSCOM with UN-supervised U-2 flights over Iraq.

Zinni was already familiar with these missions. Before his appointment as commander, he had, as General Peay's deputy, coordinated the CENTCOM support missions with Butler's predecessor, Rolf Ekeus.

On the face of it, UNSCOM's mandate was straightforward. UN Resolution 687, which set up UNSCOM (and which Iraq had accepted and agreed to support), had directed Iraq to "destroy, remove, or render harmless" its WMD and any missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers. This process was to have three stages: Iraq would declare its WMD and missiles, UNSCOM would verify the declaration as accurate, and then together UNSCOM and the Iraqis would destroy them.

The Iraqis had given Ekeus a hard time; but his problems were nothing compared with the obstacles they were already putting in the way of his successor. Iraqi efforts to conceal their WMD programs—their “hideous charade,” in Butler’s words—were to have dramatic consequences for Tony Zinni.

THOUGH TONY ZINNI did not look like a recruiting poster, he was instantly recognizable as a Marine. He was slightly under medium height, solidly built, barrel-chested, with dark hair cut in the jarhead Marine fashion—very short with shaved back and sides. His look was normally intent, thoughtful, direct, and friendly; laughter came easily to him; and he had the social openness, warmth, and common touch that came from long exposure to all kinds and varieties of people. Hardened by a lifetime of military service—and most especially by Vietnam, which had radically changed him—tough decisions didn’t faze him.

Before becoming the head of UNSCOM, Richard Butler had been the Australian ambassador to the UN, with considerable expertise in arms control and WMD issues. Like Zinni, he came out of a working-class urban Catholic background (Zinni grew up in Philadelphia, Butler in Sydney); and, like Zinni, he was a burly, physically imposing man, friendly, direct, outspoken, and tough.

Not surprisingly, the two men connected easily. Both men listened well and were not reluctant to express their views.

Butler’s first words to Zinni made it clear that he would not play favorites. He’d call the pitches as he saw them. But a successful outcome to the inspections was all up to the Iraqis. If they opened up and came clean with their missiles and WMD, he would give them a clean bill of health, and they’d get their reward—the lifting of the draconian sanctions imposed as a consequence of their invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

So far they had shown zero inclination to come clean—anything but—while crying crocodile tears over their fellow Iraqis, who were enduring the terrible sanctions imposed by the American Satan. (Saddam’s henchmen, meanwhile, lived royally in palaces.)

When it came down to the naked truth, Saddam’s regime was far more

interested in keeping their WMD and missile programs than in lifting the sanctions. Yet if they could get the sanctions removed while keeping their WMD, all the better.

Butler had no illusions about the other players in this high-stakes game, either: he was well aware that the Americans had their own agenda—not to mention the UN bureaucracy, the French, the Russians, the Chinese, and everyone else with a stake in what went on inside the nation with the world's second-largest proven oil reserves . . . a nation whose government was arguably the most repressive since Stalin's USSR.

The Iraqis, well aware of these agendas, played everyone off against each other, trying various gambits aimed at ending or at least weakening UNSCOM—from conning Butler, to putting a wedge in the Security Council, to appealing to the Secretary-General for a diplomatic solution (meaning a diplomatic surrender to Iraq). The Iraqis rightly believed that the French, Russians, and Chinese would stand to gain if the sanctions were removed; but their backing had conditions. It had to be covered over by a mask of support for the previous resolutions calling for disarmament. The Iraqis also rightly believed that the Secretary-General and his staff were hopeful of attaining a “diplomatic solution,” even if that meant sacrificing the Security Council's goal of achieving Iraqi disarmament.

The U.S. agenda was even more subtle and complex. The Americans were increasingly coming to understand that disarmament would never happen with Saddam in power. It was therefore not in their interest for the Iraqis *to be seen* to comply with UN directives and thus to have the sanctions lifted. In the American view, if Saddam *appeared* to comply with the inspectors, *seemed* to meet the conditions set by the UN resolution, and was given a clean bill of health, then he would no doubt restart the WMD programs he had not successfully protected from inspection.

