

An Interview with General (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal



What did we get right and what did we get wrong in Afghanistan and Iraq?

McChrystal: In both cases we didn't understand either the problem or our objectives going in. In Afghanistan in 2001 we went in on obviously very short notice in response to the attacks on September 11th. There was a rich history in Afghanistan—in which the United States had been deeply involved—and yet we didn't really go to school on that. Not only did we not understand the culture of Afghanistan, but we did not really understand the players in Afghanistan—the former warlords, the leaders that had fought against the Soviets—who had become such important players once the

Taliban regime was defeated. Although we understood in very broad strokes the Pakistani and Iranian positions, we didn't understand the nuances; we didn't understand the long-existing issues and concerns that they have. So as we started to execute a policy that on a superficial level seemed very logical, we ran into pressures, forces, interests, and equities of people that are, I won't say immovable, but very difficult to move. The entire western world was very surprised by that or at least unprepared to deal with it. Afghanistan in particular was a case of finding a problem of much greater complexity, much deeper roots, and much more difficult issues than we appreciated.

Iraq was different; we had time to think about it. Iraq was a war of choice versus a war of reaction. And yet, interestingly enough, we didn't understand the problem there either. Most leaders knew about the Kurds, Sunni, and Shia. But once we got inside we found that the dynamics were actually far more complex. The idea of removing the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and replacing it with a government of our making, and the functions of state just continuing on was based on a fundamentally flawed assumption. We also made the flawed assumption that we would be welcomed as liberators. In one sense we were. And we were initially welcomed as liberators by people who were not happy with Saddam Hussein, but we were not welcomed as occupiers. Once we came to be perceived as occupiers and not liberators all of the political and

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economic frustrations came to the forefront and were pasted on us. We just were not prepared for that.

What lessons should we have learned from Afghanistan and Iraq?

McChrystal: In the case of Afghanistan, immediately after 9/11, in terms of military action we should have done nothing initially. I now believe we should have taken the first year after 9/11 and sent 10,000 young Americans—military, civilians, diplomats—to language school; Pashtu, Dari, Arabic. We should have started to build up the capacity we didn't have. I would have spent that year with diplomats traveling the world as the aggrieved party. We had just been struck by al-Qaeda. I would have made our case around the world that this is a global problem and that the whole world has to deal with it. I would have spent the full year in preparation. I would not have been worried about striking al-Qaeda that year; they weren't going anywhere. We could have organized, we could have built the right coalitions, we could have done things with a much greater level of understanding than we did in our spasmodic response. Politically, doing what I described would have been very difficult. But I believe that kind of preparation was needed.

With Iraq, even though we had from 1990 on to prepare, we didn't really dissect that problem in the way we should have either. Once the decision was made to invade we focused far too much on the invasion and dealing with fortress Baghdad. Phase 4, and even beyond Phase 4, the permanent situation in the Middle East with a different regime in Iraq should have been something we spent a lot of time thinking about. The military part

was the easy part. There was no doubt we could do the military part. What there was a doubt about was, once you remove one of the key players in a region—and one could argue that Saddam Hussein was such a key player—you change the dynamic in the whole region. We were not ready for that. We really needed to be thinking about that and building a diplomatic coalition. We ended up getting a different Iran than we might have wanted and we certainly have a different Syria than we wanted. Of course you can't say Syria would not have happened without the invasion of Iraq, but we certainly should have thought through the unanticipated consequences of our actions and been better prepared for the things that happened.

What would you have done differently in Syria?

McChrystal: It's easy to criticize American foreign policy in Syria. It has been very difficult. In retrospect it's clear that one of the things we are paying a high price for is reduced American credibility in the region. After 9/11 initially we responded very forcefully both militarily and diplomatically. But then we showed the region just how long the dog's leash was. Once they saw not only all that we could do but also all we could not, or would not do, they saw the limits of American power and the limits of American patience. Suddenly our ability to influence the region declined. And as we started to show political fatigue and frustration, people in the region started to make new calculations. If you look at the behavior of the various countries—some former allies, the Saudis for instance—they have recalibrated their relationship with us and their role in the region, because they perceive

that going forward the United States will have a different role than in the past. That has weighed very heavily in Syria. We have signaled very precisely all the things we will not do. Once you signal all the things you will not do, your opponent has the luxury of saying, "I know where my safe zone is." That was probably a mistake. There needs to be some ambiguity about what we will and won't do so that our foes are in doubt, and don't know where we'll stop.

