

**Princeton Madison Medalist Alumni Day Lecture**  
**"Strategic Leadership and Old Nassau"**  
**Remarks by General David H. Petraeus**  
**20 February 2010**

Well, thank you all very much for that warm welcome. Thanks, Dean Russel, for your very kind words and very kind introduction – more importantly thanks for your great leadership of the national asset that is the graduate school here at Princeton University. Thanks for recognizing a great Marine – Barrett Bradstreet – a wonderful example of the kind of intellectual soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen that we have out there who can think as well as fight. And I want to assure you I had a good run with him this morning and got a good update on the Woodrow Wilson School and he reports it is doing well.

It is an enormous honor to join you all this morning, and obviously a special moment to do so as the recipient of the Madison Medal.

President Tilghman, it's great to see you here today. There she is – in your orange leather, or maybe pleather probably would be more appropriate. Our university is very fortunate to have you at its helm. We thank you for your tremendous leadership, your superb example, and your continuing impressive vision! Indeed, I have to say I'm very proud to be an alumnus of a university whose president this year encouraged its students...and I quote:

- “to remember that it’s a lifelong responsibility to work on behalf of those less fortunate;
- “to break out of the orange bubble and explore the world;
- “to study what fascinates them and what ignites their curiosity; and (and the ‘and’ is underlined)
- “to be as silly and inventive as they like...(so as long as what they do doesn’t pose harm to themselves or others!)”

Madam President, thank you also for reminding us all that Princeton is, and I quote again, “a place to live as well as to study, and a place to learn how to live life to its fullest”...that Princeton “is serious, but it is not somber;”...and indeed that “it is a place that values beauty and freshness and light and the renewal that comes from times of reflection and times of joy.”

As all here know well, these sentiments have long characterized the ethos of Princeton. And they were prominent among the reasons that I chose to study here. And they're prominent among the reasons that I continue to be proud to be a Princetonian – something I'll talk about a little bit later in my remarks.

Congressman Leach, congratulations to you on your selection for the Woodrow Wilson Award. It's great to see you recognized this morning for your decades of service to our nation and our university – starting with the Foreign Service at the State Department – taking quite a principled stand early in his career that ended up with him no longer being a member of the State Department, in 30 impressive years in Congress where he more than perhaps anyone else in that time crossed the aisle repeatedly, as a professor here at the Woodrow Wilson School (no need to mention your time at Harvard's Kennedy School), and currently, of course, as the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Congratulations again to you.

And I know that you're joined by a number of individuals from your class – the great Class of 1964. Yeah – HOOAH! You can spot them because of their nice sartorial wear here – a class, coincidentally, that made me an honorary member last spring. In fact, I want to reassure all of my classmates that I still have the stylish blazer that you gave me...right here...and I know there's a great occasion out there to wear it but it hasn't come up just yet!

But again, it is great to be back at Princeton for any reason, but particularly for this one. In truth, I never imagined, I truly never imagined when I was a student that I'd someday be the one up at the front of the room offering remarks. Indeed, that was the last thing on my mind when I was studying here. In fact, returning to Princeton for today's occasion could easily tempt one to feel, you know, a little bit important. But were that temptation to strike, I would recall a cautionary tale that the great General Jack Vessey used to tell about himself as a reminder to remain humble in such situations.

The time was 1982 and General Vessey had just assumed his new duties as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, culminating over 4 decades in uniform that began with service as a young First Sergeant in Italy in WWII and included earning the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism some 25 years later when his battalion's firebase in Vietnam was nearly overrun. Now here he was serving as the senior officer of the greatest military in the world. And he and his wife were invited to attend a performance at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where they were seated in the Presidential Box and treated royally the entire night.

He was, therefore, feeling understandably good about his station in life – and perhaps even a little bit important – as he and his wife left the Center at the end of the evening and stood waiting for their car. Just as the car pulled up, General Vessey saw retired General J. Lawton Collins, a legendary former Army Chief who had earned the nickname "Lightning Joe" as a hard-charging, highly decorated Corps Commander in WWII.

On seeing General Collins, General Vessey immediately went over to him, held out his hand, and said, "Good evening, General Collins. I'm General Jack Vessey, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; it's great to see you, sir."

Whereupon, General Collins shook General Vessey's hand, looked him up and down, and said: "Vessey, get me a cab!"

Well, the first time I heard General Vessey tell that story, of course someone in the audience immediately asked him, "Well, what did you do, sir?"

"Well," General Vessey said, "I got him a cab!"