As time passed, the Americans' goal for Iraq shifted from the WMD-sanctions equation to regime change—a goal they could not openly advocate because of the UN resolutions they had backed. Yet it was clear they had no intention of dropping the sanctions as long as Saddam Hussein's regime ran Iraq.

The American policy shift did not make Richard Butler's job any easier. It obviously meant there was no motivation for Saddam to comply with

the UN conditions. If the regime and not the WMD was the issue, then there was no reason for them not to keep the WMD programs. . . . Of course, that was an excuse and not a reason. Saddam intended to keep his programs no matter what.

OVER THE next months, the Iraqis did their best to scam Butler. The scam didn't work. As they realized he was not a pushover—and was becoming increasingly exasperated by their lies and tricks—they ratcheted up the stakes with attempts at intimidation. By the end of October 1997, they were putting more and more obstacles in the way of the UNSCOM inspectors, and making serious and quite naked threats. At this point, they had two immediate goals: to protect several key sites they had designated “presidential”; and to remove anything “American” from the inspection process, including the U-2 flights. (Of the approximately one thousand UNSCOM inspection staff, about a quarter were American.)

Meanwhile, the Iraqi failure to cooperate had provoked CENTCOM contingency plans for retaliatory air strikes. Though there had been U.S. strikes against the Iraqis before Zinni became CINC, they had been relatively limited. Zinni's strikes were intended to hurt.

The crisis came to a head in early November, when the Iraqis ordered all the American inspectors to leave Iraq and threatened to shoot down the U-2. Although hitting the high-flying aircraft would have taken a very lucky shot, it was possible.

The question: How to respond to the threat? A U-2 mission was scheduled for November 10. Obviously, an attempt to knock it out would be followed by American bombs. But was the threat alone reason enough to hit Saddam?

That was Zinni's position. He did not favor flying the mission, preferring instead to strike Iraq immediately (based on the threat), or else to punish them in other ways, such as increasing the airspace in the no-fly zone/no-drive zone enforcement area.*

*

Large zones of northern and southern Iraq were interdicted by the UN after the First Gulf War. The Iraqi military (with some exceptions) were not allowed to fly military air-

But Washington thought otherwise. Their decision was to fly the U-2; and Zinni was ordered to be prepared to conduct immediate air and missile attacks on Iraq if the plane was fired upon. In preparation for the strike, he flew out to the friendly countries in the Gulf to secure agreements to use their airspace, bases, and territorial waters for the strike—a round of visits he would make several times as head of CENTCOM.

On the way, he visited the U-2 pilots at their base in Saudi Arabia. There he learned that the squadron commander had decided to fly the flight himself, an act that impressed Zinni, who later awarded him an air medal for flying into the engagement zones of hostile Iraqi surface-to-air missiles.

Getting agreement from the friendly leaders in the region was not automatic. They were nervous about the strike. Though none had any illusions about the Iraqi leader, they all had a great deal of sympathy for the long-suffering Iraqi people—Arabs, just as they were. A solution that did nothing for the Iraqi people made no sense to them. Thus they all backed an attack that would remove Saddam, but in their minds, yet another round of “pinprick” bombings only made him stronger.

In the end, however, they agreed to a strike if the U-2 was fired upon. Despite their serious questions about the benefits of the U.S. air strikes, they always came through with their support (contrary to U.S. media reports), but preferred to keep the extent of their support private.

The U-2 flew as scheduled on November 10. During the flight, Zinni sat with senior Saudi leaders in the Saudi Ministry of Defense in Riyadh, but in direct communication with CENTCOM’s air operations center, ready to give the order to strike at the first indication that the plane was threatened.

As had often happened before, Saddam’s threat turned out to be hollow. The flight was uneventful.

