



Paratroopers with Charlie Battery, 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, rotate M777 155mm howitzer in preparation to engage militants with artillery fire in support of Iraqi and Peshmerga fighters in Mosul (U.S. Army/Christopher Bigelow)

Fighting the Islamic State By, With, and Through

How Mattered as Much as What

By J. Patrick Work

In January 2017, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, deployed to bolster the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the campaign to annihilate the so-called Islamic State (IS). Task Force Falcon joined the coalition advise-and-assist (A&A) effort with 2 weeks remaining during the 100-day offensive to retake east Mosul. For the next 8 months, we wrestled a complex environment with

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a simple framework: help the ISF and hurt IS every day. Naturally, we had missteps, but our team also served ISF and coalition commanders well on some terribly uncertain days. Specifically, *how* we advised ISF commanders was as important as *what* we advised them to do in order to win. We mixed innovative concepts and straightforward tactics to attack IS by, with, and through the ISF, yet the entire effort always centered on our partners' leadership and ownership of exceptionally nasty ground combat operations. Several of our perspectives on mindset

and approach—how we advised—offer useful examples and angles for leaders to ponder as we consider future excursions with this style of high-intensity security force assistance.¹

Organizing Principles

Our mission under Operation *Inherent Resolve* (OIR) proved infinitely different than the exhausting, firsthand combat that many of us experienced in Iraq from 2003 to 2008. For example, a typical American Soldier's experience during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*'s "troop surge," whether battling Shia

militias or the Salafist forebears of IS, was that Americans did the deadliest work, as Iraqis observed. Moreover, the ISF that we supported were also not the same broken groups that collapsed during the IS rampage of 2014. Our OIR journey was dramatically different than both of these circumstances, and we adjusted our mindset and approach accordingly.

Admittedly, the initialism *ISF* may carelessly overhomogenize our partners' capabilities; each of the three cohorts had its own distinct personality, and our account will bring some of this to life. This collection of host-nation troops often demonstrated tremendous willpower and assumed the lion's share of the physical risk no matter which uniform they wore: Iraqi army, Federal Police (FEDPOL), or Counterterrorism Services. Still, warfare by, with, and through the ISF was hard work that highlighted three interrelated principles that can help inform how joint leaders think about, resource, and lead A&A operations: advisers do not get to choose their partners, advisers do not control their partners, and advisers must put their partners first.

First, coalition combat advisers did not get to choose their partners. Each of our A&A teams had cause for frustration at times, but some partnerships were clearly more challenging than others. Indeed, some ISF were reluctant at times. Some of their commanders demonstrated inconsistent levels of know-how, and, on occasion, the cohorts' agendas were more competitive than cooperative. On the other hand, we found that IS rallied around cunning jihadists who exploited Iraq's sectarian politics and commanded an intoxicating Salafist narrative of martyrdom. In the end, despite being vastly outgunned, small, organized IS units continued fighting through the battle of Mosul's final days in mid-July. Our mission statement not only reflected our pursuit of Combined Joint Task Force-OIR's (CJTF-OIR) interests, but also how we worked to steady the episodic imbalance of determination between our partners and the enemy: "Task Force Falcon—by, with, and through ISF in everything it does—advises, assists, and

empowers our partners to defeat [IS] militarily in order to help the government of Iraq establish sufficient local security and set conditions that contribute to broader regional stability." A key was remaining goal-oriented when it was hard; our job was simply to help the partners *that we had* dominate IS.

Along these lines, our combat advisers had little control over partner decision-making, preparation for combat, or execution of operations. Importantly, our commanders embraced being advisers first, accepting that most meaningful decisions and moves were clearly in the hands of the Iraqi government. Indeed, senior ISF commanders required vast support and encouragement at times, but they generally took full responsibility for their operations. Our A&A teams, logisticians, and artillery troops proved infinitely flexible; advisers could never fall in love with ISF plans because they changed so frequently. Moreover, our two-star and three-star commanders' flagship concepts saturated our approach. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend of CJTF-OIR was clear that we were to *help* the ISF fight. Stated another way, our A&A teams did not close with or take the ground from IS, but instead navigated a fascinating quest of influencing ISF without any authority *over* ISF. Additionally, Major General Joseph Martin of Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command (CJFLCC)-OIR championed "nested, multi-echelon engagement" to help the coalition optimize its influence with our partners. Like any coalition warfare, the host-nation force came first; however, our approach to fighting by, with, and through amplified our Iraqi partners' leadership and ownership.