Would you then argue against "red lines?"

McChrystal: Red lines are dangerous things. Anytime you draw a red line you invite your adversary to call your bluff. If they do cross it you have to be prepared to act. If you don't act, you pay a big price in credibility with not just your foes but with your allies as well.

Red lines tell them exactly just how far that they can go without fear of retaliation.

McChrystal: Like with Dean Acheson's Perimeter Speech when the Secretary of State left South Korea outside of the U.S. protection perimeter. Everybody points to that, and whether or not that was the cause of the Korean War, it points out the danger in red lines.

What can we do today to defeat ISIL or the Islamic State?

McChrystal: The Islamic State is the symptom, not the cause. Some argue that if the Islamic State were eliminated the problem would be solved. I would counter-argue that if the Islamic State suddenly vanished, most of

the problems in the region would still be there and they would be just as intractable as they are now. The Islamic State is a reaction to the chaos and the weakness of the existing regimes in the region, the lack of legitimacy, not just of the Bashar al-Assad government, but in Iraq and elsewhere. The weakness of these regimes is the absence of a compelling narrative that signals to the people that there will be political, economic, and social opportunities in the future. ISIL is a rejection of the status quo. That is also what the Arab Spring was about. It wasn't a move to democracy, it was a rejection of the status quo. The great tragedy of the Arab Spring was that there was no compelling narrative around which the people could coalesce. There was no pan-Arab nationalism as there was in the past, nor any other compelling narrative. The only counters to the ISIL jihad narrative have been the narratives of status quo organizations and governments that, in the minds of populations, are, at best, 20th century entities. People don't want to maintain that; even though they might not want ISIL they haven't seen another option yet. ISIL must be contained for the moment and ultimately destroyed over time, but most importantly the region needs a narrative that is compelling and credible to the populations. That narrative must include a vision of what the region will look like in 25 years. Of course the vision won't get everything right because things change. But there seems to be a sense in the region today that leaders don't know where things are going. So many of the stabilizing factors have changed. Those autocratic regimes may not have been good but they were stable, as was the presence of the United States since we were so tied to the flow of oil. Today a mother in Ohio is not going to be nearly as willing to send her daughter or son to protect

the lanes of oil delivery in the Middle East as she might have been in 1978 because we frankly don't need Middle East oil today. That's not lost on people in the region. They believe they need some new kind of believable and credible defense and security structure that looks durable.

What can the United States do to support that new kind of credible and durable security structure?

McChrystal: We cannot retreat from the region. We cannot say, "We're done. We didn't enjoy Iraq or Afghanistan so we're going home." I don't think that is our intent, but there is a difference between the message you transmit and the message that is received. We transmitted a very nuanced message that was received in a very stark and un-nuanced way; that the United States is leaving. That the United States wanted a nuclear deal with Iran and now that they have it, Iran can do what it wants. That the United States is not going to help contain Iran. We have sent an unintentional message that what happens in Syria and Iraq is their problem. It's natural for us to feel that way. And if the region thinks that we are disengaging they will assume the Europeans are disengaging as well, because most of the Europeans don't have the capacity to remain without American support. There is an assumption that the United States is not going to be a significant player in the region. When they see Russia come into Syria that seems like confirmation. In 1973 Henry Kissinger artfully maneuvered the Soviets out of the region. The region has been relatively stable since then. Now the Russians are back and the Americans seem to be on the way out, and unwilling to play a major role. Everybody is trying to figure

out what the future is going to look like. In every country in the region the people are trying to recalculate. I watch what Jordan is doing; I watch Saudi Arabia and Yemen. They are all trying to figure out how to deal in this new environment.

Should the United States step up its presence and be more proactive in the region?