On November 14, in the face of the Iraqi demand to remove the Americans, Butler evacuated the entire contingent of inspectors; but after several days of intense diplomatic activity, they were all able to return—though, once again, with less freedom to operate than before. Every “diplomatic solution” lessened UNSCOM’s ability to get the disarmament job done.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi lies and threats did not stop; and over the next

months, Saddam raised the stakes again and again—always probing for weaknesses, always trying to limit UNSCOM's effectiveness.

In response, CENTCOM built up forces in the region to be ready to strike if the inspectors were no longer able to do their business. This operation became known as "Desert Thunder."

In February, Secretary of Defense Cohen and Zinni conducted a four-day trip to eleven countries to gain support for a major air strike if Butler's inspectors were unable to carry out their mission. By February 17, when a confrontation with Saddam seemed imminent, President Clinton announced in a televised speech that the U.S. would act if he did not cooperate with the inspectors. Zinni briefed the President and key cabinet members on the planned strike and defense of American allies in the region.

But once again Saddam made a last-minute retreat. A February 20 visit to Baghdad by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan got an agreement from Saddam to resume cooperation with Butler; yet it was clearly only a matter of time before this cooperation would collapse.

Meanwhile, the U.S. forces that had been added to the units already in the region remained in the Gulf, poised to strike.

DURING THE target selection process for Desert Thunder, the President had injected a new and unprecedented element into the planning—he had clearly begun seriously to face the question raised by the likelihood that Saddam would finally block UNSCOM's work. "Can we militarily eliminate Saddam's weapons of mass destruction program?" the President asked Zinni. Previous air strikes had simply punished the Iraqis in the hope of forcing their cooperation. Now he was asking whether bombing could accomplish militarily what the inspectors seemed no longer able to do on the ground.

Zinni's answer at that point was negative. "We don't know enough about the WMD program," he said, "much less where the components of the program are. That's why the inspectors are in there."

But Clinton persisted. "What can be done militarily about the WMD?" he kept asking. "To what level can we take them out?"

As time went on, Zinni began to come up with answers.

Once they are built, WMD are relatively easy to hide. But the facilities and processes that are used to build them are much harder to conceal. Zinni's people knew quite a lot about these. The delivery systems and the fuels that powered them were vulnerable, as were the security systems and personnel that protected the programs; the various documents, information, materials, and the research-and-development operations; and the special and difficult-to-acquire machinery required to fabricate high-tolerance parts (such as centrifuges needed to separate fissile uranium from its more stable forms).

Whenever an air strike was imminent (normally tipped off by a buildup of CENTCOM forces in the region as tensions mounted), the Iraqis would move the more vulnerable elements of their WMD programs out of harm's way. These were the elements that could be taken out . . . if they could be hit before they'd been moved to safety.

"The Iraqis are allowed to have certain missiles," Zinni reported to the President. "But within that capability, they can research and develop an expanded capability, which at some point can be turned into a delivery system. We can eliminate that. We can bomb their missile facility.

"They also have experimental, developmental programs on fuel for missiles and rockets. We can take these out.

"We know the security forces charged with protecting WMD program information, documents, materials, and R & D studies. The Special Republican Guard is charged with these missions. We can hit them.

"We know the facilities where they keep high-tolerance machinery that is necessary for a nuclear program. We can hit those facilities.

"And we can add targets vital to the regime, like their intelligence headquarters and the Ba'ath party headquarters. Taking out such targets will do serious damage to their command and control capabilities.

"Taking out all these things will not end forever their WMD program," Zinni said in conclusion. "If the strike goes well, if we are really lucky, the best we can do is set back their programs for two years. It will take about that much time to reconstitute and replace what we've destroyed."

With the President's approval, Zinni was given the go-ahead to plan for striking these targets.

DESERT VIPER

Butler and his UNSCOM inspectors soldiered on, but with ever-increasing difficulties. From May 1998 to the end of that year was a time of almost constant crisis.

