

# Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Captain Mark E. Bojan\*

*If we were the best of the best, why were such attacks not disappearing, but in fact increasing? Why were we unable to defeat an underresourced insurgency? Why were we losing?<sup>2</sup>*

## I. Introduction

“This isn’t a war story,” cautions retired Army General Stanley McChrystal in the introduction to *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*.<sup>3</sup> “Far beyond soldiers, it is a story about big guys and little guys, butterflies, gardeners, and chess masters. The reader will meet slimy toads, mythical beasts, clanging machines, and sensitive ecosystems.”<sup>4</sup> *Team of Teams* is an after-action report delivered in the engaging style of *Freakonomics*.<sup>5</sup> It is also a thought-provoking look through the eyes of a senior commander at the historical development of organizational management models and the effectiveness of those models in the twenty-first century. Leaders tempted to reach for a bigger hammer would be wise to consider General McChrystal’s hard-won lesson in problem-solving.<sup>6</sup>

In 2004, General McChrystal commanded the Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq (the Task Force).<sup>7</sup> “[B]y any objective standard we were the finest special operations fighting force in the world—‘the best of the best.’”<sup>8</sup> The Task Force was pitted against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the “most prominent and savage of the many terrorist operations that had sprung up in the wake of the U.S. invasion.”<sup>9</sup> General McChrystal gives the tale of the tape:

On paper, the confrontation between AQI and our Task Force should have been no contest. We had a large, well-trained, superbly equipped force,

while AQI had to recruit locals and smuggle in foreign fighters one by one through dangerous, unreliable ratlines. We enjoyed robust communications technology, while they were often dependent on face-to-face meetings and letters delivered by courier to minimize the risk of detection. Our fighters had persevered through the most demanding training in the history of special operations; theirs had attended a smattering of madrassas scattered across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. We could, at will, tap into an unmatched well of firepower, armored vehicles and cutting-edge surveillance; their technology consisted of [Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)] assembled in safe-house basements from propane tanks and expired Soviet mortars.<sup>10</sup>

The Task Force’s advantages seemed overwhelming. However, the reality was that they were unable to prevent AQI from carrying out devastating terror attacks that inflicted enormous loss of life. “The tragedy of the September 30 sewage plant attack was an unwelcome reminder that, despite our pedigree, our gadgets, and our commitment, things were slipping away from us.”<sup>11</sup> In examining this improbable situation, *Team of Teams* provides a fascinating explanation of why the fight against AQI was a new kind of war that had to be fought in a new way.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> STANLEY MCCHRISTAL WITH TANTUM COLLINS, DAVID SILVERMAN AND CHRIS FUSSELL, *TEAM OF TEAMS: NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT FOR A COMPLEX WORLD* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See generally STEVEN D. LEVITT & STEPHEN J. DUBNER, *FREAKONOMICS: A ROGUE ECONOMIST EXPLORES THE HIDDEN SIDE OF EVERYTHING* (2005) (using detailed discussion of historical examples to illustrate the application of economic principles).

<sup>6</sup> ABRAHAM H. MASLOW, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SCIENCE: A RECONNAISSANCE* (1966), at 15 (“I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”).

<sup>7</sup> MCCHRISTAL, *supra* note 1, at 3, 18. General McChrystal also commanded the Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq (Task Force’s parent organization, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which had been organized years earlier in response to the catastrophic failure of the attempted rescue of American hostages in Iran in 1980. *Id.* at 48-49; see also Mark Bowden, *The Desert One Debacle*, *THE ATLANTIC*, May 2006,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/304803/> (discussing the failed rescue attempt and the tragic series of events that led to the deaths of eight U.S. servicemembers).