McChrystal: Yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean a larger military presence. It means a guaranteed level of participation and a willingness, when necessary, to apply strong economic and military pressure to show that we are a player in the region; that we are a permanent fact of life here. To most people that is a desirable thing. They will always complain about us. But like America in Europe after World War II we were a very stabilizing factor.

What do you see as the starkest, most challenging characteristics of the emerging global threat environment?

McChrystal: There are two characteristics of concern. First is the reemergence of great power nationalism; the rise of China, the reemergence of Russia, both with enough power and self-confidence to go back to traditional nationalist objectives. Russia is trying to move back into areas in Ukraine and perhaps even into the Baltic States, to try to reassert itself. That is a natural ebb and flow of power going back hundreds of years. I don't think we saw the end of history in 1989; rather we are back on the track of history. Russia and China are major factors, and they are enough that we might not be in a post-modern period of history. A European war is not unthinkable. People who want to believe a war in Europe is

not possible might be in for a surprise. We have to acknowledge great power politics; we can't pretend they are gone.

The second area of concern is that technology and globalization have been great equalizers. Modern technology has given individuals extraordinary power. An individual with an automatic weapon can be extraordinarily lethal. An individual with a weapon of mass destruction, or a small number of drones or precision weapons can be extraordinarily lethal. Everyone now has precision strike capability; you can buy a cheap drone and put a hand grenade on it and you've got precision strike. It's really difficult to defend against that. Suddenly the security situation has changed; anyone with a keyboard is a cyber warrior. The problem with the rise in power of these individuals—which really didn't exist in the past—is that individuals in very small groups have a disproportionate ability to act. But they don't have the vulnerabilities of a nation state. Nuclear power and nuclear strategy were always based on holding each other at risk. The problem is you can't hold an individual or terrorist group at risk because you might not be able to find them—or they may not care. As a consequence, deterrence in its traditional sense doesn't work. How can you prevent people from doing harmful things if you can't deter them? In law enforcement it's the risk of being caught and put in prison. A terrorist group might not care about being caught, or being imprisoned. They may not even care about dying. The only deterrents available are either massive protection—enormous amounts of security—or some way to identify and either persuade them or physically prevent them from acting.

We have never faced this challenge before. Technology has created the problem because

it empowers individuals to do unprecedentedly destructive things. On the other hand technology empowers society to track and monitor people as never before. We are beginning an era in which our ability to leverage technology to track people and control populations is going to create a lot of tension; I think we are going to see a lot more population control measures. We are going to have to give up a lot more of our precious civil rights than most of us imagine because we want security. In other countries that haven't had the freedom that we have, they may not notice as much, but we are entering a period where we will have to make those choices. And the choices are likely to go in the way of surrendering civil rights for security.

On a different subject, how would you characterize the distinctive qualities of special operations forces? What makes them special?

McChrystal: It is important to be clear that special operations forces are not better operations forces, they are special operations forces. That is one of the great misunderstandings of special operations forces, and special operators have been guilty of that as well. They were originally formed to do specific things; the Rangers were formed to do raiding. The size of a Ranger company in World War II was based on the capacity of landing craft because they were going to conduct raids into coastal areas. The Green Berets were originally designed to work behind enemy lines and they were formed in twelve person teams with specific capability to build up guerrilla forces against an existing government. We have entered an era where what we've done through selection and a lot of other factors has turned today's special forces into supermen and superwomen.

The distinguishing characteristic of special operating forces is that they are more elite, better trained, uniquely equipped; and they are all of these things.

The danger is when we begin to believe that because they are better trained or equipped, we should use them for any task we think is important. Eventually we want to turn to them for any tasking; because why shouldn't we just use the better force? Special operations forces are indeed truly exceptional; but as we begin using them for more and more things, we will eventually destroy them by deploying them for the wrong tasks. And we will have misplaced confidence in their ability to do everything and anything.