Though UNSCOM was intended to be a verifying and not an investigative body, the Iraqi obstacles to its proper functioning had required the creation of an investigative and forensic unit. In June 1998, the UNSCOM investigations discovered long-sought smoking guns—stores of Scud-specific propellants and incontrovertible evidence of VX production (one of the most vicious of the nerve agents*).

Because the propellants could be used only for Scuds, there was no reason for the Iraqis to have kept the stuff around—if, as they had long claimed, they had destroyed all their Scuds.

The Iraqis were later proved to have produced close to four thousand liters of VX long ago—after claiming far lower estimates. “But of course,” they told UNSCOM, “we’ve destroyed all that we made during the years they had actually made the stuff.”

The UN resolution demanded UNSCOM verification, but the Iraqis always blocked UNSCOM from verifying anything significant.

Naturally, UNSCOM successes did not sit well with the Iraqis.

On August 5, the battle entered its final phase, when the Iraqis officially suspended UNSCOM’s disarmament work. Though Kofi Annan and others shuttled to all the usual capitals in an effort to attain another “diplomatic solution,” by October 31 no one serious doubted that the work of UNSCOM was finished. No one knew how the end would come—whether the Iraqis would throw the inspectors out, or the inspectors would give up and walk out—but one way or another it was certain that the UNSCOM operation in Iraq was untenable.

When that happened, the heavy air strike would inevitably follow.

As that moment approached, Secretary of Defense Cohen, communicating through General Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs

*

A single droplet on the skin is lethal. And enough could be loaded into a missile war-

of Staff, directed Zinni to prepare two attack plans—a heavy option, and a lighter one. The heavy option would attack many targets over several days. The lighter option would be shorter, and hit fewer targets.

Though he could have lived with either option, Zinni preferred the heavier. “If you’re going to hit him, hit him,” he told the Joint Chiefs.

ON THE SEVENTH of November, he flew up to Washington to brief the plan.

If he thought the briefings would be easy, and followed by an automatic approval of his plan, he was wrong.

A briefing with the Joint Chiefs was held in the small Pentagon conference room called “the Tank.” When Zinni had finished, the chairman called for a vote on the options.

To say that the vote surprised Zinni was an understatement; the vote itself made no sense. Not only was there no serious discussion beforehand, nor to his knowledge had there been earlier sessions to discuss the options, but, most important, the Joint Chiefs were not in Zinni’s chain of command (which went directly through the Secretary of Defense to the President). The CINCs are operationally independent of the Joint Chiefs, whose primary job, in their Service Chief role, was to provide the CINCs with the personnel and equipment they needed to do *their* job. In other words, to Zinni the vote was meaningless (though no CINC casually ignores the recommendations that the JCS gives on employment of U.S. forces). He was even more shocked when the JCS voted 4 to 2 for the lighter option, after he had recommended the heavier one. Since there had been little discussion before the vote, the reasons for their choice were unclear. Whatever the reason, Zinni could sense their nervousness: Going against the CINC’s recommendation made them all uneasy. None of them liked to second-guess a field commander.

Though Zinni repeated that he could live with either option, his difference with the Chiefs remained. Since the place to resolve their difference was higher up, General Shelton recommended to Secretary Cohen that Zinni attend a meeting of the principal cabinet members and the President at Camp David in order to discuss the options.

The next day, November 8, he flew out to Camp David.

The meeting was held in the wood-paneled conference room of the main cabin. Bill Clinton, seated at the head of the table, was flanked by the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet; the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright; the Secretary of Defense, Bill Cohen; the National Security Adviser, Sandy Berger; and the JCS chairman and vice-chairman, Generals Shelton and Ralston. Though the Vice President was not present, he was on a speakerphone.

As the group discussed the choices, Zinni sensed that the cabinet was as divided as the Joint Chiefs; and when it came time for a vote, there was again no consensus. The Secretary of State leaned toward the heavier strike, the Secretary of Defense the lighter, George Tenet the heavier, and so on around the table. The cabinet members were all over the map.

