

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 45
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2015*

Article 9

Winter 12-1-2015

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USAWC Press

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Recommended Citation

USAWC Press, "An Interview with David H. Petraeus, General (USA Retired)," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2988.

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On Strategic Leadership

An Interview with David H. Petraeus, General (USA Retired)

Few military officers ever command international coalitions in combat operations. Fewer still do it twice. General (retired) David Petraeus commanded coalition forces in Iraq from February 2007 to September 2008, and in Afghanistan from July 2010 to July 2011. He served as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency until 2012.

A team from the Belfer Center of the Harvard Kennedy School, led by Emile Simpson, recently interviewed General Petraeus to obtain his views on strategic leadership. What follows is a selection from those interviews, reproduced here with permission.¹

Question: Can you give us an overview of your four key tasks of strategic leadership?

Petraeus: First of all, strategic leadership is that which is exercised at a level of an organization where the individual is truly determining the azimuth for the organization. When you look at a combat theater, the overall commander of that combat theater—Multi-National Force-Iraq, International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan—is the strategic leader who, within the confines of the policy that is approved by the President of the United States and/or the NATO authorities, he's the one that is developing the direction the organization is going to go.

In essence there are four tasks. The *first* is to get the big ideas right. The *second* is to communicate them effectively throughout the breadth and depth of the organization. The *third* is to oversee the implementation of the big ideas. And the *fourth* is to determine how the big ideas need to be refined, changed, augmented, and then repeating the process over again and again and again.

Now, in my experience, getting the big ideas right isn't something that happens when you sit under the right tree and get hit on the head by Newton's apple—a big idea fully formed or big ideas fully flushed out. My experience is big ideas result from collaboration, from study, research, analysis, having a large tent in which lots of people are engaged. Certainly the leader at the end of the day does have to make decisions, does have to settle on the big ideas; but it's a very iterative process, or at least it has been for me over the years. And that's the way it needs to be approached.

Communicating the big ideas is a process that takes place using every possible medium and opportunity. It starts with the very first day speech, the change of command remarks after having taken command of the unit. In the case of Iraq, it continued with the issuance of a letter

¹ For the full interview, see: <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/PetraeusStrategicLeadership>.

I'd written to all of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and civilians of the Multi-National Force in Iraq. It then went on through a meeting with the commanders of the Multi-National Force who were all there for the change of command. In subsequent days, I changed the mission statement; over time we changed the entire campaign plan.

You continue to communicate on a daily basis, through everything you do, including how you spend your time. The battlefield update and analysis we went through each day was another opportunity to communicate throughout the organization because there are a lot of people who are video teleconferencing into this particular event. It ran a full hour, and my comments were all transcribed and sent out via the military internet all the way down to brigade commander level.

This gets now into overseeing the implementation of the big ideas task, which is one that involves a battle rhythm of how is it you're going to spend your time. Each day, what will you do? Beyond that, what are the metrics you use to measure progress? We spent a great deal of time trying to develop those, refine them, and make sure they were absolutely rigorous in application. How many days a week do you fence to go out and see for yourself, to go on a patrol, to meet with Iraqi leaders in their areas, to meet with our leaders all the way down to the company and platoon level, to get a sense of what they're experiencing, what their concerns are, whether they have been able to understand your big ideas, your intent, and then how they're operationalizing it at their level?

And then finally, of course, comes the process of identifying changes needed for the big ideas. Some big ideas perhaps, as we say, we shoot and leave by the side of the road, others we refine, and then perhaps we adopt some additional big ideas as well. So it's a continuous cycle that is always ongoing. This is something that does have to be done systematically. It is something that has to have a rhythm to it. You need to return to examine the big ideas formally from time to time. You need to determine your communications process. You have to communicate to those above you, you have to communicate to your coalition partners, to your host nation partners, Iraqi or Afghan, so it's a 360 degree effort in that regard. Then, of course, in the oversight of these, you're constantly assessing. Where do we need to make the changes, that fourth task? But that fourth task has, again, systems, processes, procedures. There was a Center for Army Lessons Learned team, a United States Marine Corps Lessons Learned team, a Joint Lessons Learned team, the Asymmetric Warfare Group, the counterinsurgency center, on and on and on. All of that formally had to be brought together, presented to me, and then recommendations made for how we would actually operationalize them, because a lesson is not learned until it has actually resulted in a change back in the big idea phase.

Question: How did you come to the “big ideas” when you were in command in Iraq?

Petraeus: Well, first of all is what I did to get the big ideas right in my own head. To help our Army and indeed the Marine Corps—because we did this in partnership with General Mattis and the US Marine Corps—what we sought to do to help those institutions develop the right big ideas as well. So during that fifteen month period that I was

back in the United States [commanding the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth], having returned from a fifteen-and-a-half month tour as a three star heading the train and equip mission in Iraq, we spent a great deal of time working our way through ideas and concepts of what the strategy should be. This included the counterinsurgency field manual, and it included articles for *Military Review* magazine—indeed we had a writing contest for counterinsurgency using *Military Review* which was also under my purview at that time. We worked very, very hard and with considerable rigor to try to get this set in our heads so when I actually did deploy—you know, I'd been told that it was quite likely I was going to go back to Iraq. There was only one position to which I could return presumably, and that would be to be the commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq. The call came, frankly, a bit earlier than I expected when the President decided to conduct the surge, and decided to make a change in leadership.

But when I went back over there, and having already had nearly two-and-a-half years on the ground, I had a pretty good idea—as did our other leaders, who had been seized with this issue for a number of years. Most of the commanders who came to Iraq during the surge had at least one tour, one full-year tour on the ground by then. Many had two. And so we were a reasonably experienced group, and, again, we'd worked our way through this. We'd made the doctrinal changes, we'd tweaked our organizations, we'd overhauled the training, the so-called road to deployment, every activity along it. We'd completely changed our leader development courses. And so we'd made a number of institutional changes to ensure our leaders and our units were prepared for the tasks required in Iraq and of course in Afghanistan as well.