Thus, Task Force Falcon upheld the ISF as the preeminent member of the coalition against IS. We measured our success only through our partners' success. This mindset is worth emphasizing because, frankly, superbly capable teammates can lose sight of the partners' centrality at times. To condition our team to always consider the ISF's goals first, our leaders openly discussed the importance of empathy, humility, and patience

throughout the formation. We certainly defeated IS in Ninewah Province together, but the fact remains that ISF troops bore the weight of the violence on some astonishingly brutal days. The human costs to the ISF were massive over Mosul's 9-month struggle to defeat our nations' common enemy. I sensed that our by-with-through ethos was on track once our teams began to consistently use terms such as *them*, *they*, and *their* rather than *us*, *we*, and *our*. Our language mattered because how we spoke reflected how we thought about our partners' leadership and ownership of operations. Accomplishing our mission was obviously central, but it was not more important than *how* we accomplished our mission.

Lethal OCT Network: An Imperfect Analogy

Anyone who has experienced a combat training center (CTC) rotation has a useful model for comprehending Task Force Falcon's core organizational and operational concepts. Fundamentally, the CTC's observer-controller-trainer (OCT) network wraps itself around a rotational unit with a parallel structure connected by dependable communications and disciplined information flows. The network's goal is to help unit commanders improve their warfighting craft, largely by helping them see the opposing force (OPFOR), the ill-structured environment, and themselves. The OCT network may even feel intrusive at times as its nodes maintain contact with the rotational unit at every echelon. Finally, assuming competence is the network's anchor point, many of the same traits that make A&A teams effective also distinguish the most useful OCTs. Empathy, humility, and patience truly matter.

Perhaps most important, the OCT network is not embroiled in "fighting" the OPFOR or the burden of external evaluation. Therefore, OCTs routinely achieve a level of shared understanding that outstrips the rotational units' understanding. Of course, they are not all-knowing; plenty of conversations occur without OCT oversight, and they periodically misread events, personalities, or

trends. Still, the network is well-postured to provide vertically aligned insights, perspectives, and ideas that help the rotational unit advance against the OPFOR in an uncertain environment. An imperfect analogy, for sure, but thus far we have only discussed similarities that attend to the advise side of A&A operations.

As for the assist aspects, we should begin by picturing the same OCTs armed with enormous amounts of secure bandwidth, intelligence capacity, and strike capabilities. Moreover, imagine that this lethal OCT network's mission, or *moral obligation*, includes attacking the OPFOR relentlessly to ensure the rotational unit wins. Now visualize this lethal OCT network as only one among equals in an aggressive ecosystem that includes special operations, joint, and other coalition stakeholders who are also united in their desire to thrash the OPFOR. As inadequate as this comparison may be, we all reason by analogy: Task Force Falcon operated like this fictional, lethal OCT network—only the stakes were infinitely more deadly and complex. Our field-grade commanders wore two hats, advising ISF corps or division commanders in addition to their traditional responsibilities. Likewise, our company-grade commanders advised Iraqi army or FEDPOL brigades. Combat advising at these echelons maintained a natural distance between our teams and the savagery of close combat, and this space probably reinforced our focus on helping our partners see the enemy, the environment, and themselves rather than doing the fighting for them.

Align Around the Big Ideas, Then Get Out of the Way

In addition to Task Force Falcon's seven organic battalion-level headquarters and internal enablers, we integrated an eighth battalion-level adviser team, a 155mm Paladin battery, and several other formal attachments or informal partners. Our operational profile was as geospatially decentralized as it was dynamic—we had at least one platoon that operated from 14 different bases over the 9-month mission. Moreover, our A&A operations were functionally

diverse, spanning divestitures of military equipment and supplies for vetted partners, fires and counterfire, civil-military advice, and the deadly work of helping ISF liberate the people of Ninewah.