It was left to Sandy Berger to square this circle.

“Are these two options mutually exclusive?” he asked reasonably. “Why couldn’t we start with the lighter one and see how it goes, but hold open the option of going heavy?”

“That’s fine with me,” Zinni answered. This was neither the time nor the place for drawing a line in the sand. At this stage, he just wanted to get on with it. “I’m not trying to make this hard. If that’s what you want, we’ll work it that way.”

The President approved the compromise.

THE TRIGGER for Desert Viper was to be the end of the inspections. As soon as Richard Butler announced, “We’ve had it; we’re out of here; we can’t do business,” the clock would start ticking. The bombs would start dropping within hours.

Preparing for this takes time. Bringing bombs to their targets is an enormously complex process, involving land-based aircraft, carrier aircraft, and cruise missiles fired from both ships and B-52s. The various strike aircraft have to be in the air—along with tankers, the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), and all the other support aircraft; the ships and carriers have to be in position for launch; the crews must all have their required rest; and much, much more. Zinni’s people

needed about twenty-four hours before the actual strike in order to make all that happen.

At some moment after the inspectors climbed into their white UN SUVs, drove out to Habbaniyah Air Base* eighty-five miles northwest of Baghdad, and took a plane to Bahrain—or some other friendly place—the President had to give the “go” decision for Desert Viper. Twenty-four hours later, the bombs would fall.

Once the twenty-four hours started, the strike could be stopped at any time up to six hours before the scheduled impact. But six hours was the drop-dead moment. That was when the first cruise missiles were launched.

This fact had caused some controversy—Clinton’s advisers didn’t want to tell the President what he couldn’t do.

“You don’t understand,” Zinni told them. “When you get beyond six hours, the launch is a done deal. Nobody can stop it.”

“But you can’t tell the President that,” they replied. “He has to be able to call back his decision up to the last moment.”

“I’ve got no problem with that,” Zinni persisted. “What I’m telling you is that the last moment is six hours before the bombs drop. And you need to tell him he can’t.”

The controversy came to a head at a Pentagon session, attended by the President. Zinni had with him what was called “the Master Air Attack Plan”—an enormous and labyrinthine time/event matrix that came rolled, like a scroll.

When the advisers began to sense that Zinni intended to show the plan to their boss, they were horrified: “You can’t do that! It’s too complex!”

But when the opportunity came, Zinni unrolled the plan on the conference table. “Mr. President,” he said, “you need to see all the moving parts that have to be in position and all the timelines and limits we’re working from. You need to see when you have to make the decision to start.

*

Even though the UN resolution stated that UNSCOM would have unrestricted access to any facility they needed, the Iraqis had insisted on granting air access to only a single Iraqi site, the very inconvenient base at Habbaniyah. There had been protests, but

And you need to see exactly what's happening with the cruise missiles. They spin up and launch six hours before the strike. Once launched, that's it. They're going to go until they hit what they're aimed at.

"This is the absolute drop-dead time. If you want to send us a no-go, you have to do it before that."

The advisers' fears were of course groundless. Zinni knew from previous briefings that Clinton was a very quick study; he instantly caught what Zinni was trying to show him.

"Right," he said. "Fine, you'll get the decisions you need in time."

As November wound on, Zinni's people kept tabs on the inspectors . . . watched their progress—or lack of it—waiting for the launch trigger. It came in mid-November. The inspectors had continued to demand access and cooperation, which the Iraqis continued to refuse to give.

As this drama unfolded, CENTCOM built up air and naval forces in the Gulf in preparation for the strike.

Finally, on November 11, the inspectors gave up on the fiction of Iraqi cooperation. They'd had enough. Butler ordered the evacuation of his team; and the President ordered the execution of Desert Viper on the heels of their departure. . . .

. . . AND ON November 12, Tony Zinni, in his command room in Tampa, with his fudge time completely gone, grabbed a phone and called Willy Moore, hoping against hope that Admiral Moore could stop the Tomahawks anyway.

