

By Tim Heffernan

From [Esquire](#) | Original Article

Barely a week ago, Defense Secretary Robert Gates [announced](#) a major change in the United States's prosecution of the war in Afghanistan. General David McKiernan was out as the head of American-led NATO forces. General Stanley McChrystal was in.

In Washington, the initial response was mild shock: McKiernan is a highly respected, battle-tested officer, and had been in the Afghanistan post for less than a year. The firing effectively ended his career, and in the most brutally public way imaginable.

The second response was a question: Who the hell is Stanley McChrystal?

In a sense, nobody really knows. McChrystal, currently director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, led the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) from September 2003 to August 2008. JSOC is the military's most secretive branch (many of its components are still not officially acknowledged to exist), charged with its most secretive missions — identifying, tracking, killing, or capturing and interrogating the highest-level members of Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. That it does so in conjunction with the CIA, DIA, FBI, and other intelligence agencies only makes JSOC's task more sensitive. So it is no accident that the branch's former commander is himself basically unknown to the media, Congress, and the public at large. His were not the sort of missions after which press conferences are called.

Nonetheless we do know, crucially, two people close to McChrystal: General David Petraeus, now head of U.S. Central Command, and General David Rodriguez, former commander of the U.S. Army's Taliban hunters in Afghanistan. McChrystal, [reports the Atlantic's Marc Ambinder](#), shares his friend Petraeus's instinct for "commander's intent" — the ability to implement in detail the broad military goals of the commander in chief. For his part, Rodriguez will be McChrystal's right-hand man in Afghanistan; both men, the Pentagon [told Slate's Fred Kaplan](#), are "champing at the bit" and "will do what is necessary to win."

However, most of what we know about Stanley McChrystal — and it's not much; fewer than 50 newspaper and magazine stories, including [one of our own](#), featured him in any meaningful way prior to his recent appointment, according to the Lexis Nexis database — is what he has done. Of course, that's what the question of "Who is he?" is trying to get at: what he has done before, and therefore what he is likely to do in his new command. And what he has done suggests that he is an extraordinary leader — and perhaps a ruthless one. That he is an unparalleled hunter of suspected terrorists — and perhaps the overseer of their torture. That he has favored targeted military action over broad counterinsurgency and nation-building — and that he may be bringing that dramatic shift in strategy to Afghanistan. Herein, a thorough accounting of what this may mean for the future of the "forgotten" war.

McChrystal's Men: Hunters — and Torturers?

In February 2006, [the Army Times reported](#) that Joint Special Operations Command, as an entire branch, was in effect being promoted — and with it its commander since 2003, then two-star general Stanley McChrystal. JSOC would gain greater autonomy from its parent organization, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCom); McChrystal would gain a third star for himself, a two-star deputy for his operation, and a mandate for streamlining an elite unit that then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had come to believe was encumbered by the traditional military practices and bureaucracy of SOCom.

It was already the case that after 9/11, JSOC had evolved from a hostage-rescue role to "door-kicking" — that is, hunting terrorists. But under McChrystal, the transformation had gone further and deeper than before. JSOC became a focused and highly active machine. Two JSOC task forces were stationed in Iraq after the invasion, and a third operated in Afghanistan. "You train, you train, you train, then all of a sudden you get on a plane and you go somewhere, do a mission, it's over in 36 hours and you come back," a source told *Army Times*, speaking about the nature of the branch prior to McChrystal's arrival. After he came aboard, the source said, JSOC was deployed "24/7."

And the machine accomplished a great deal. Most famously, the command hunted down Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, using a virtuoso combination of signals intelligence (read: NSA, DIA), human intelligence (CIA, FBI), interrogation (the best of the best, drawn from government, the military, and the private sector), and special ops. (Mark Bowden told the story in the *Atlantic*. [Read it.](#)) While al-Zarqawi was the marquee hit, there were dozens, if not hundreds, of others: the bombers, bomb-makers, spies, spotters, and assassins who created and sustained the bloody street war against U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians. Indeed, Andrew Exum, an ex-Ranger better known as [the blogger Abu Muqawama](#) and one of the leading public experts on counterinsurgency, [told Ambinder](#) that his inside take on the "surge" in Iraq was that it was won not by the increase in U.S. troop levels, but by the elite killers of JSOC — as led by Stan McChrystal.

