



Strategic Command:

General David Petraeus and the Execution of Strategic Leadership

By Maj. William J. Denn

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.

--Seneca, Roman Philosopher

Introduction

In the first few days of January 2007, Lieutenant General David Petraeus was riding in a rental car with his wife, Holly, and their son on California's Interstate 5 to visit his sick father in Santa Clarita. Almost on cue, every cell phone in the car started ringing, and Petraeus' email inbox lit up with messages. Speaking on his son's phone was an aide to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs—Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wanted immediate contact with Petraeus.¹

Holly pulled into a strip mall to find a spot with sufficient cell coverage. Petraeus could only think of the irony of taking such a career defining call in a rundown parking lot. Secretary Gates asked if Petraeus would take command of the war in Iraq. Petraeus told Gates yes. In reality, Petraeus wanted to discuss how he thought a commander needed to approach the job at hand. Petraeus wanted to be sure that the Bush administration understood what they were getting.² In that particular phone call, the administration just wanted to get to "yes," so they could announce Petraeus' nomination. A franker discussion would have to come later. On January 5th the White House announced that Petraeus would take command, leading a new strategy to turn the tide in the failing conflict.³

Very few leaders in history have been in a similar situation to Petraeus – that of a strategic-level commander; even fewer had served in that role for wars that many considered lost.⁴ By late 2006, many in Washington, including many senior military, were at a loss for how to salvage Iraq. Conventional thought held that the U.S. military presence was causing the problems, not alleviating them. The White House lacked a coherent strategy, but knew they needed a dramatic change. Petraeus, his counter-insurgency strategy, and a surge of forces formed the last ditch effort and gamble that the White House could take.

As defined by Dr. Robert Murphy at the U.S. Army War College, strategic leadership is "the process used by a leader to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood vision by influencing the organizational culture, allocating resources, directing through policy and directive, and building consensus within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous global environment which is marked by opportunities and threats."⁵ In essence, strategic leadership is exercised at a level where one is determining the direction of an organization.

In a military context, strategic leadership takes the form of strategic command but is subjected to a series of limitations, namely national policy and scope of the mission assigned to them. The extent to which a theater commander is a strategic commander depends on the extent of those limitations.

For Petraeus, a command in Iraq represented an opportunity rare to most generals. Despite the layers of authority within the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, the State Department, and the White House, the degree of latitude and responsibility he possessed was considerable.⁶ To the best of his knowledge, Petraeus does not remember being given specific guidance other than to retrieve a desperate situation.⁷ Not only was Petraeus to be the commander leading the war effort, but with full support from the President and with



tremendous influence in designing the national policies around that effort. In effect, Petraeus had carte-blanche; he would be exercising pure strategic command.

When called into a situation like Petraeus was in 2007, how does one think about the role and responsibility of being a strategic commander? How does one think about changing the direction of an organization as large as the U.S. war effort in Iraq?

Strategic leadership, according to Petraeus, is based on the strategic leader making sound and ethical decisions with a continuous cycle of learning.⁸ This cycle, which he calls “the Four Tasks of Strategic Leadership,” includes:

1. Developing the “big ideas;”
2. Communicating those big ideas effectively;
3. Overseeing their implementation; and
4. Revising and institutionalizing the big ideas.⁹

The surge led by Petraeus in 2007 will certainly be entombed in the annals of history as one of the greatest military about-faces on the battlefield; however, in Petraeus’ opinion, it was a surge of ideas that was even more important than the surge of forces.¹⁰ This essay will detail how General Petraeus developed his view of strategic leadership and applied these concepts successfully during the surge in Iraq from 2007 to 2008.¹¹

Getting The Big Ideas Right

The first task of strategic leadership, and the most difficult of all, is getting the big ideas right. As defined by Petraeus, big ideas are the overarching concepts that guide an enterprise or organization. Developing the right intellectual constructs to guide an organization’s approach is critical—they are the principles that guide operations. If the big ideas are wrong (or they lose their validity over time), then all subsequent operational plans will be built on shaky foundations. No desired effect will occur, no matter how many troops or resources one throws at a problem, if plans are built on poor ideas and assumptions.

