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# General Anthony Zinni (ret.) on Staying Honest with the Troops and Translating Experience

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Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)

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# General Anthony Zinni (ret.) on Staying Honest with the Troops and Translating Experience

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Guest Author



*By Mie Augier and Major Sean F. X. Barrett*

This is the third part of our conversation series with General Anthony Zinni, USMC (ret.) on leadership, strategy, learning, and the art and science of warfighting. [Read Part One here](#) and [Part Two here](#).

**During an earlier conversation, one thing we touched upon was how to develop people who ask the right questions and do not fall victim to biases and simply project what they want to believe. Even if we managed to do so, what obstacles might we confront when trying to implement and apply concepts, doctrine, ideas, and strategy?**

Zinni: The system rewards certain things that may not be the things that are going to contribute to successful operational results. There is a natural friction between the service chiefs and the combatant commanders. Many of the service chiefs still think they take their forces to war, but it doesn't happen anymore. You can offer a lot of great ideas. You can write doctrine about the best ways to employ forces, but you need to present these concepts to the combatant commanders who are going to fight them. It does me no good to have four service chiefs tell me what their doctrine is if those doctrines don't mesh.

This built-in friction tells you we've got a screwed up system. If you started from scratch and said, "Okay, I want to build a military," you would not come up with the structure we have now, which is sort of self-defeating. Ever since the creation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947, look at how they have failed the president. Developing extraordinary conceptual ways of doing things and developing advanced theory is not enough. If you don't have the organization, strategy, structure, processes, capabilities, and systems to apply them in effective ways—more effectively than the guys you are going to fight—then it is pointless. It's just an academic drill.

### **What is your sense of the obstacles we were unable to overcome in Afghanistan?**

Zinni: It's interesting. There were four Presidents, 14 Secretaries of Defense, 10 CENTCOM commanders, and 18 U.S. commanders in Afghanistan. When you look at this mess, we have gone to "war by temps" as I call it. In World War II, if you were in command, you stayed there. When units went out, they stayed out. But in Vietnam, we went to individual replacement, which was a disaster. You had no unit cohesion. So, we went to unit rotation, and then we made the decision that the unit should only be out there six months. Then, you look at senior leadership above the units, and they rotate unbelievably fast. When I went out to Afghanistan to do an assessment in the tenth year of the war, I really wanted to see what problems this caused, and it was unbelievable. Everybody that comes in has a different approach, and it was driving everybody crazy, especially those that had been out there for multiple tours. When they'd go back out, it was like a different war: different objectives, different operational designs, different everything. I really think this way of doing business is part of the problem. The Taliban didn't go home. They were there the whole time, and they learned, like the bad guys in Vietnam. We, however, think these are all interchangeable parts, so we don't build any corporate memory.

I also didn't think the foundation we were building was as strong as we either thought it was or portrayed it to be. I'm a big believer that when you get into nation building, or counterinsurgency (COIN), or anything like that, the measure of success must be viable institutions. If I look around and see a corrupt government, an incompetent military, economic systems going nowhere, and some sort of corrupting institution—like the drug trade in Afghanistan—that is stronger than your institutions, and tribal structures and other institutions are stronger than national ones, you are not going to succeed. If institutions aren't there, or you aren't building them successfully and honestly assessing them, you can be deceived by the house you're building.

The other thing is if the enemy has a sanctuary and you don't do anything about it, then he can rearm, refit, reconstitute, and re-recruit. I saw that in North Vietnam, and we never really did anything major—an occasional bombing, but it wasn't serious. Then, Pakistan became the sanctuary. It was obvious those borders were completely porous. Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban set up on the other side of the border in Pakistan and were basically free to operate.

**What do you see as the strategic mistakes or pitfalls? You point to the lack of leadership and continuity as one.**

Zinni: You can never recover from the lack of any strategy. When the Rumsfeld DoD came in, before 9/11, they had a mission to transform the U.S. military to rely heavily on technology and less on manpower. Of course, they wanted to prove this by doing Iraq and Afghanistan with few troops. They discarded the war plan that called for 380,000 troops in Iraq and went with 130,000. They paid a big price for that. We never sealed the border, never controlled the population—all the things we had in the war plan that we knew we would run into.