The admiral said: "You may be in luck, sir. I built in fifteen minutes of fudge time myself. But we're already into it." Moore scrambled. He had to get word out to all eight ships to shut down the missiles—by then their gyros were already spinning, the last step before they are launched.

And with exactly eight minutes left until the launch—he succeeded. Meanwhile, Zinni got the planes in the air recalled. Desert Viper was averted. But it achieved its aims: Saddam had blinked once again. Richard Butler's inspectors flew back into Habbaniyah and attempted to resume their work.

DESERT FOX

One aspect of their (temporary) success troubled Zinni and other senior American leaders, though. A few days after Desert Viper was aborted, General Shelton called Zinni to talk about this frustration. “You know,” he said, “every time we deploy forces out there, Saddam sees them coming and moves his sensitive equipment and files out of targeted facilities.”

“You’re right,” Zinni answered, “and because he knows about our precision bombing and concern for collateral damage, he doesn’t have to move it very far.”

“What we need to do,” Shelton continued, “is catch him with these things in place. If we can hit him without any warning, we can do a lot more damage.”

Zinni agreed.

“We need to do something that outsmarts him,” Shelton went on, “something that outfoxes him.” He laughed: “We ought to call the next strike ‘Desert Fox.’”

“Yeah,” Zinni laughed with him. But both generals were deadly serious.

“Really,” Shelton continued, “what that amounts to is this: We’ve got to set up the next strike with forces already in the theater, so he doesn’t see any buildup. Or if we have to build up, we do it quietly, or trickle it in bit by bit.

“So here’s my question: Can we do a strike with forces we have in theater, and with maximum operational security and limited numbers of people in on the planning?”

“Let me look at it,” Zinni said. “I’ll see what we can do, and I’ll get back to you.”

The answer Zinni came up with was “Yes”; and General Shelton’s suggestion was put in place in the next CENTCOM strike plan—Desert Fox.

The name proved to be controversial after somebody pointed out that it was also the epithet given to German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel—the bane of the British and Americans in North Africa in the early 1940s. “How can you name an air strike after a famous Nazi?” they asked . . . a

thought that had not occurred to Shelton or Zinni. To them, it was simply a sly joke: They were going to outfox the fox.

In spite of the doubts, the name stuck.*

THE THREAT posed by Desert Viper had not ended the Iraqi games. During the rest of November and the first two weeks of December, they continued to jerk Butler and his UNSCOM inspectors around.

Finally, in mid-December, Richard Butler pulled them out once and for all. As the inspectors prepared to leave, the twenty-four-hour clock started yet again, and Zinni once more took up position in his Tampa command center to lead the attack.

This time, there was no last-minute reprieve. Four hours after the inspectors landed at Bahrain, the surprise Desert Fox attack began. It lasted from the seventeenth to the twentieth of December, with an option to continue on if it seemed desirable, either to restrike targets or to go heavier.

The attack was perfectly executed. Over six hundred Air Force, Marine, and Navy sorties were conducted (including over three hundred night strikes), over four hundred missiles fired, over six hundred bombs and precision-guided munitions dropped, using more than two hundred aircraft and twenty ships. Surprise was total. None of the equipment or facilities targeted had been prepared for it. None had been moved (no shell game). All the targets had been hit—and hard.

The attack was so successful that Zinni decided not to move on into the hard option—especially since Ramadan began that year on December 21, the day after the fourth day of bombing.

“There’s no point in bombing for three or four days into Ramadan,” he told General Shelton. “We’ve done about as much damage to the WMD program as we’re going to do. Any more would just be bombing for bombing’s sake.”