Steering our decentralized, dynamic, and diverse A&A enterprise called for an enduring set of guideposts that lined up our decisionmaking and risk evaluation processes. As we entered the A&A fray of Mosul in January, Task Force Falcon organized around five big ideas:

- Protect ourselves and our partners.
- ISF are always the main effort.²
- Attack IS.
- Share understanding.
- Be agile—ISF should never have to wait for us.³

We concentrated on these ideas constantly for nearly 9 months, and reevaluated their relevance on several occasions as the campaign advanced.

When I was a student at the Marine Corps War College, preparation for a guest lecture by Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper, USMC (Ret.), introduced me to a mission command–styled concept that he dubbed “In Command and Out of Control.”⁴ Along these lines, I envisioned commanding Task Force Falcon from the center, an intellectual schema blending the organizational strengths of hierarchies and webs that I had observed during prior combat tours with joint special operations task forces. The chain of command certainly remained intact, particularly our commanders' responsibility to help the CJFLCC manage risk, but we knew the brigade headquarters would get in the way of our teams unless we stayed “up-and-out.” Also, our traditional roles in a typical brigade hierarchy were far less notable than our A&A-specific responsibilities to empower combat advisers at the tactical edge. Any leader's control over people and events naturally loosens at each higher echelon of command; I tried to *command* our A&A network, never to *control* it.

Relationships: Coin of the A&A Realm

In its essence, Task Force Falcon was not made up of people—it *was*

people. And our people did not advise ISF institutions—they advised other people. The fight to liberate Mosul was a decidedly human story of grit and willpower, and the key ISF characters in the story had their own personal relationships, tensions, motivations, and fears. Uncomfortable discussions were the natural order of things, and sturdy relationships with our partners helped us get past them. Rule #1 for us was profoundly unassuming: “Listen.” And Rule #2 was nearly as simple: “Maintain contact.” Only by staying with key ISF commanders much of the time, and listening to them *all of the time*, did our A&A network begin to understand how our partners saw IS, the environment, and themselves. This informs Rule #3: “Be realistic.” The battle of Mosul was exhausting for both sides. Even as poorly trained and resourced as IS may have been at times, its leaders demonstrated remarkable conviction, an inequality that helped extend such a murderous resistance. Expressed differently, by listening during carefully orchestrated contact with the ISF, our team remained realistic about the advice we gave, as well as our own limitations in influencing the ISF's fighting path and pace.

We probably only saw the tip of the iceberg, but our A&A network would have never had a chance of understanding Mosul's unfolding story unless we all committed to our relationships. Lieutenant Colonel Jim Browning, adviser to 9th Iraqi Army Division and commander of 2-508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, went so far as to fast with his partners through Ramadan. As long as we answered the CJFLCC commander's information requirements, we allowed the ISF commanders' biorhythms, specifically cultural habits like afternoon rest and late meals, to drive our task force–level battle rhythm. Indeed, teams at every echelon were sensors for relevant atmospheric and answers to higher headquarters' information requirements. By living and breathing the ISF leaders' biorhythm, we underscored, directly and indirectly, the ISF's primacy in the fight.



Iraqi Security Forces member provides security near patrol base in Mosul, June 22, 2017 (U.S. Army/Rachel Diehm)

In particular, our A&A efforts with Staff Lieutenant General Abdul Amir al-Lami, the Iraqi government's overall joint forces commander, framed and reframed a lively puzzle for senior, subordinate, and peer special operations commanders. He was a serious man who evoked Dwight Eisenhower for his own ISF-internal coalition, and as his combat adviser, I was physically with him on most days and nights. I *listened a lot* during our 150-day battle to liberate west Mosul, and we had several uncomfortable but candid discussions. After spending the day with Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami, I would typically report insights to the CJFLCC commander using a limited flag officer email distribution in order to help inform our nested, multiechelon engagement across the team of teams.

After hitting send on these brief messages, we often followed up with phone

conversations several nights a week. Later in the evenings, we frequently hosted secure video teleconferences to connect Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami in northern Iraq with his partners, Major General Martin and later Major General Pat White, in Baghdad. Meanwhile, I often pumped similar contextualized updates down and into our network of field- and company-grade teams that were also listening, maintaining contact, and pursuing realistic pieces to the ever-morphing puzzle. Consistent dialogue throughout the breadth and depth of our A&A network contributed to shared understanding and advanced our ability to help ISF and hurt IS.