In Afghanistan, they supported the Northern Alliance, which they thought was really cool. And the CIA guys rode on horseback with the Northern Alliance, and they were going to get AQ. That was the mission. We only sent in a Marine Expeditionary Unit and a couple of other forces, but when AQ got trapped in Tora Bora, they bought their way out. They bought off the Northern Alliance, and they beat feet into Pakistan. So, now our troops are in Afghanistan, AQ is in Pakistan, and you have no strategy beyond going in to get AQ and doing it the wrong way. And then, we stayed. There was no deliberate decision to rebuild Afghanistan. We just did what we've always done—mission creep—and we rolled into nation building without knowing what we were doing.

We had no strategy and never bothered developing one, but COIN and nation building became the strategy sort of by default. No administration—not the Bush administration, not the Obama administration—ever bought into it. No one ever looked at what it would cost, how doable it was, and what it would involve. We sort of rolled into something that no one ever made the deliberate decision to do. I also realized this turnover of units and commanders caused constant confusion and a lack of consistency and that nobody had a good picture of what the heck was going on. The CIA's picture was way different than the military's, and I don't know what was driving these differences.

**You talk about institutions. The power of institutions is such that they don't change quickly, and you can't build them overnight.**

Zinni: You have two problems. One is you're countering other institutions, and the institutions they had—tribalism, conservative interpretation of religion—were countering what we were trying to do. We never coopted them and never understood how to deal with them to diminish their power compared to the institutions we needed to build. It was a house with no foundation.

The second thing is we built a myth. We convinced a bunch of young girls and men that this was going to be something, that we were building a different kind of Afghanistan. It was never there. It was a myth, and they bought into it. And you saw things like "girls are going to school" and "guys are opening businesses" and "look, there's hairdressers," and we allowed ourselves—and them, which is the real tragedy—to be deceived by this façade. There was nothing behind it.

The other key question is whether the bulk of the population is willing to die for whatever you are selling them. This is a lesson I learned in a small hut in a village in Vietnam. The wife of the village chief with whom I was living said, “What is it that you want me and my son to die for?” If you can’t answer that question and you are giving the Kiwanis Club pitch to a woman who has seen 30 years of war, you have a problem.

Suppose there’s a guy in a village who joins the Afghan Army. Well, his cousin is a Talib, and in their traditional way, he might fight that cousin today, but he might cut a deal with him tomorrow. We’re the outsider. We come in with this sort of hubris that makes us think they’re embracing us to the point they’re totally rejecting their brothers and sisters who they’re fighting. Well, their tradition is to go tribe-to-tribe and cut deals. This is what the Taliban did and what we saw in the total collapse and surrender of the Afghan military and government. The tribes have always cut deals and shifted sides based on the conditions. To a tribe out in the middle of some valley, if you’re saying they’re supposed to die fighting the Taliban, they may ask, “Why? I can cut a deal with that Taliban chief, and he won’t bother me.”



Marine Gen Anthony Zinni, right, then-Commander-in-Chief, Central Command, testifies on Capitol Hill, Tuesday, March 3, 1998, before the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on military strategy and operational requirements. (Tyler Mallory/AP)

**We see what we want to believe sometimes.**

Zinni: That is true. We're all guilty of that sometimes. I used to tell my lieutenants back when I was a company commander, "Keep me honest because I'm going to be the one who sees the good stuff, and you have to be the guys to tell me what I don't see." Everybody wants to be the one who gives the boss good news, and you must build this trust so your subordinates can tell you, "Boss, let me tell you how it really is." It's hard to take sometimes because you get so invested.

Another big danger I found is that you fall in love with your plan. You thought about it, you developed it, and you know you're a genius and don't want to accept that something is flawed. Unless you've built some sort of internal red teaming into your command system and fostered an environment in which people are willing to come to you and tell you that, you're going to get into trouble.