Question: How did you communicate the “big ideas”?

Petraeus: Relentlessly and continuously. You have to seek every opportunity, make use of it, exploit it. Every medium, every possible way in which you can communicate the big ideas as effectively as possible throughout the breadth and depth of the organization, but also to our partners, our Iraqi and coalition partners, and indeed to the greater audiences out there, certainly to our chain of command, our bosses in the US and coalition chain, and to the people of our nations, the citizens of the United States and the other coalition countries. All of these had to be audiences, each of them needed to be provided with what it was we were trying to do. We needed to explain that; we had an obligation to do that. I think we even had an obligation to let them get to know a little bit about the individual who was commanding their sons and daughters, who was taking this important effort forward together with Ambassador Crocker and all the other members of the team. And indeed we then owed them an objective, a frank, realistic assessment of the situation on the ground, how we thought it was going, what we planned to do in the future in a general sense, and what we thought we could and could not achieve.

Question: How did you oversee the implementation of the “big ideas” in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Petraeus: Well, in a very structured way. You’ve got to understand that this is not going to be an effort that’s going to culminate with taking the hill, planting the flag, and going home to a victory parade. Rather, it’s going to be a set of small successes and perhaps small setbacks along the way, certainly. It will be the gradual achievement of progress that does then start to accumulate over time. And you can map it, you can see it, you can feel it. You’ll see it in the metrics.

We worked very hard to have a whole series of different metrics on which we focused, whether it was daily attacks initiated by the enemy, suicide car bombs, regular car bombs, improvised explosive device explosions, sectarian violence, our casualties, Iraqi casualties, civilian casualties, again across the board. Even into how many megawatts of electricity are being produced, how many barrels of oil produced and exported. Every element of Iraq, its society, its political progress, its social progress, basic service provision, hospitals, schools, rule of law, you name it, we had to track all of that, in addition to the normal military measures, if you will. And we had, again, a very, very structured process.

Every single day we had the BUA. It started, I think it was at 7:30 in the morning to 8:30, our time, at the end of which we had a small group meeting with a select group of the highest, most senior coalition leaders, and then ultimately a smaller group with just US and UK, and then perhaps the smallest of the small groups, which was just Lieutenant General Odierno and me sitting there looking at each other asking when each of us thought this thing was going to turn in the early, very, very tough days. But then we would have a series of other events during the week. I got an hour each week at minimum with the three star train and equip commander, another hour minimum with the special operations commanders, there was a special intelligence assessment that we did every Sunday that was frankly very stimulating and enjoyable. We had marked out two days a week minimum where right after the BUA I’d get in either an up-armored Humvee or one of the other vehicles or a helicopter and we’d drive or fly somewhere and then go on a patrol with a unit, spend time with that unit, get an update from them, get a feel for myself of what the situation was on the ground. There were certain Iraqi events every single week. There was a National Security Council meeting of the Iraqis that was conducted every single week, as an example.

And then we had the video teleconference with the president of the United States, Washington time, 7:30 to 8:30 on Monday morning. I had the video teleconference with Secretary Gates and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs every Tuesday at Washington time 7:30, and so forth. Then there were events that took place biweekly; there were monthly events, and there were even quarterly events, all the way to the so-called strategic campaign plan assessment. Ambassador Crocker and I conducted with all of the leaders of the US and coalition diplomatic communities and embassy teams with the development and intelligence leaders there as well, and all of the senior coalition military leaders present also. We had quite detailed analytics we looked at for how were we coming in the train-and-equip mission for the Iraqi security forces, the overall security

situation, and so forth, all the way through the civilian lines of effort as well.

Question: In either Iraq or Afghanistan, could you give us an example of how an important “big idea” was revised?

Petraeus: I’ll give you an example of one that was created. In Iraq, I’d not focused a great deal on detainee operations in my previous assignments as the division commander or the commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, the train and equip mission. But now, all of a sudden, I realized that we’ve got perhaps somewhere short of 20,000 detainees and it went to twenty-seven or twenty-eight thousand during my time as commander of the Multi-National Force during the surge. And I realized that we had to completely overhaul what we were doing. We had a riot one night early on in my time in command where there were some 10,000 detainees rioting. And there’s no fence in the world that can stop 10,000 detainees if they all work together. And we ended up mustering every single person at that particular camp, in riot control gear, with the fire engines and everything else we could. We used every non-lethal munition we had, and shot thousands of rubber bullets that evening before finally getting it under control. And I realized something was seriously wrong.

The new detainee joint task force commander had just taken over, and we underwent a very systematic assessment and we came up with a number of big ideas for detainee operations. The first of which was we’re not releasing any more detainees until we get it under control and we have a rehabilitation process. But the second was we can’t do that until we’ve identified who the true hardcore extremist leaders are and get them out of these detainee facilities. So this was called “carrying out counter-insurgency inside the wire.” It’s very similar to what you do outside the wire in the neighborhood. You’ve got to identify the bad guys, you’ve got to figure out how to kill or capture or remove them from the general population and put them somewhere safe, and we had to do that in the detainee operations affairs as well. And again, it was not something I thought would be a very significant part of my effort. I thought we’d be focused on securing the people, reconciliation, going after the irreconcilables, but this was actually probably one of the top five. Ultimately we had to figure out how to rehabilitate these individuals, release them, but with a much reduced recidivism rate. And so we developed new big ideas there, refined those over time, developed a review process and so forth; and we developed the rehabilitation programs, began implementing them, and experimented with them and tweaked them, obviously, again, as a learning organization should seek to do.