<sup>8</sup> MCCHRISTAL, *supra* note 1, at 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 19. On September 30, 2004, in a meticulously planned and tightly coordinated operation, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) suicide bombers drove two vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) into a crowd of locals gathered to celebrate the opening of a new, American-built sewage pumping plant in Baghdad. *Id.* at 13-17. Coalition forces opened fire on a third VBIED, causing it to detonate prematurely. *Id.* at 17. However, the attack resulted in the deaths of at least thirty five children, with ten Americans and 140 Iraqis wounded. *Id.* at 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> The conflict provides context, but the real value of *Team of Teams* lies in the broader application of the lessons learned. The Army has taken these lessons to heart. See generally U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY TRAINING AND DOCTRINE COMMAND, PAM. 525-3-1, *THE U.S. ARMY OPERATING CONCEPT: WIN IN A COMPLEX WORLD* (31 Oct. 2014) (incorporating the concept of complexity discussed throughout *Team of Teams* into the Army’s strategic development plans for 2020-2040).

## II. One of These Things Is Not Like the Other

The Task Force was initially organized in accordance with standard Army doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Unable to account for AQI's success in the face of what should have been overwhelming opposition, the Task Force tried to identify exactly what it was that made AQI so effective. "We examined a litany of possible variables—the history of the region, the virulence of AQI's ideology, and the no-holds-barred tactics they adopted—but none could adequately account for what we were seeing on the ground."<sup>14</sup> A key insight came when Task Force staff used low-tech whiteboards to diagram connections and relationships in AQI's organizational structure. They were convinced that the familiar structures of conventional military units must be present, but the reality proved to be something new and entirely unexpected:

[I]n place of the straight lines and right angles of a military command, we found ourselves drawing tangled networks that did not resemble any organizational structure we had ever seen. The unfamiliar patterns that blossomed on our whiteboards seemed chaotic and riddled with contradictions—taking them in was like reading a technical document in a foreign language.<sup>15</sup>

Critically, the networked nature of AQI had apparently not been designed, but had instead "evolved through ongoing adaptation" to take advantage of its operating environment.<sup>16</sup> But what drove AQI's adaptation? What conditions make having a small, networked organization an advantage in a military conflict against a large, traditionally-organized enemy?

For AQI, the short answer was that the technological advances of the last fifty years had made information available instantly and globally, resulting in an unprecedented level of interconnectedness. "AQI was successful because the environment allowed it to be."<sup>17</sup> General McChrystal observed that although the Task Force was the best staffed

and equipped special operations force in the world, "we were not—as an organization—the best suited for that time and place."<sup>18</sup> The root of the problem the Task Force faced was that the "twenty-first century is a fundamentally different operating environment than the twentieth."<sup>19</sup>

The challenge for the Task Force was how to adapt to this environment to get back into the fight. General McChrystal describes the Task Force as a "veritable leviathan in comparison with AQI. How do you train a leviathan to improvise?"<sup>20</sup>

## III. Prediction Versus Adaptation

To answer that question, *Team of Teams* examines the origins of organizational management models. In the military context, the drive has historically been toward efficiency, to allow troops and their commanders to do the most with the fewest resources.<sup>21</sup> Efficiency promotes predictability. By eliminating variables, commanders are better able to predict what forces are necessary to win the fight.<sup>22</sup>

On the civilian side, efficiency in business translates to profit. Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management" movement had an enormous impact on worldwide industrial development throughout the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> As Taylor's ideas bled over into government and military operations, the drive to create more efficient fighting forces only increased.<sup>24</sup>

Over time, Taylor's concept of workers as fundamentally lazy, unthinking cogs in a machine has largely been left behind.<sup>25</sup> "Nevertheless, Taylor's *foundational* belief—the notion that an effective enterprise is created by commitment to efficiency, and that the role of the manager is to break things apart and plan 'the one best way'—remains relatively unchallenged."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, says General McChrystal, Taylor would have been delighted to tour the Task Force's facilities in Iraq and see the clockwork operation of the forces there.<sup>27</sup> However, despite the greatly increased operational tempo of

<sup>13</sup> Readers from all walks of life will likely be familiar with traditional organizational charts that depict a single leader at the top, with successive, branching areas of subordinate command and responsibility as one reads down the chart. *See generally* U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 6-0, MISSION COMMAND (17 May 2012) (C2, 12 Mar. 2014); U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, PAM. 10-1, ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY (14 June 1994) (providing multiple examples of typical military organizational charts).