**Is this part of our tendency to avoid mistakes and failures and our inability or unwillingness to learn from them?**

Zinni: There are a couple of problems. As I mentioned, one is our political system and the lack of corporate memory at the top, where you hope strategy would begin. Instead, you have this constant turnover, and we don't do a good job of passing anything forward, especially if parties change. There isn't much of a foundation anymore. There used to be. During the Cold War, strategies of containment and deterrence were consistent from administration to administration. Today, we are dealing with the byproducts of "war by temps." There isn't an ability to learn from your mistakes because you are changing out the people that made them, and you are bringing people in that are going to make them all over again.

The other thing, and I was guilty of it as a young officer, too, is young people join the military for an adventure. The idea that they are going off to war is exciting. I saw this when I retired. When the workup to Iraq and Afghanistan was taking place, I was asked to speak to some units, but they didn't want to hear what I had to say. Most of the officers there were like, "He's an old guy, kind of a naysayer. This is war. You have to be patriotic. This is our first time in." Then, after they got their fingers burned, they came back and saw things a little differently.

One thing with me and my generation, we were all fired up for Vietnam, even going back for multiple tours. It took until after the dust settled, when we were maybe senior majors and lieutenant colonels, that we were able to see things we couldn't see in the heat of being young company grade officers, when we were out there making our bones. I think that contributes to it, too.

**One thing about managing the enthusiasm of senior officers and commanders is how do you balance maintaining good troop morale and people thinking they are doing good work with some serious criticism and internal reflection concerning things that really need to be changed?**

Zinni: I think the first thing is to be honest with the troops because they aren't fools. They are fighting the war, they see it, they know what's happening. You have the generals that come out with this cheerleader approach and don't seem to be in touch with reality—the reality those troops are experiencing on the ground. It seems to me you need someone in those positions that listens to what the troops are saying, what they are experiencing, and you are making sure it's grounded in truth, not misperceptions. And after acknowledging it, you try to fix the problems they see.

The higher up you go, the less in touch with reality they can be. The real key to being a successful senior commander is to get down to those lower levels as much as you can. Get the feedback and acknowledge what they are seeing—that you know what is actually going on. And where there are issues, correct it. You are trying to get that view from the front lines that you need. You have to work hard to get it because there are so many things that get in the way. There are so many people around you and below you that try and screen you from all of that. You must be careful with that. It's like you need to have intelligence on yourself and on your organization. If you just take what's coming up the chain of command, you may not get the right picture, so you have to find a way to see and feel everything below that.

**Gen Gray, yourself, and others have this sense of humility or humbleness. This seems to be a rare quality or attitude, but if you don't have it, it seems more difficult to listen and learn.**

Zinni: Right, humility is important, but for those lacking it, I don't think it necessarily always comes from arrogance, although it can come across that way. I think it sometimes comes from insecurity, and that can come across as a lack of humility. I have seen senior officers who are around junior enlisted, and they are at a loss for words. They just don't know how to connect or take it beyond the first words. Sometimes, to try and not look embarrassed about being unable to communicate effectively, they kind of take an air that looks like a lack of humility. This isn't to say there aren't people who are not humble, but I do see a lot of senior officers who are very insecure when they find themselves in that environment. They don't know how to relate, and they didn't try to learn how to connect.

**How do we address the zero-defect culture and make-no-mistakes kind of attitude? When something goes wrong, commanders oftentimes tighten the screws, which dampens initiative. How do we address that?**

Zinni: That's hard to do because senior officers get scared and overreact. The knee-jerk reaction is over control. It is related to what I was studying in my dissertation—the commanders in World War II. Every one of them had something occur in their careers that today would have ended their careers. Nimitz ran a ship aground as a young officer. MacArthur was warned after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor to be prepared. Vinegar Joe Stillwell was always in trouble.

With Nimitz, his attitude was, this is all new to us—carrier operations, amphibious operations, and the like. We all have flaws. If a mistake is made honestly, and we can learn from it, I am not moving him. And he didn't. They were after him to fire Spruance and a number of other senior officers, and he wouldn't do it. He hung in there with them. And that doesn't seem to happen today. I don't know where that came in. When I was a second lieutenant and I checked into 6th Marines and got to my first battalion, the sergeant major told me a good Marine is going to have two or three non-judicial punishments. He isn't a Marine if he didn't have that. Today, if you have two or three minor offenses, they put you up for a discharge.