Following the departure of the UNSCOM inspectors and the Desert Fox strike, Saddam became much more aggressive toward the planes still

*

The system naming military operations always uses two terms, with the first term indi-

enforcing the no-fly zones. Nearly every other day, his air defense units would fire on coalition aircraft, or his Air Force would attempt to lure the planes into missile range. In response, the U.S. unleashed attacks on the entire Iraqi air defense system, resulting in significant losses in Iraqi Air Defense Command weapons, radars, and command and control assets. This attack-counterattack routine lasted from the end of Desert Fox (December 1998) until the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (March 2003). Coalition forces never lost an aircraft and Saddam's air defense forces suffered greatly for his folly.

DESERT CROSSING

Tony Zinni continues:

Desert Fox accomplished everything militarily that we wanted it to accomplish. But it also brought political consequences that none of us expected. These totally surprised me.

Soon after we turned off Desert Fox, we started to get really interesting reports from inside Iraq—from diplomatic missions and other people friendly to us—indicating that the attack had badly shaken the regime. They actually seemed shocked into paralysis.

Although they'd had suspicions that we would hit them when the inspectors walked out, it turns out that the absence of visible preparations for the strike and the approach of Ramadan seem to have lulled them into a lackadaisical approach to their own preparations. Somebody put out the word to move the equipment and documents, the way they normally did; but nobody was in a hurry to do it; so they got caught with their pants down. And they totally didn't expect us to take out the Ba'ath party headquarters and the intelligence headquarters—the "House of Pain," as Iraqis called it, because of all the torturing that went on in there.

For a time, they were so dazed and rattled they were virtually headless.

After an attack, we could usually expect defiant rhetoric and all kinds of public posturing and bluster. But there was none of that. And there were reports that people had cheered when the "House of Pain" was hit.

Some of us even began to wonder about the stability of the regime; and I

began to hear stories (told to my Arab friends by senior officers in the Republican Guard) that there may have been a move against it if the bombing had lasted a little while longer.

That we had really hurt them was confirmed again in January 1999, in Saddam's yearly Army Day speech, when he viciously lashed out at all the other Arabs—blaming them for all the harm they had sanctioned, threatening reprisals, calling regional monarchs “throne dwarfs.” These were all people he hoped would feel sorry for him—or at least for his people. Showing such fury toward them was unheard of; it meant we'd hurt him really bad.

ALL THIS got me thinking: What if we had actually tipped the scale here? What if we'd hit Saddam or his sons, and that had somehow spurred the people to rise up? What if the country imploded and we had to deal with the aftermath?

Before Desert Fox, we'd looked at the possibility that we would have to execute the takedown of Saddam; but we always thought that would come after he attacked a neighbor or Israel, used WMD again on his own people, or committed some other atrocity so outrageous we'd have no choice but to go in there and turn over the regime.

“But what if it just collapsed?” I began to ask myself.

It didn't take me long to figure out the answer to that: Somebody'd have to go in there to rebuild the country.

“Who?” I asked myself.

“As the CINC, I have a plan for militarily defeating Saddam. Doing that isn't going to be hard. But after we defeat him, who takes care of reconstruction and all the attendant problems?”

It was clear that we had to start looking hard at this possibility. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that if we didn't, we could find ourselves in deep trouble.

“What we need to do,” I realized, “is come together and work out a comprehensive and joint plan. We need to get the other agencies of government—not only CENTCOM and the DOD [Department of Defense], but the CIA, the State Department, and their Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and USAID, and everyone else with something to contribute. And we'd also have

to plan to bring in the UN, various NGOs, and Coalition members for this phase of the operation."

"Who's doing this?" I asked myself.

When I probed around Washington, I quickly learned that nobody was doing it; nor was there much interest in doing it.

"Then we have to create interest," I told myself. "We need to organize a conference, a seminar, or a war game that will spark people to generate an interagency plan for dealing with this issue. Out of this I can also develop a specifically CENTCOM plan, which would cover some of the more immediately practical issues."

I decided to organize a "war game" that presented several post-Saddam Iraq scenarios. The game—called "Desert Crossing"—was conducted in the Washington, D.C., area late in 1999 at Booz Allen, the contractor (who run secure games for the government); experts from all the relevant branches of government took part.