What does this mean for special operations forces? Conventional forces are developing a lot of the same capabilities as those previously associated with special operations forces. Special operations forces need much greater knowledge of the environments in which they will fight. Back when they were formed, during World War II, the Jedburghs were going into Europe, so they were prepped for that. The special forces that were formed under President John F. Kennedy were regionally focused; they were taught foreign languages, and the idea was that they would know the people, they would know the culture, and they would be able to operate effectively because of that knowledge. But then we started deploying those groups all over the world and they lost their unique specialized knowledge and skills. They still had a unique organization but there were lots of things they could not do in an area that people who really had long service, long experience in that culture could do. We are going to have to get back to that. We are going to have to make language training and cultural training in special operations forces an

absolute requirement and language training in regular forces a norm. Many like to identify the special operator with kicking down doors and martial arts with advanced weapons. Those skills have actually been commoditized. We can train anybody to do those things. In Iraq particularly we found that was the easiest part of what we did. Not to say that it was easy, but it was by far the easiest. The hardest part was knitting together the intelligence and the various organizations needed to form a team that could pull it all together. That was much harder. We have a fascination with big-shouldered, big-knuckled commandos which threatens to force all special operations forces into a niche that does not include all the other things they have to do.

Can you explain the distinction special operators make between the direct approach and the indirect approach? And what is the importance of the indirect approach?

McChrystal: The direct approach is a raid on a target. The capacity you need has to be pretty good; like a bullet shot out of a gun. The real value though is in the gun and in the person aiming it. When you aim, when you pull the trigger, that's the important part.

The indirect approach on the other hand is when you are essentially leveraging things, for example leveraging the feelings of the local population. You are trying to leverage the capacity, or increase the capacity, of local defense forces. Or if you're in a guerrilla insurgency mode, you are trying to support an insurgency and leverage that. The indirect approach allows you to get much more scale than you can get with the direct approach alone. A few people if trained properly can have massive effect. More importantly if you

use the indirect approach effectively, the local population you are training is owning and solving its own problems. This is hard to do, but if you don't do it, the moment you're out of there, there is a huge gap in capacity.

There have been times when the indirect approach has worked extraordinarily well. The fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan leveraged the natural resentment of the Afghans toward the Soviet occupiers. We leveraged that frustration to create opposition movements. We enabled them with arms and money. And they defeated the Soviet Union and drove them out. On the surface it looks as though for a relatively small investment, and no Americans killed, we beat the Soviet Union. We gave the Soviets their Vietnam. In so doing though, we changed Afghanistan. We created these warlord groups that fought a civil war that then allowed the rise of the Taliban. We created problems that we are now facing. Maybe they were foreseeable, but we certainly didn't foresee them. Regardless, this was a classic case of using leverage, and shows how the indirect approach is not only more efficient, ultimately, but more durable, if you get it right.

Do special operations forces have a comparative advantage with respect to the indirect approach?

McChrystal: They should, because special operations forces typically are older, more mature, have longer service, and more experience. If they've received language training, and if they have had multiple tours in a country, they can be really effective. If they have not had these, it makes things much harder.

Two decades ago John Arquilla wrote "it takes a network to defeat a network." If our

adversary is a network, how do we become a network to defeat them?

McChrystal: My interpretation of "it takes a network to defeat a network" is that we have to connect all the different parts of our government and our capacities in order to do a number of important things. First we have to gather information, so that if somebody steps on the foot the head knows it, the whole body knows it. We also have to be able to pass capacity; when we get information, we can't just rely on the capacity at that point; the entire capacity of the network must be able to apply resources of every type—diplomatic, military, and economic—against the problem as and where it arises. We have to learn more quickly because if each individual or each part of the network learns every one of the bitter lessons of fighting an insurgency or terrorism, it's just too slow. We can't afford to keep relearning the same lessons. The whole organization has to learn. You might think that we do learn, but as organizations—and even individual organizations are often siloed internally—it's hard to do that. When organizations are separate, and not really networked, it is almost impossible. All the information we needed to prevent the 9/11 attack existed within the U.S. government. We just couldn't connect the dots. It is easy to say this, and that's exactly what we have to do. If I were training people I would train people who can make networks work. People networks, not just digital connections, but person-to-person networks.

Do you see any promise in the whole-of-government approach? What was your experience with the whole-of-government

approach during your time in government service?