Big ideas don’t usually come as an epiphany like Archimedes yelling “eureka” in the bathtub nor do they fall out of a tree like the apple onto Newton’s head. Big ideas tend to start as kernels and then are gradually developed and refined through analysis, study, and discussion.¹²

While many attribute the big ideas that would later be encapsulated in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, as having been inspired during Petraeus’ tenure as commander of the Combined Arms Center (CAC) at Fort Leavenworth, the reality is Petraeus had been refining these ideas throughout his career under the tutelage of mentors.

Petraeus’ mentor and father-in-law, West Point Superintendent, Lieutenant General William Knowlton, had been the military deputy to White House official Robert Komer. Komer led the successfully regarded CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) program in Vietnam.¹³ CORDS was regarded as one of the first programs to develop comprehensive civil-military cooperation in a counterinsurgency environment. Petraeus and Knowlton talked extensively about CORDS and its potential similarities in other counterinsurgency campaigns.¹⁴

As a young captain, Petraeus had the opportunity to serve as an aide-de-camp to General Jack Galvin, then the 24th Infantry Division Commander. General Galvin, one of the most respected generals in the Army at the time, had written much of the secret history of the Vietnam War, which Daniel Ellsberg later leaked as the *Pentagon Papers*.¹⁵ Galvin had been a fierce critic of how the U.S. military fought in Vietnam. Galvin served as an inspiration to Petraeus in studying the lessons of Vietnam and in developing his intellectual acumen. Petraeus would



later write his Princeton doctoral dissertation on the U.S. military's attitude toward using force in Vietnam.¹⁶

In 1985, Petraeus would again serve as an assistant to General Galvin, then serving as SOUTHCOM commander and in charge of the brewing conflict in El Salvador. Petraeus would observe first-hand the frustrations of the U.S. military operating in a "low-intensity conflict." Influential to Petraeus in El Salvador would be Brigadier General Fred Woerner, who led the U.S. Military Strategy Assistance Team. Woerner's strategy would address the root causes of the insurgency, laying out a plan for rural land reform, urban jobs, humanitarian assistance, and basic services.¹⁷ Rather than solely focusing on an enemy-centric strategy, Woerner took a population-centric approach.¹⁸

For the Autumn 1986 edition of *Parameters*, Petraeus would write an article entitled "Lessons of History and Lessons of Vietnam." In it he would conclude:

[there is] recognition that involvement in small wars is not only likely, it is upon us. It would seem wise, therefore, to come to grips with what appears to be an emerging fact for the U.S. military, that American involvement in low-intensity conflict is unavoidable [...]. It would be timely to seek ways to assist allies in counterinsurgency operations, ways consistent with the constraints of the American political culture and system, as well as with the institutional agendas of the military services.¹⁹

Throughout his career, Petraeus would develop these big ideas that would prove so critical in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁰ Between low-intensity conflicts in Haiti and Bosnia in the 1990s, as well as more recently as commander of the 101st Infantry Division in Mosul, Iraq, Petraeus exhibited the capacity to synthesize the history of prior conflicts to inform an approach in other conflicts. The big ideas found in FM 3-24 were not a new discovery out of Iraq's failures, but rather a combination of his intellectual commitment to a career studying history, first-hand observations under influential mentors, and his professional military education.

Later, Petraeus' fifteen months as the CAC Commander from 2005 to 2007 at Fort Leavenworth, served as a time where he could apply intellectual rigor to capture and hone those ideas. To be fair, Petraeus involved over one hundred civilian journalists, scholars, and academics for a two-day vetting and open discussion of a draft version of FM 3-24; however, Petraeus always drove the process.²¹

While there were a number of big ideas captured in FM 3-24 and Petraeus' subsequent command guidance, four of the biggest were:

- Secure the people: human terrain is the decisive terrain.
- You can't kill or capture your way out of an industrial strength insurgency.
- Irreconcilables must be dealt with.
- A comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency strategy is essential.