Still, it took more than energy and listening to earn our partners' trust. ISF commanders were pragmatic when evaluating risk; they fought knowing the Iraqi government may not be sending

replacement troops, combat systems, or ammunition any time soon. This gave our relationships, no matter how cozy, a transactional quality. Expressed very simply, Rule #4 was "Assist in order to advise." The ISF senior commanders we dealt with were well-educated, had seen extensive combat beginning with the Iran-Iraq War decades earlier, and had watched senior American advisers come and go for years during Operation *Iraqi Freedom* and Operation *New Dawn*. Importantly, they also stood on the business end of American military dominance twice between 1991 and 2003, so they had little patience when they were tested by inexpensive off-the-shelf IS drones or when coalition strike cells developed the situation before directing precision fires. In fact, our predecessors from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), wisely coached us

to prepare for this assist in order to advise paradigm. “Money talks” in combat advising, too. Ninth Iraqi Army Division leaders appreciated Lieutenant Colonel Browning’s symbolic show of friendship during Ramadan, but what they really wanted was for him and Command Sergeant Major Curt Donaldson to keep striking IS on the final days of close combat in Mosul and Tal Afar.

A commonsense feature of relationships was probably the most significant to our mission—strong relationships encouraged accountability in the partnership. Notably, coalition advisers joined FEDPOL senior leadership for the first time as the ISF’s counterattack on Mosul began. Obviously, there was some interest-mapping for both sides to do, and occasionally the stress and slaughter of the FEDPOL’s attack in west Mosul caused passionate reactions. For example, the FEDPOL’s three-star commander fired our A&A team at least a couple of times. Even so, the team that Lieutenant Colonel John Hawbaker and Command Sergeant Major Brian Knight led remained remarkably goal-oriented. Their best military advice—delivered with empathy, humility, and patience—as well as their punishing strikes against IS set them up to push back when coalition interests were ignored. This brings us to Rule #5: “Never lose sight of your own interests, and use your leverage.” To be clear, ours was never a carrot-and-stick relationship. It was much more of an equal partnership—their success was our success. Yet at times, we had to dial our types and amounts of combat support up or down, promote or expose ISF commanders’ reputations with key Iraqi government influencers, or shift priorities to exploit aggressive ISF action elsewhere. Again, CJTF-OIR had interests, too.

More so than any other experience in my 22 years of commissioned service, Task Force Falcon’s fight by, with, and through the ISF epitomized central concepts underpinning the Army doctrine of mission command. We were empowered for dramatically decentralized operations because we kept the CJTF and CJFLCC commanders’ intents front of mind always, using the already discussed five

ideas to guide our decisionmaking and activities. Like all senior-subordinate relationships, ours were stressed on occasion, but I genuinely trusted all eight of our field-grade commanders. Also, our role was critical in informing a unified coalition view, so we tirelessly and transparently overcommunicated with our higher headquarters to help them understand the campaign from the ground up. Our commanders also expected everyone in our A&A network to do their jobs, regardless of their distance from the combat action. There were no extra Soldiers on our team. More directly, there were no extra minds. Our leaders and Soldiers at every echelon had to continuously solve emerging problems across the warfighting functions. Finally, we organized the art and science of mission command to get the right information to the right leader at the right time so that he or she could make useful decisions in an ever-changing environment.

All Six “As” of A&A Operations

Through the Lethal OCT Network analogy, we introduced a handful of the concepts inherent to A&A operations. *A3E*—advise, assist, accompany, and enable—entered the coalition lexicon before Task Force Falcon arrived in Iraq. The third A, accompany, ostensibly delineated the riskier forward posturing of combat advisers to help accelerate the counter-IS campaign. For Task Force Falcon, we never knew the difference; there was no before and after perspective for us to have. Because we transitioned while the ISF were still fighting in east Mosul, our combat advisers had to cultivate relations with ISF generals while in contact. Thus, close proximity to ISF commanders on the battlefield was always a signature component of our mission, so we may have intuitively leaned toward a handful of “As” other than advise, assist, and accompany as we honed our A&A mindset and skill-set in Mosul’s cauldron of violence.