When I was the commanding officer of 9th Marines, my predecessor had made all the battalion commanders stand tall in front of him and explain every time a Marine did something minor, like having a little too much to drink out on the town. And then, when new Marines came in, my predecessor addressed them in the base theater and got in their face and said, "You better not do this, you better not do that." I couldn't believe this. My approach was, "Welcome to Okinawa. Let me tell you about all the things you can do here. Take care of each other. Use the buddy system. We want this to be positive." I wanted a more positive environment. It was also the relationships out in town, like with the Japanese police force and the bar owners' association. Every week, my battalion commanders and I went out to five bars. And besides wanting to know what's going on with the Marines and being out with them, I wanted to know all the bar owners. I said, "Look, I'm asking you for a favor: if a Marine is getting too loud or it looks like they had too much to drink, just give our courtesy patrol staff a call. They will come out and bring him back." I wanted to build relationships, and they loved it. It was all about getting everybody involved together and thinking about how to manage things constructively.

**Coming out of Vietnam, junior officers were fed up, and this spawned very enthusiastic, even heated, after-hours study group discussions that drove change, notably amongst the maneuverists. What parallels can we draw to that competitive mindset as we regroup from Iraq and Afghanistan and prepare for the next fight? How can we provide the mechanisms to facilitate similar groups today? How can we foster that same type of mindset?**

Zinni: I think if you had those experiences as a junior officer, it's kind of seared into your soul. You have to be a little careful though because some lessons didn't necessarily translate to the highest level or to the potential "big one" against the Soviets. Translating a lot from Vietnam was difficult, but it did give us a lot of insight into how we needed to repair our military from a training, education, manning, structure, and standards perspective. I think it gave us a much better perspective than the generals in Iraq and Afghanistan who experienced combat for the first time at the colonel and above level. They didn't have the sense of what it was like as a lieutenant and a captain out there on the ground. I saw that in Afghanistan and Iraq when I did assessments out there. I could relate very easily to those sergeants and captains I was out there with, more so than I could with the generals who didn't have that kind of gut experience and didn't understand how some of the decisions they



were making or not making were impacting things down there at that level. That becomes hard because it's not the fault of the generals who weren't involved in combat until they were at that senior level, but I do think something is missing when you don't have that perspective.

One thing I saw coming out of Vietnam that didn't work well was that many colonels and maybe even general officers continued to fight like they did in Vietnam as captains. They still thought they were fighting in some jungle with air superiority. You'd watch a battalion commander get in a helicopter, go over his unit, try to direct them, and you tried to tell him that his helicopter would be toast if he did that in this environment. It wasn't that way in Vietnam. It made sense back then, so they had bad habits they couldn't transition out of.

There are certain things you can take out of past experiences—many of them very personal, very visceral—but there are many things you must be careful with translating into a different environment.

*General Anthony Zinni served 39 years as a U.S. Marine and retired as Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Central Command, a position he held from August 1997 to September 2000. After retiring, General Zinni served as U.S. special envoy to Israel and the Palestinian Authority (2001-2003) and U.S. special envoy to Qatar (2017-2019). General Zinni has held numerous academic positions, including the Stanley Chair in Ethics at the Virginia Military Institute, the Nimitz Chair at the University of California, Berkeley, the Hofheimer Chair at the Joint Forces Staff College, the Sanford Distinguished Lecturer in Residence at Duke University, and the Harriman Professorship of Government at the Reves Center for International Studies at the College of William and Mary. General Zinni is the author of several books, including Before the First Shots Are Fired, Leading the Charge, The Battle for Peace, and Battle Ready. He has also had a distinguished business career, serving as Chairman of the Board at BAE Systems Inc., a member of the board and later executive vice president at DynCorp International, and President of International Operations for M.I.C. Industries, Inc.*

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Featured Image: KIN BLUE, OKINAWA (Feb. 9, 2020) – Marines with Charlie Company, Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion 5th Marines, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, and Japanese Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade service members communicate during a simulated bilateral small-boat raid on Kin Blue, Okinawa, Japan, Feb. 9, 2020. (Official Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Audrey M. C. Rampton)