The violence, however, may not have been limited to actions in the field. In 2006, "Jeff," an elite Army interrogator, [told Esquire](#) that he had witnessed the physical and mental torture of prisoners at a veiled U.S. base in Iraq. Camp Nama — short for Nasty-Ass Military Area, the joke went — was one of the primary locations where the military and intelligence agencies brought detainees suspected of harboring knowledge about Al Qaeda and the Taliban. But when Jeff questioned the legality (as well as the usefulness) of the violent techniques employed in their interrogation, he was rebuffed:

It was a point of pride that the Red Cross would never be allowed in the door, Jeff says. This is important because it defied the Geneva Conventions, which require that the Red Cross have access to military prisons. "Once, somebody brought it up with the colonel. 'Will they ever be allowed in here?' And he said absolutely not. He had this directly from General McChrystal and the Pentagon that there's no way that the Red Cross could get in — they won't have access and they never will. This facility was completely closed off to anybody investigating, even Army investigators."

Jeff further reported to writer-at-large John H. Richardson ([click here for his most recent thoughts on the McChrystal appointment](#)

)
that not only was a McChrystal deputy, a colonel who went by the single name "Mike," present at Camp Nama, McChrystal himself was. "I saw him there a couple of times," Jeff said.

In 2006, [Human Rights Watch released a major report](#) based on dozens of interviews with soldiers who had witnessed the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. "No Blood, No Foul" revealed that the elite forces conducting the interrogations at Camp Nama and two other locations, known (among other names) as Task Force 121, committed systematic abuse of prisoners at other facilities across Iraq, leading to at least three deaths. Whether or not he was present during the actual abuse — and it seems unlikely that he would need or want to put himself in that exposed position — as commander of JSOC, Stanley McChrystal oversaw them.

Unprecedented Alliances, Untested Powers

A major [article in the *Washington Post*](#) from September 2006 addressed a question that seemed to have been forgotten amid the deteriorating conditions in Iraq: Where is Osama bin Laden, and why has he not been caught? McChrystal was not the focus of the article, but he appeared in it prominently, portrayed as the individual whose mission and capabilities made him the most likely man to answer the question. Again, at this point JSOC was running a task force in Afghanistan, and according to the *Post* it was marshalling all the diverse resources available to hunt senior terrorist figures, from military to intelligence to law enforcement. Its troops were skilled at quickly mining captured sources — humans, documents, communications devices, computers — for information, and just as quickly using that information to plan and execute actions in the field. But two specific revelations about McChrystal's extraordinary reach stand out.

First:

...Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the JSOC commander since 2003, has become the de facto leader of the hunt for bin Laden and developed a good working relationship with the CIA to the extent that he recently was able to persuade the former station chief in Kabul to become his special assistant. He asks for targets from the CIA, and it tries to comply. "We serve the military," one intelligence officer said.

And second:

McChrystal, who has commanded JSOC since 2003, now has the authority to go after bin Laden inside Pakistan without having to seek permission first, two U.S. officials said.

"The authority," one knowledgeable person said, "follows the target," meaning that if the target is bin Laden, the stakes are high enough for McChrystal to decide any action on his own. The understanding is that U.S. units will not enter Pakistan, except under extreme circumstances, and that Pakistan will deny giving them permission.

The first revelation is a prime example of the information-based, technology-driven, on-the-fly blend of intelligence and military force espoused by Donald Rumsfeld. And all politics aside, it has been difficult for even long-time agents and officers to find a logical argument against closer relationships between the intelligence and military communities. One of the prime directives of asymmetric warfare — warfare between great-power states like the United States and small-power states or non-state forces like Al Qaeda — is that the powerful states must minimize "collateral damage." Tanks, bombers, and, [as even Exum himself argued this weekend](#), even drones are not good at avoiding the deaths of the innocent people caught up in the violence. Small, elite forces conducting limited actions against specific targets are. And it is intelligence that identifies those targets.