All six “As” and the nuanced concepts and challenges they represent are security force assistance lessons that we learned fighting by, with, and through the ISF.

1. Advise. Our teams helped ISF commanders think through their tactical and logistics problems with an eye toward exploiting opportunities, assessing risk, and making sober decisions on how to apply finite resources. Through nested multiechelon engagement, Task Force Falcon pressed consistent messages at every echelon. In fact, we frequently helped the CJTF or CJFLCC commanders be our finishers. Both were key drivers of coalition combat advising as they engaged at the executive levels to influence ISF activities, all the while reinforcing our nested message from the top-down.

2. Assist. Our partners rarely used the red pen before designing a scheme of maneuver. Therefore, some of our most important assistance to them was coaching intelligence-driven operations. First, our A&A network shared intelligence information and products to the extent that we were allowed. As we helped the ISF prepare to attack Tal Afar in August 2017, we actually arranged the entire brigade intelligence enterprise to help them understand which attack axes exploited IS’s most vulnerable defenses. The value of our advice was found in their execution. Our partners dominated IS in a 12-day blitz to retake the city.

Assist’s lethal expression was obviously precision fires. After IS conquered Mosul, it prepared a formidable defense for more than 2 years before the ISF launched the counterattack in October 2016. The defense involved a monstrous mortar capacity, a legion of suicide car bombers whose high-payoff target list was topped by ISF tanks and engineering assets, and droves of IS infantry. The ISF stubbornly moved through this medley of violence for 9 months, reinforced by coalition strikes from artillery, attack helicopters, jets, and bombers. Meeting the ISF requirement for responsive and precise fires, more so than other form of assistance, gave our partners confidence on the hardest days.

3. Accompany. As discussed, Task Force Falcon was operating forward with ISF brigade, division, and corps commanders upon arrival in January. Predictable and persistent contact with ISF commanders was crucial to building



Military working dog team with 380th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron completes detection training scenario at undisclosed location in Southwest Asia, January 10, 2017 (U.S. Air Force/Tyler Woodward)

relationships of trust and accountability, but accompanying them also fed our efforts to assure, anticipate, and be agile. Accompanying the ISF gave our combat advisers a strong sense for the combat's direction and intensity. This helped our Lethal OCT Network provide timely and useful assistance at the point of decision while also offering perspective to promote shared understanding and unity of effort.

4. *Assure.* During my last battlefield circulation with Major General Martin before he departed in July, I offered my observation that the third A in A3E should stand for *assure*, not *accompany*. We have countless examples of how our physical presence, ideas, or fires—or a confluence of these inputs—gave ISF commanders the confidence to keep attacking. In fact, I now have a new paradigm for what nonlethal contact can mean. In OIR, when I was not with Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami, we maintained contact. For the very reason of assurance, quality translators mattered

immensely to us. During frequent times of crisis, we encouraged all of our advisers to continually remind the ISF that they could count on us and that their success was our success.

5. *Anticipate.* As we discussed the A3E profile previously, I mentioned my proposal for a more relevant third A, but there is more to the story. Major General Martin actually countered with another insightful candidate, *anticipate*. To be clear, the ISF we enabled during OIR did not issue combat orders or rehearse operations. In fact, senior commanders normally returned from Baghdad just in time for the start of another bloody phase of the attack. When our partners departed northern Iraq during the transitions, we continued to overcommunicate and maintain a disciplined battle rhythm to ensure our A&A network's shared understanding in spite of lapsed Iraqi communications. In fact, during these periods, our partners only occasionally felt compelled to call us with essential updates, so we relied heavily

on the CJFLCC commander and senior staff in Baghdad to help us posture our A&A capabilities.