Recognizing the security of people, the military had to reverse a trend starting in 2004 of moving away from population centers onto super-bases. Living among the population is the only way to secure and serve them. Likewise, forces cannot simply clear an area and then leave it, moving onto the next neighborhood.²² Clearing required committing the resources to hold and rebuild areas once they had been cleared.²³

Second, forces have to reconcile with as many of the insurgents as possible to turn them from being part of the problem into being part of the solution.²⁴ For every insurgent the military kills or captures, potentially several others are created. Insurgent calculus works against a counterinsurgent force. This idea would inform the entire reconciliation initiative, building on the Anbar Awakening that had already occurred outside Ramadi but had not yet spread to greater Sunni populations.²⁵

Third, while one hopes to reconcile as many insurgents as possible, there are irreconcilables. Senior leaders of Al Qaeda in Iraq, senior insurgent and militia leaders were irreconcilable, requiring targeted special operations



to kill, capture, or run them off.²⁶

Finally, the U.S. effort required a comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency effort. There had to be absolute unity between civilian organizations, the military, as well as with Iraqi counterparts.²⁷ This idea would lend to a close working relationship between Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, as well as the expansion and support of the State Department's Provincial Reconstruction Team program, a modern derivative of the Vietnam-era CORDS.

These big ideas, refined over Petraeus' career, institutionalized into the Army while at Leavenworth, and operationalized under his command would serve as the foundation for Petraeus' surge into Iraq.

Communicating Big Ideas Effectively

Big ideas are never enough; the second task of strategic commanders is to communicate them effectively. The unique role of the strategic leader requires communication to flow in multiple directions: up through the chain of command, outward through coalition partners, the interagency, and the media, and downward through units and staffs to the troops.²⁸ While in command, Petraeus aimed to be consistent and relentless in transmitting big ideas up, down, and out in every method available.²⁹ Some of his communication was through formal direction. His counterinsurgency guidance, change of command speech, letter to the troops and his campaign plans, all helped to set the tone for operational commanders.³⁰ Other secondary communication channels, including media reports, reports to Congress, discussions with individual subordinate leaders, and actions with coalition partners and Iraqis, indirectly communicated the big ideas.³¹ To Petraeus, consistency of communication was crucial to connect understanding of the big ideas to consistency of their execution.³²

Upwards to the chain of command, Petraeus conducted weekly video teleconferences (VTC) every Monday morning with President Bush and his national security team. Tuesdays he would VTC with Secretary Gates, the CJCS, and senior Pentagon advisors. He sent a weekly memorandum back to the CENTCOM commander, the CJCS, and Gates. When Congress was in recess, he would host up to three delegations per week.

Outward across the coalition, Petraeus would stop in London every time he traveled back to Washington. Nurturing coalition relationships was a critical task for Petraeus, but sometimes this took the form of staying on message, especially with the Iraqis. Petraeus made it a priority of always talking to Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki with Ambassadors Khalilzad (and later Crocker) by his side to show a unity of effort.³³ There were rare occasions when Petraeus had to threaten al Maliki with his resignation when al Maliki refused to implement Petraeus' counterinsurgency campaign plan.³⁴

Finally, communicating the big ideas down to the troops is the most important communication task—it is how a leader can enact the most impact on the ground. Petraeus used many opportunities to visit troops on battlefield circulations to achieve this aim. Over time, using relentless communication at all levels, Petraeus' big ideas began to take hold, and those responsible for executing the ideas came to understand what they were trying to do and why.

Ensuring Implementation

A strategic leader has to personally drive the campaign. Driving the campaign does not mean micromanagement, but rather is reflective of how a strategic leader defines success, prioritizes his/her time, and empowers subordinates. In Petraeus' case, driving success included defining metrics, imposing a disciplined battle rhythm, and empowering mission command.