McChrystal: Everybody agrees with the concept philosophically. I did a project after I retired with a Yale immunologist comparing counterinsurgency to the human immune system, particularly in its reaction to HIV/AIDS. It is extraordinarily similar. The human immune system is amazing at identifying the million potential infections that it's subjected to and then reacting to them, and learning from each experience. If you have an infection, your body learns from the experience and maintains the ability to combat it in the future. That's building up immunity and is how vaccinations work.

The whole-of-government approach is absolutely essential, but it's really challenging, for all the reasons we are familiar with. Everyone says we need to work on a whole-of-government basis; but failure starts with being out of alignment. We get to the National Security Council and say "we have to defeat al-Qaeda." Everybody agrees. We all walk out thinking we agree. But every organization has a different definition of what that means. Everyone therefore has a different set of actions in mind. And in many cases those actions are not only not aligned, sometimes they are conflicting. The individuals and individual agencies each think they are doing the right thing, but they're not aligned. There is no forcing function in the U.S. government to align them. Ask yourself, "Who in the U.S. government is in charge of the fight against ISIL?" The answer is, "the president." Then ask yourself, "Who is his agent?" The answer is, no one. Although some individuals may be more involved than others, there is no one officer below the president with true tasking authority; to direct the

CIA, the Department of Defense, and local police to work together. Officials can cajole, they can ask, but no one can direct other agencies to align. So achieving the whole-of-government approach, moving people away from inertia, moving people away from equities that they think are important, getting different personalities to work together, is extremely hard. Because responsibility is bifurcated, individuals don't think that they are ultimately responsible for the outcome. They want a good outcome, but they are not responsible for it. If the outcome isn't good they can blame it on someone else, or say "That's too bad, we didn't achieve a whole-of-government approach." Government employees don't get yearly bonuses based on the company bottom line. It is insidious that our structures, our cultures, and our incentive systems don't drive us to the outcomes we all want.

How did the "team of teams" approach come about.

McChrystal: "Team of teams" is a term that we gave to a set of lessons and associated behaviors that SOF learned in the fight in Iraq between 2003 and 2008. That was my term there, but the lessons have been sustained. It was an adaptation to the fact that we were structured and procedurally and culturally built on habits based on the pursuit of traditional terrorist organizations. Traditional terrorist organizations are hierarchical, pyramid-shaped organizations with tight control and a set of unique attributes, in some ways very similar to a U.S. corporation. We were designed to go after that kind of organization. Al-Qaeda was organized like that, and still is.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was different; it was al-Qaeda 2.0. AQI was born in 2003, and

built on the proliferation of information technology. Suddenly with cell phones, computers, and information technology in everybody's hands, AQI acted differently. It did not act like a pyramidal hierarchy. We kept trying to draw them in to a traditional structure and track them that way, because they "had to be that way." But they weren't. They were a network changing constantly, that operated under general directions from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. But they operated more according to his general intent. They inherited some of the attributes of the old centralized organization—being able to focus their efforts. But they had all the advantages of a network, learning constantly, adapting, being extraordinarily resilient. They were hard to hurt, because every time we took out key players, the organization adapted around them, no problem. We became the "team of teams." We had small teams, five and ten man teams that were the best that have ever been fielded in history. But they did not equal the sum of their parts because they were all separated—different cultures, different processes. We had all this capacity but it wasn't aligned to operate in a coordinated fashion. When I first took over the first thing I did was to apply traditional management, command and control; you assemble all your pieces, tell everybody what to do, the headquarters knows everything, information technology allows you to compile it. "I'm going to run this factory really well because I see everything and I have all these wonderful operators." But things happen too rapidly, and things are too complex to try and run everything centrally. This gets to John Arquilla's point; the operation has to become a network that operates in a fundamentally different way. Information has to flow laterally. There is still a role for a chain of command and for

hierarchy, but that role shifts from having a decisionmaker at the top of the operational sequence, with information going up, decisions getting made, directives going down and getting executed. The "team of teams" approach takes the central headquarters out of it. The organization operates much more laterally and starts to make decisions based upon common shared consciousness, which information technology enables allowing everybody to know the big picture as well as their local picture. Then you can push decisionmaking way down.