And I want to assure you that if anyone needs a cab later today, I'll be out front doing my duty...

Well, thanks for laughing. You know the deal, when you reach this station in life, you're only as good as the material they give you.

In reality, being in Princeton classrooms back in the 1980's taught me a bit about maintaining one's intellectual humility as well. As I confessed during the Baccalaureate Address last spring, in fact, I had my share of early struggles here. Professor Bob Willig's Advanced Microeconomics class, in particular, comes to mind. Now I hadn't taken a true basic economics course as an undergraduate. I was pre-med of all things at West Point. And I actually didn't know about supply and demand curves, what each represented, which went up and which went down. Heck, I didn't even know the difference between micro and macro economics. And it had been a few years since I'd used higher-level math as well. So, here I was enrolled in the advanced graduate-level microeconomics course. I am not making this up. And it was tough. And I had to work through Paul Samuelson's classic basic economics text at the same time that I was going through Professor Willig's advanced graduate level course. In any event, I obviously survived and I can now affirm that all the hard work was worth it. And that's a tribute to Professor Willig and all the other professors and staff members who helped me become a proud graduate of this university. And I should note that with us this morning was another member also doing the Ph.D. track here who assured me that his first semester was equally rocky at the Woodrow Wilson School.

On a personal note, I want to single out one of my most wonderful mentors over the years, and was mentioned already by the dean – my dissertation advisor, Professor Dick Ullman. As all know, a key strength, perhaps the key strength of Princeton has always been its professors – devoted to scholarship, teaching, and mentoring – rather than preparing for that night's cable news appearance – not that there's anything wrong with that, just so long as it's not the essence of the organization. In any event, it's the university's professors, as you all know, who make these hallowed halls so special – yep, students do some of that too – but it's the professors who have always gone out of their way to support us during our time here and who often sacrifice their research and projects to help us with ours. Professor Dick Ullman personified these qualities. I remain grateful to him for that to this day – and I suspect that virtually all the graduates here with us this morning had similar experiences with faculty members like him during their time at Princeton. Indeed, I'm sure that all of us here on Alumni Day share a

sense of gratitude toward the world's greatest faculty, and I'd ask that you join me in thanking them for all that they've done for so many of us over the years.

In reflecting on my time here, as one understandably does in approaching such occasions, I was reminded, indeed, of how wonderful Princeton is for all of us, how special it is to me personally, and how proud I am to this day to be an alumnus of this great university.

In fact, I decided to list a few of the reasons I'm proud to be a Princetonian, and I'd like to share some of them with you.

- I am, for example, proud of the culture of inquiry that Princeton fosters and proud of the culture of debate and conversation that flourishes here.
- I'm proud, needless to say, to be associated with a university that attracts a truly exceptional student body and an equally exceptional faculty and staff.
- I'm proud of the natural and manmade beauty of the campus – and of how generations of Princeton alumni and university leaders and staff have preserved and improved that beauty.
- I'm proud to be connected with a university that includes in its faculty and its student body important representation of the diversity in America – indeed the world – that has been among our nation's greatest strengths.
- On that note, in fact, I'm proud to be a graduate of a university in which a Palestinian-American and a Jewish-American can play together on the same basketball team. Of course, I'm even more proud that that team has achieved a won-loss record of 20 and 2. And congratulations on the victory over Yale last night.
- I should note, as an aside, I'm proud to hear that the Woodrow Wilson School is going to establish a Center for Security Studies. That was decided I think earlier this week and I offer congratulations to the former Dean and to the present Dean – Anne-Marie Slaughter and Chris Paxson. Well done to you.
- I'm proud to be a graduate of the university that has the country's finest ROTC program –and that kept that program throughout the Vietnam War, unlike several others. And it was great, great to spend time with the members of that program yesterday and some of those who were with us this morning as well.
- Indeed, I'm proud that Princeton prepares all of its students so admirably to make a difference in our Nation and in our world by helping them develop those qualities it takes to be leaders...attributes that President Tilghman so eloquently outlined at the beginning of the school year in her remarks at the Opening Exercises. And again I quote some of those:

- “a devotion to critical thinking over ideology;
- “the self-confidence that it takes to change your mind in the face of new evidence;
- “the capacity to speak the truth as you understand it;
- “a deep respect for learning as opposed to uninformed opinion; and
- “the strength of character that grows out of humility and compassion for your fellow human beings.”

And thanks for putting voice to all of those very important thoughts. Well done.