Success does not occur in one final battle, but instead is a gradual accumulation of progress measured over time. Petraeus and his staff used a tremendously structured process to understand all the variables that might affect progress: daily attacks, suicide car bombs, roadside bombs, sectarian violence, friendly and civilian casualties,



megawatts of electricity produced, oil exported, basic service provisions, hospitals built, schools built, rule of law—all helped Petraeus visualize how the campaign was being successfully or unsuccessfully implemented on the battlefield.³⁵

Petraeus' battle rhythm also became a method to ensure implementation of his big ideas. There would be time to regularly meet with the generals he charged with critical tasks such as the train and equip mission and detainee operations. He also built two days where he could conduct battlefield circulations to visit troops and communicate his big ideas into his weekly battle rhythm. Through regular reporting by subordinates and frequent visitations to the front line troops, he could continue to steer his organization towards progress.

According to Petraeus, “implementing big ideas typically requires empowering people and organizations to execute the ideas at their levels without the need for constant approval – indeed, empowering subordinate leaders to exercise considerable initiative.”³⁶ Tracing its roots from the Prussian concept of *Auftragstaktik*, and later codified in U.S. Army doctrine as “mission command,” Petraeus sought to enable disciplined initiative within his commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders. He would seek to empower brigade and battalion commanders in particular, but also the “strategic lieutenants” whose tactical actions would have strategic consequences.³⁷ Promoting initiative within the auspices of his counterinsurgency guidance and commander's intent was at the core of implementing his big ideas and defeating the insurgency at its most local level.³⁸

Revising and Institutionalizing Big Ideas

Sometimes the big ideas need to be revised; one example is detainee guidance. Detainee guidance was not prominent in Petraeus' previous assignments, nor in FM 3-24. However, after the Spring 2007 riots involving about 9,000 detainees, Petraeus knew that big ideas were needed to guide detainee operations.³⁹ The result was a systematic assessment under a new detainee joint task force commander. The new big idea was that detainee operations needed to conduct counterinsurgency inside the prison wire, just as much as outside. Detainee operations should rehabilitate the reconcilables and identify the extremists to get them out of the facilities.⁴⁰

Strategic leaders are also responsible for ensuring that a “learning organization” captures best practices that are institutionalized for the future. For Petraeus, “the long-term effectiveness of any organization—whether a military unit, a civilian government agency, or a business—often depends on its ability to identify and institutionalize adaptations that have proven effective and need widespread implementation.”⁴¹

As the CAC commander, he observed this while overseeing the Center for Army Lessons Learned. As Petraeus notes, lessons are not “lessons learned” until they've been institutionalized, not just identified. Petraeus worked to institutionalize ideas while CAC commander and worked with the Asymmetric Warfare Group and his Training and Doctrine Command counterparts while in Iraq. They codified the lessons into Army doctrine, organizational structures, training scenarios at the Combat Training Centers, as well as leader development.⁴² When combined, these efforts would ensure the military would not forget lessons learned from the course of Petraeus' career.

Conclusion

Many assume that Petraeus was lucky, being in the right place at the right time to be tapped for command in Iraq during President Bush's surge. While there is truth to that observation, this essay has attempted to illustrate the tremendous amount of preparation over the course of a long career that laid the foundation for Petraeus' command and success of the surge. Moreover, the surge was predicated on the strength of new big ideas that could only be implemented by a strategic leader willing and prepared to transform his organization. General Petraeus executed strategic leadership by developing these big ideas, communicating them effectively, overseeing their implementation, and ultimately institutionalizing them to turn around a hopeless war-effort in Iraq.

What remains unexamined are the unintended consequences of giving one leader such influence over operations and policy. Under one strategic commander, issues may simply be crowded out--such as Iran's role in a



future Iraq or Al Qaeda safe havens in Syria, both contributors to Iraq's dysfunction today. Future research in strategic command may see value in a more collaborative role in policy formulation. Nonetheless, Petraeus' leadership provides a tremendous case study in organizational transformation, mission command, and strategic leadership.

Major William J. Denn is a U.S. Army military intelligence officer and a student at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS. He holds a B.S. from the United States Military Academy, a M.P.P. from Harvard University, and a M.M.A.S. from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Denn is a recipient of the Gen. George C. Marshall Award and Gen. Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award.