The reason you couldn't push decisionmaking down the command chain previously is that no one had the big picture; so they didn't know how to support the commander's vision. Technology just wasn't sufficient. Generals in World War I commanded from the rear, in the chateaus, because that's where the communications lines ran to. Today not only can you communicate with the commander from anywhere, you can communicate with everybody. And when everybody is informed, everybody can make decisions at their level with contextual confidence in what they're doing. Then you have to unlock them and let them make decisions. You have to make it a self-reinforcing network, and the role of the chain of command changes from making those big decisions to orchestrating this process; oiling the machine, increasing its speed, speeding it up, and slowing it down.

But also encouraging successful experiences and learning from the unsuccessful ones.

McChrystal: That's right; fixing broken pieces that don't work, making sure information flows, that you are learning every time. We

encouraged conversation and learning across the organization. This is a dramatic departure from the way we operated in the past. After the changes the organization worked with much greater speed. It learned much faster. It still made some mistakes, but so does every organization, network or hierarchy. But it could now approach the speed of the environment it was working within, because it was so much closer to the problems as they arose and the changes as they were detected.

How can the incoming administration, whichever it is, apply these principles to deal more effectively with the velocity of decisionmaking and adaptability in the way you described?

McChrystal: We are going to have to make some major changes. Some in structure, in the government, but more in process and culture. I just testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee about putting cross-functional teams into the Pentagon under the Secretary of Defense. That is a step, but it will not be a panacea. The first response is always, "I'm going to get good people, put them in the various departments across the government, and make things happen." But unless we operate differently, each one will try to fix their part of the problem. The new administration will take the first six months or a year, and get good people, but the situation won't improve. Again, not because the people are bad people, but the situation won't improve. Two or three years into the new administration, we will still have all the same gaps and seams with nobody responsible for them. Then we will change people, again, and go through the same thing.

Unless we step back and implement a fundamentally different approach, and create a

fundamentally different environment, nothing will ultimately change. Sometimes you need new organizations or structural changes, but I am always a little suspicious of those because they are never as effective as you expect them to be. Process and culture are more important. But someone will have to drive that hard and tell people what is being done and why. It cannot be subtle, and might even be frightening. None of the presidential candidates has mentioned this at all. None of the campaigns has touched this because what I'm talking about is extremely difficult. Making government more effective, particularly in the national security realm, is going to require a forceful and determined approach. It will break china and likely hurt people's feelings. But if it isn't done.... Look at what is happening in the corporate world; the companies that aren't making these changes... Look at what is happening to these behemoths that have scale, good professionals, and processes that have worked for a long time; suddenly they are looking the other way and "Boom!" Amazon.com crushes them. Uber comes in and crushes them. The new companies are operating with different mindsets and processes. It's an asymmetrical fight. The big organizations not only have their time-worn habits, it's hard to turn the ship around because it is so big. Just 25 years ago, just being big was good enough, because size and scale created barriers to entry. But one after another, look at Sears and Roebucks, Walmart, Chrysler under stress. All these big corporations are getting pounded even though they are pretty good at what they do.

But they're just not adapting to the emerging environment.

McChrystal: That's right. They're playing football and suddenly they are on the basketball court. It is really frustrating for them. It's not their fault. It's just their reality.

It seems like we have the wrong mind-set; war and peace, when it's neither of those the way we used to think of them. What we are in is more like perpetual struggle. In the 1990s two Chinese Air Force colonels wrote something called "Unrestricted Warfare." They seemed to get it.

McChrystal: Yes, I did read that. The Russians may get it also, though I haven't read enough on current Russian thinking to know for sure. I'm watching their actions, for example what they did in Crimea and are still doing in Ukraine, particularly on the tactical level. We didn't see the problem that way when we invaded Iraq or Afghanistan. When I would go to the Pentagon in late summer 2002, and speak to people planning the invasion of Iraq, I was really surprised, I had no idea they were doing that. And as I observed the planning process, I asked myself "Does anybody know what we're talking about?"

We were completely focused on how many ships and planes would be required over there. We got so wrapped around the axle on deployment and mobilization, we never stepped back and considered, "Wait a minute. We're about to go to war." **PRISM**