<sup>14</sup> MCCRYSTAL, *supra* note 1, at 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* "It was more than just chat rooms and YouTube: AQI's very structure—networked and nonhierarchical—embodied this new world." *Id.* at 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 34-36.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 36-42. *See generally* FREDERICK WINSLOW TAYLOR, THE PRINCIPLES OF SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT (1911) (promoting the theory that management's role is to see the big picture, and that workers should execute discrete, repeatable tasks as rapidly as possible).

<sup>24</sup> MCCRYSTAL, *supra* note 1, at 44. "In the years leading up to World War I . . . [r]eductionist master planners broke down offensives into the number of feet and inches that each brigade would be expected to advance each hour." *Id.* During World War II, "reductionist systems enabled tens of thousands of untrained sharecroppers to become welders and shipbuilders in the span of a few months." *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 48.

the Task Force—the bigger hammer—the Task Force had still not stopped AQI.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. Form and Function

Taylor's management model is designed to allow large organizations to perform *complicated* tasks efficiently. "Complicated" is a term of art that refers to multi-part systems (such as machines) where the parts interact in relatively known, simple ways.<sup>29</sup> The machine operates with a predictable result and the impact of changes to the machine may also be predicted, if not perfectly.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, in a *complex* system, "[T]he number of *interactions* between components increases dramatically," making the outcome of the interactions unpredictable.<sup>31</sup> What did this mean for the Task Force?

[O]ur actions were the product of our planning, and our planning was predicated on our ability to predict. (Or more precisely, our perception of our ability to predict—our belief that we understood the workings of the clock.) But by 2004 our battlefield behaved a lot more like the capricious movements of a cold front than like the steady trajectory of Halley's Comet. New communications technologies [had created] a dense tangle of interconnectedness. These events and actors were not only more interdependent than in previous wars, they were also faster. The environment was not just complicated, it was *complex*.<sup>32</sup>

And so, General McChrystal had identified the structural problem: "In Iraq, we were using complicated solutions to attack a complex problem. *For decades we had been able to execute our linear approach faster than the external environment could change.*"<sup>33</sup> But that was no longer possible. At its core, the issue was lag time: by the time a plan was approved, battlefield conditions had changed and

made the plan useless. "We could not predict where the enemy would strike, and we could not respond fast enough when they did."<sup>34</sup> AQI, on the other hand, had scaled the connectivity and adaptability of small teams to the enterprise level.<sup>35</sup> The Task Force had to change how it did business to minimize the lag between information and action.

#### V. Changes

General McChrystal's solution, which he compared to "redesigning the plane in midflight," was as elegant as it was untested.<sup>36</sup> In a complex (and therefore unpredictable) environment, adaptability is a survival trait. In order to create a more adaptable organizational structure, General McChrystal proposed to scale up to the full Task Force the characteristics that made the small special operations teams under his command so effective. But how to do that? Clearly, it was unrealistic to attempt to create a single, seven-thousand-member team. Simply calling the Task Force a "team" would not make it function as one.<sup>37</sup> In truth, the Task Force was already a "command of teams," with multiple individual teams operating under a centralized command structure.<sup>38</sup> However, the individual teams were still operating in silos, answerable to higher command but not cross-connected.<sup>39</sup>

To allow the Task Force to leverage the teams' individual adaptability and responsiveness at the macro level, General McChrystal built a *team of teams*, in which the relationships between the constituent teams resembled those among the individuals on a single team: each team needed to trust the other teams, and so be bound by a cooperative sense of common purpose.<sup>40</sup> That trust allowed the evolution of a Task Force-wide shared consciousness, in which everyone became aware of the overall mission and the relationship between their personal and team missions (and the missions of other teams) to the Task Force's overall goal.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 57; see, e.g., Ariel Adams, *Ultimate Guide to Watch Complications*, THE WATCH GALLERY (Aug. 16, 2013), <http://www.thewatchgallery.com/magazine/ultimate-guide-to-watch-complications/> (referring to the functions of a mechanical watch as complications).