NOTES:

1. Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009), 127.
2. David Petraeus, interview by author, New York, February 10, 2015.
3. Michael Gordon and Thom Shanker, "Bush to Name a New General to Oversee Iraq," *New York Times*, January 5, 2007, accessed March 5, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/05/world/middleeast/05military.html?_r=0.
4. Historian Victor Davis Hanson in his book *The Savior Generals* (2013) identifies five generals since Greek antiquities that won wars that most considered lost: Themistocles at Salamis in 480 B.C.; the Byzantine general Belisarius in 527 A.D.; William Tecumseh Sherman in 1864; Matthew Ridgeway in Korea, 1951; and Petraeus in Iraq, 2007.
5. Robert Murphy, "Strategic Leadership vs. Strategic Management: Untying the Gordian Knot," unpublished paper, 8, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/murphyarticlefeb02c.pdf>.
6. David Petraeus, interview by author, New York, February 10, 2015.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. David Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau," Princeton University Madison Medalist Alumni Day Lecture, Princeton, NJ, February 20, 2010.
10. Ibid.
11. This essay is a continuation of a larger project entitled "David Petraeus: On Strategic Command" sponsored by Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. The scope of this research project was for the author and his research team to understand the elements of strategic command from General Petraeus' experiences as commander in Iraq, CENTCOM commander, and ultimately as commander in Afghanistan. The result of this project was a multimedia documentary available for public use. For more details visit <http://www.belfercenter.org/PetraeusStrategicLeadership>.
12. David Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau," Princeton University Madison Medalist Alumni Day Lecture, Princeton, NJ, February 20, 2010.
13. James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington DC: Brassey's, 1995), 105.
14. Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York, NY:



Simon & Schuster, 2013), 27.

15. Ibid., 22.

16. Ibid., 24.

17. Ibid., 28.

18. Influential to Petraeus at the time also was a widely read U.S. Army War College paper by Colonel John Waghelstein, a Special Forces commander in El Salvador, which concluded, "Simply killing guerrillas will not solve El Salvador's problems." See Kaplan, *The Insurgents*, 29.

19. David Petraeus, "Lessons of History and Lessons of Vietnam," *Parameters* XVI(3) (Autumn 1986).

20. General Galvin would also ask Petraeus to ghostwrite an article for the Winter 1986 *Parameters*, entitled "Uncomfortable Wars: Toward a New Paradigm." Penned under Galvin's name, the article was read as an assault on the Army establishment. The conclusion was that low-intensity conflicts were going to dominate the upcoming battlefields. Governments must not only battle insurgents but also "reestablish political legitimacy" by addressing "contentious, long-ignored, but popular issues tied to key facets of national life—sociopolitical, economic, educational and juridical." See Kaplan, *The Insurgents*, 30.

21. Armin Rosen, "The Legacy of David Petraeus and the Future of American War," *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2012, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/the-legacy-of-david-petraeus-and-the-future-of-american-war/265301/>.

22. Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau."

23. In one Divisional area alone in Baghdad, U.S. forces would establish seventy-seven additional locations, partnered with Iraqi security forces, living among the population.

24. Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau."

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 7.

29. Petraeus, interview by author, New York, February 10, 2015.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. One such event was when al Maliki demanded that coalition forces reduce their presence in population centers, consolidating again on super-bases. Al Maliki would also demand that coalition forces reduce their night raids against insurgent leaders.

35. Petraeus, interview by author, New York, February 10, 2015.

36. Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau," 7.

37. Ibid.

38. In order to accomplish this Petraeus sometimes felt he needed to go around the traditional chain of command. Often he would hand out his email address to junior leaders instructing them to email him directly if their problems



were't being addressed by their chain of command. He would also seek reporting from his "directed telescopes," junior leaders throughout the force instructed to give him ground up reports of their progress and struggles. Petraeus was not attempting to undermine the traditional chain of command, but rather gaining a better perspective of the ground truth, solving problems, and empowering his leaders to turn his big ideas into real action at their level.

39. Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 153.

40. Petraeus, interview by author, New York, February 10, 2015.

41. Petraeus, "Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau," 8.

42. More specifically, the Army underwent what is referred to as a DOTMLPF review to understand how transform in the areas of Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership Development, Personnel, and Facilities.