The second passage is a prime example of the conundrum of war with non-state enemies: the enemies do not respect state boundaries, but we, as a state, officially do. Indeed, for the entire

post-WWII international system to keep functioning at all, we must. And so, once again putting all politics aside, the see-no-evil agreement evidently reached between the U.S. and Pakistan on the matter of cross-border JSOC raids is difficult for even skeptics to logically condemn. In the shadows, our shared interest in defeating terrorism is protected. Publicly, both remain legitimate state powers: Pakistan's sovereignty is unchallenged, and America's fidelity to international law is demonstrated.

But, of course, politics cannot be put aside: either word gets out and both sides are shamed, or the secret is maintained but every overlooked American violation generates an uncomfortable IOU to Pakistan.

And, of course, intelligence is not perfect. Even if the two cross-border JSOC actions in Pakistan reported by the *Post* are the only two that ever occurred, one of them failed — not just because it missed its target, but because it killed 13 people, among them civilians. Suddenly the traditional rules of war seem all the wiser.

Counterterrorism or Counterinsurgency?

On March 1, 2006, just days after McChrystal became the three-star commander of the newly independent JSOC, [Armed Forces Journal](#) published a lengthy analysis of the action. One commenter worried that McChrystal's background as a Ranger — adding as it did to what was then a preponderance of non-Special Forces leaders at SOCom — meant that the particular, field-tested skills of those forces would be lost:

"I always said to myself that we will see if SOCom is serious about the war on terror and in fact considers white [nonclassified] SOF [Special Operations Forces] an important entity by what they do with Mike Jones after he leaves SF Command," said a former JSOC staff officer. "My thought was he would go to the CSO [Center for Special Operations] and be in charge of it. But

when he was essentially being shipped off to nothing, that really meant that... the Ranger/JSOC mafia was the team that was going to be in charge."

What skills exactly? Again, the *Armed Forces Journal*:

What troubles many special operators, particularly those from the SF community, is that another six principal missions, as well as the contributions of the Army's civil affairs and psychological operations units, are undervalued by their leaders. Those missions include unconventional warfare (fostering and promoting an insurgency, as the SF troops did with the Northern Alliance against the Taliban), foreign internal defense (helping a friendly government defeat an insurgency) and information operations. These are missions that, unlike direct action, place a high priority on Special Forces' language skills and cultural awareness (each of the Army's seven SF groups has a regional focus).

A Special Forces veteran translates:

"My concern is that all we're focused on is direct action, to the absolute exclusion of all other things," said Mark Haselton, a retired Special Forces lieutenant colonel. "The war we are fighting (and will be fighting for years to come) will require the ability to export training in ways that others can use to organize their own capabilities. If we spend the rest of our lives 'capturing and killing' terrorists at the expense of those SF missions that are more important — gaining access to the local population, training indigenous forces, providing expertise and expanding capacity — we're doomed to failure."

The military is a conservative organization, not so much politically but philosophically. Change is encouraged — prized, in fact — but only when it represents strategic adaptation to altered conditions. Change for change's sake, on the other hand, can be seen as the epitome of politics, and as therefore the enemy of strategy.

It is possible to interpret McChrystal's command of JSOC as both adaptation and politicization, and his confirmation hearing may reflect that hybrid perspective.