Even as we transitioned the A&A mission to 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, the ISF plan was evolving daily as the start of the Hawijah offensive approached. As we departed, CJFLCC was organizing a medical evacuation architecture without absolute certainty of ISF intentions. The incoming team was arranging its fires architecture and basing posture with an eye toward maximum flexibility in order to absorb late change. Nothing was first order in Iraq's political-military environment. As stated, Task Force Falcon could never fall in love with a plan, and we continuously challenged our own assumptions. Our A&A network had to always listen, maintain contact with our counterparts, and apply the fundamentals of mission command in order to make the best decisions we could. However, when we sensed increased risk, the commanding general or I



Member of Iraqi federal police awaits next movement on streets of recently secured airport during offensive to liberate West Mosul, March 2, 2017 (U.S. Army/Jason Hull)

would direct clarifying questions to Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami, discussing resource tradeoffs with him in a transparent manner.

6. Agility. One of Task Force Falcon's guiding ideas was that the ISF should never have to wait for us. Our commanders and teams nimbly changed directions in response to updated Iraqi government decisions or emergent opportunities to damage IS. In fact, 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, support to the 15th Iraqi Army Division near Badush is a superb example. While the battle of Mosul still raged, Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami decided to press the IS disruption zone to the east of Tal Afar. He shared his thinking with us during a routine key leader engagement on a Monday evening, and by Friday morning, Task Force White Falcon was on the move. In a matter of 4 days, we synchronized logistics, began building a new assembly area, and integrated a battery of 155mm howitzers that was previously based with our cavalry squadron. We kept it simple during these frequent jumps; there were no routine patrols and teams lived out of rucksacks initially. The priorities were always establishing the defense and long-range communications.

In Their Own Way: The Essence of Warfare By, With, and Through

It was a privilege to represent our Army and our storied division with the coalition during OIR. We are also honored to have served under two tremendous divisions during the drive to help the ISF dominate our nations' shared enemy. We could not have been prouder of our partners as we departed Iraq in September; the ISF had liberated well over 4 million people and 40,000 kilometers of terrain and more than a quarter million people had returned to their homes in Mosul. Perhaps the most heartening aspect was that Staff Lieutenant General al-Lami and the ISF accelerated the campaign against IS following their victorious battle of Mosul.

How we advised ISF commanders—our mindset and approach—always mattered as much as the actual tactical and logistical advice that we conferred during our mission to help ISF and hurt IS every day. We had to produce results to retain the ISF's trust, and we are immensely proud of our teams for balancing grit with empathy, humility, and patience. There was always much more to serving the ISF and coalition well

than merely advising and assisting. Still, the campaign was incurably human, and naturally, relationships mattered. Solid relationships kept everyone goal-oriented on frustrating days, and our connections introduced a deeper accountability to the partnership. Finally, we kept a consistent azimuth guided by five big ideas, and we never lost sight of the coalition's interests.

By breaking down IS in their own way, the ISF leadership and ownership of the battle of Mosul embodied the essence of warfare by, with, and through a partner whose success was the very measure of our success. I still clearly remember the day I sensed the ISF mass was finally toppling the enemy's Juhmuri Hospital fortress in west Mosul. It was the visible beginning of the end for IS, and our partners were still leading the day's deadly work. They continue to do so today. JFQ

Notes

¹ Joint Publication 3-20, *Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 23, 2017), II-8, cites Department of Defense Instruction 5000.68, while describing *security force assistance*: "With, through, and by. Describes the process of interaction with foreign security forces that initially involves training and assisting. . . . The next step in the process is advising, which may include advising in combat situations (acting 'through' the forces)."

² Perhaps not as self-evident as it may appear, we lifted this central theme from Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend's seminal Tactical Directive #1, his command direction that arguably unlocked unrealized coalition potential for responsive, precision lethality. His message to advisers was "don't make yourself the main effort."

³ This is also a direct lift from Major General Joseph Martin's overarching guidance to anticipate Iraqi Security Forces' actions and posture nimbly. I first recall Major General Martin emphasizing the necessity of anticipation during the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command-Operation *Inherent Resolve* Commanders' Conference at Camp Union III in Baghdad in January 2017.

⁴ Paul Van Riper, "How to Be in Command and Out of Control by Paul Van Riper 2," YouTube video, 9:19, September 23, 2008, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhzRQfhOITA>. During his presentation, he offers an alternative title for his thoughts that underscores the complexity of guiding any large, information age institution: "Decision Making in Modern Organizations."