The scenarios looked closely at humanitarian, security, political, economic, and other reconstruction issues. We looked at food, clean water, electricity, refugees, Shia versus Sunnis, Kurds versus the other Iraqis, Turks versus Kurds, and the power vacuum that would surely follow the collapse of the regime (since Saddam had pretty successfully eliminated any local opposition). We looked at all the problems the United States faces in 2003 trying to rebuild Iraq. And when it was over, I was starting to get a good sense of their enormous scope and to recognize how massive the reconstruction job would be.

Desert Crossing gave us the ammunition we needed to define the post-Saddam problem, but that was only a start.

"Well, who's going to take the next step?" I asked.

The answer: Nobody. There was no interest in Washington in pursuing it. Most of the participants in the game were sympathetic; but none had any charter to develop a plan. They were more than willing to help us define the problem, maybe learn a little bit about what needed to be done; but nobody was in a position to sign up to anything. Post-Saddam Iraq was simply too far down the priority list of any agency with a reason to be interested in the problem.

You can't really blame them for this. Nobody saw Iraq as a really pressing threat. Saddam's military was down. Our policy was containment, the policy was succeeding, and we were whacking Saddam when he got out of line. At this stage of the game, there was a near zero likelihood that he could attack Kuwait, Iran, or Israel again. And there was no way he was going to initiate a serious attack against us, nor were we going to initiate anything major against him.

Besides, we had other, more pressing crises to manage. We were working the Kosovo problem, the Bosnia problem, the Israeli-Palestinian problem, the drug problem in Colombia . . . India-Pakistan, Korea . . . and much of Africa was going to hell.

So if you look at my inability to drum up interest in a post-Saddam Iraq in the light of what's going on right now, you have to ask how they could have passed it up. But back then, it just didn't seem high priority to anybody in Washington.

You also have to keep in mind the structural barrier to getting anything like that done in Washington. In Washington, there is no one place, agency, or force that directs interagency cooperation. The only such cooperation is on an ad hoc person-to-person or group-to-group basis. So if you have a problem like putting Iraq back together after Saddam, that requires the joint work of many government agencies (not to mention international agencies—NGOs and the UN), there's nowhere to start.

I could go to DOD. But where does DOD go? Possibly to the President's National Security Adviser. He or she might then interest the President. Or possibly someone will take the issue to a cabinet meeting and interest the President that way.

Failing that, you're in limbo. There's no way you can move the bureaucracy without action from the top.

OF COURSE *the problem did not go away. I knew then there was a very good chance it would come back to haunt us. Which meant that if Saddam's regime did collapse, "somebody" was going to get stuck with putting Humpty back together again.*

I knew who that “somebody” was likely to be. It was “us”—the military. I knew that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men were far from the best solution, but we would have to do until we came up with something better.

So I said to my guys, “We need to start planning on this.” And they did. But by then we were well into 2000 and I was coming to the end of my tour. And when I left CENTCOM (in mid-2000), the plan was nowhere near materializing.

I’m not sure where it went after I left.

As far as I can tell, the plan was pigeonholed. And by the time Iraqi Freedom rolled around, nobody in CENTCOM had ever heard of it. There’s no longer any corporate memory of it.

Meanwhile, we’re living through the fall of Saddam Hussein, and my concerns have come true. Since nobody in Washington had seriously planned for the consequences of the fall, the military—by default—got stuck with the nation building that followed it.

On February 11, 2003, a month before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Tony Zinni was called to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the subject of post-Saddam reconstruction planning. He followed a panel of Defense and State Department officials who’d just been heavily criticized by the committee for their obvious lack of serious attention to that critical phase.

In his own testimony, Zinni recounted the lessons learned from Desert Crossing, and continued by relating from his own numerous past experiences that defeating hostile forces militarily does not necessarily mean victory. In Zinni’s view, victory only comes when the defeated people see that they have a livable future and that they have some say in it.

He first learned this lesson as a young lieutenant in Vietnam.