Regarding the former, it is understandable that if, as the Bush administration often and loudly proclaimed, the so-called war on terror represented an utterly original challenge to U.S. security, the military needed to evolve in order to meet the challenge effectively. Before 9/11, covert actions were generally assumed to have state actors as their target, and U.S. Special Operations Command had the tools in place to carry those actions out: the various special forces run by U.S. Special Operations Command. After 9/11, however, the targets were non-state actors, and it apparently appeared to Donald Rumsfeld and the top military leaders at the Pentagon that it would be quicker and simpler to adapt an existing unit — JSOC, with its limited role of freeing hostages — to that condition than to make SOCom, as a whole, change its essential purpose. Bureaucracies and traditional chains of command have tremendous inertia, after all; when speed is of the essence, it is often faster to construct a new ship than to make the existing one change course.

The booby trap in doing so, however, is laid by those very bureaucracies and chains of command. They exist for a reason: they are tested by experience. War is an uncountably complex endeavor. Decisions at the top filter down through the ranks like a message in the child's game of telephone — the message and its resulting actions get garbled on the way. And momentary tactical decisions on the battlefield — not to mention their unpredictable consequences — filter up, altering the circumstances in which those in command must make the next strategic decision. In light of this, structures and traditions persist, in part, to act as a buffer or brake on these processes; to provide familiar rules by which to judge novel situations and layers of analysis by which to interpret them. But some believe that JSOC, effectively a brand-new entity, existed in a virtual vacuum. And nobody had seen anything like it before.

The past is not a prologue, and it would insult McChrystal's intelligence and abilities to assume that because he has spent the past six years in counter-terrorism, he is sure to make it the focus of his Afghanistan command. But the air is thin at the top. Generals tend to expand in the rarefied atmosphere, filling the empty space with the wind of their own arguments. So it is telling that in the military blogosphere, the one consistent doubt expressed about McChrystal's appointment is his lack of counterinsurgency experience. Counterterrorism is one thing, best handled by brilliant killers like McChrystal and his JSOC crew. But counterinsurgency (COIN, in the parlance) means not just killing top terrorists, but clearing whole areas of their henchmen, holding the areas long enough to establish a meaningful peace, and then building the social and physical infrastructure necessary to maintain that peace after our soldiers are gone. It cannot be done without the grunts — and it cannot be managed from the top-down, not even by a singular intelligence.

What Awaits Afghanistan

So who is General Stanley McChrystal? He is the former leader of our most highly trained soldiers. He has an unmatched record of success in counterterrorism. He has, more than any other general in recent American history, brought together the military and intelligence communities to produce battlefield results. He is by all accounts acutely intelligent, in possession of both strategic and tactical vision, and manifestly capable of inspiring those under his command to achieve great things against long odds.

McChrystal is also ethically burdened by his ties to the torture of prisoners in Iraq. And in the military, ethical burdens can quickly become professional ones. (In light of this, it is worth noting the dates of McChrystal's appointment and President Obama's decision not to release more photos of prisoner abuse in Iraq: May 11 and 13, respectively.) Under McChrystal's command, JSOC soldiers have crossed international boundaries — violating international law in doing so — and killed innocent civilians. These actions may well be unavoidable given the circumstances of the wars in which the U.S. is engaged, but because they fall outside the traditional moral and political rules of war, their effects are much harder to predict and control. Who would have thought, on the morning of 9/11, that within the decade our own soldiers would be called terrorists by the people of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq?

Above all, however, is this fact: Stanley McChrystal is now the man in charge of winning the war in Afghanistan — or, more accurately, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is the belief of many exceptional people, including the president, General Petraeus, and Secretary Gates, that he is the person most likely to be able to do so. The question is how. Will he adopt and expand our current efforts at counterinsurgency? Or does his appointment signal that the war is shifting back toward its original goals — the hunting and killing of Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders? The latter seems likely: both groups have resurged in the region over the past three years. And if that is the case, there are few endorsements of the general more concrete yet ambiguous — alternately more encouraging and disturbing — than that of a former colleague who publishes under the pen-name Dalton Fury. [The ex-Army Ranger recently wrote](#) of his one-time boss:

From my perspective, our rules of land warfare, our respect for human life, and our strategic

constraints handcuff us to the point that the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable. But, with LTG McChrystal at the helm now all bets are off.