<sup>30</sup> MCCHRISTAL, *supra* note 1, at 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* Note the use of the term *complex* in the full title of *Team of Teams*. The book contains an extensive discussion of complexity theory and its impact on systems of all kinds. *Id.* at 53-69. Although well-written and of great interest, deeper analysis of that discussion is beyond the scope of this review.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 59.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 69 (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 114. "None of AQI's individual elements was better than ours, but that did not matter; a team, unlike a conventional command, is not the sum of its parts. Even if their nodes were weak, their network was strong." *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 84.

<sup>37</sup> See *id.* at 126-27 (discussing the concept of diminishing returns for increased size as applied to teams).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 129.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* The authors' graphical representations are helpful in understanding the organizational structures at issue.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 128. One hurdle was the deliberately inculcated squad-centric nature of special operations forces. This internal focus was a function of training and service culture. "The squad is the point at which everyone else sucks," said one SEAL. *Id.* at 127. Changing that focus for the good of the Task Force as a whole would require years of focused effort.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 164-70 (discussing the building of trust via constant contact and information transparency). One reviewer observed that there is "no mention of the 160,000 non-[Special Operation Forces] SOF military members

Among the significant changes General McChrystal made, one stands out. It is a rare, self-aware leader who asks whether he is part of the problem:

The wait for my approval was *not* resulting in any better decisions, and our priority should be reaching the best possible decision that could be made *in a time frame that allowed it to be relevant*. I came to realize that, in normal cases, I did not add tremendous value, so I changed the process.<sup>42</sup>

That process, which later came to be called *empowered execution*, pushed decision-making authority down the chain of command so long as the decision supported the Task Force and was both moral and legal.<sup>43</sup> Unexpectedly, this resulted in both faster and better-quality decisions by subordinates.<sup>44</sup>

By 2006, this empowered decision-making process had engendered an organization-wide responsiveness to current conditions. The Task Force was back in the fight against AQI and working more effectively than ever before.<sup>45</sup> General McChrystal's unorthodox experiment had worked.

## VI. Conclusion

*Team of Teams* is part history lesson, part roadmap, and part cautionary tale. It is a candid assessment of the effectiveness of traditional management models in the information-dense and cross-connected environment of the twenty-first century. It is a case study in how the application of the principles underlying those models (including the courageous decision to abandon those that were not working) transformed an organization. Most importantly, it is a frank challenge to military and civilian leaders and their organizations to either adapt to the changing demands of the world around them or be left behind.

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[who] shared the Iraqi battle space with [the Task Force], or their complimentary role as the admittedly non-cool, non-special team in the team of teams." David Fastabend, *Team of Teams: The New McChrystal Book is Good But a Bit Heavy on SEAL Role*, FOREIGN POLICY (May 12, 2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/12/811593/>. This is true, as far as it goes, but—without taking a position on relative coolness—there is a good reason for the SOF-centric writing (beyond the fact that two of the authors are former SEALs). The SEALs and other SOF teams carried out the Task Force's direct, daily mission against AQI. The adaptability and interconnectedness that made those teams so successful ultimately served as models for the macro-reorganization of the Task Force. Personnel worldwide supporting the Task Force were unquestionably vital to its mission. However, their characteristics were different and the same level of fluidity of action and adaptability necessary in the SOF teams was not required for the majority of support personnel to be successful in their individual missions. *Team of Teams* may be forgiven for focusing on its central message.

<sup>42</sup> MCCHRISTAL, *supra* note 1, at 209.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 214.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> By 2006, this "eyes on—hands off" approach allowed the Task Force to conduct upward of three hundred raids per month, a seventeen-fold increase from 2004. It also resulted in the successful termination of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI, and multiple high-level AQI operatives in a single night. *Id.* at 218, 236-41; *see also* Ellen Knickmeyer & Jonathan Finer, *Insurgent Leader Al-Zarqawi Killed in Iraq*, WASH. POST (June 8, 2006, 5:57 PM), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/06/08/AR2006060800114.html> (providing additional background on the death of al-Zarqawi).