### **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP**

Well those are, indeed, critical aspects of leadership. And, given that we have so many current and future leaders from all walks of life here this morning, I thought I'd use the remainder of my time this morning, before the Q & A, to share with you a few thoughts on leadership – in this case, thoughts, specifically, on strategic leadership – that is, leadership exercised at the most senior levels of large organizations ...

In my view, a strategic leader of any organization or group has a solemn obligation to make sound and ethical decisions, and to do so based on a continuous cycle of learning. That obligation necessarily entails several critical tasks that all revolve around big ideas: working hard to develop the right big ideas, communicating those big ideas effectively, and then overseeing their implementation. Beyond that, in the course of that implementation, a leader must also seek and capture feedback – best practices, worst practices, lessons that need to be learned, and so on – feedback that enables refinement of the big ideas, communication of those refinements, and oversight of their implementation. This, then, comprises a fundamental cycle, not at all difficult to understand, but often very difficult to carry out properly.

This morning, I'd like to walk you through those elements of strategic leadership, using our experiences in Iraq to highlight how they worked in practice as we executed the surge – not just the surge of forces into Iraq in the spring of 2007 but, more far more importantly, the surge of ideas, big ideas. The truth is that the surge of ideas was even more important than the surge of forces – though clearly the increase in forces enabled us to implement the new ideas, the big ideas, much more rapidly than otherwise might have been the case.

#### **Getting the Big Ideas Right**

The first task of strategic leadership, then – and probably the most difficult of all – is the task of getting the big ideas right. Developing the right intellectual constructs to guide

the organization's approach is critical. This typically requires an ability by the organization's senior leaders to think creatively and critically about complex challenges and, quite often, to embrace new concepts, in addition to constantly testing one's assumptions and basic thinking.

In my experience, big ideas come from a focused process in which strategic leaders and their key advisors collaboratively develop those ideas over time, analyzing, refining, evaluating, and challenging their concepts to converge on the right ones. Big ideas don't fall out of a tree and hit you in the head like Newton's apple; rather, they tend to start as kernels of little ideas – and they are then gradually developed, augmented, and refined through the process of analysis, study, and discussion.

In the case of Iraq, for example, it took several years to develop and refine the big ideas that guided our efforts when we launched the surge. The biggest of the big ideas there was that the Iraqi people were the decisive terrain – the human terrain was the decisive terrain – and that, together with our Iraqi partners, we had to focus on securing and serving them, on earning their respect and gaining their support. Several other big ideas flowed from this. First, we realized that we couldn't adequately secure the people by commuting to the fight from big bases; we had to live with the people we were going to secure. Second, we recognized that we couldn't just clear an area and then leave it and move on to the next. Indeed, we had to commit the resources to hold and rebuild areas once they had been cleared. And third, we realized that we could not just kill or capture all the enemies of security and stability in Iraq; rather, we also had to identify and reach out to reconcilable elements of the insurgency.

Each of those big ideas – and a number of others in the counterinsurgency guidance I issued –such as being first with the truth, living our values, promoting initiative, and institutionalizing the process of learning and adapting, and so on – proved effective in Iraq. And today, despite innumerable continuing challenges and drama and despite periodic attacks – we see the lowest levels of violence in Iraq since the beginning of our operations there, with the improvements in security creating the space for the economic, diplomatic, and political progress that has also been achieved, albeit to varying degrees. Clearly there is still much hard work to be done in Iraq and there are still serious security threats, political challenges, economic difficulties, and social issues. But there has been significant progress, and it came not just because we had extra coalition forces and, in time, extra Iraqi forces. The progress came even more because of how coalition and Iraqi commanders employed the extra forces and because they were prepared to exploit opportunities that presented themselves. Getting the big ideas right was crucial in guiding that employment – just as getting the big ideas right is crucial in any endeavor. In fact, if one doesn't succeed in getting the big ideas right in an effort like that in Iraq, operational plans will be built on shaky or even flawed foundations. And, in that case, no amount of additional troops or other resources can produce success.

### **Communicating Them Effectively**

While getting the big ideas right is critical, simply developing them is not enough. Indeed, the second task of a strategic leader is to communicate those big ideas effectively – in effect to educate the organization’s leaders and others on the big ideas, hopefully leading those individuals to embrace the big ideas.

To be effective, communication should flow in multiple directions. For those of us in uniform, it should flow upward through the chain of command, downward through our units and staffs, and outward through coalition partners, interagency elements, and the press. The most important direction, though, is downward – communicating the big ideas throughout the breadth and depth of one’s organization. That’s what matters most, as it is the leaders and units within the organization that will turn the big ideas into reality on the ground.

In any field or sector, there are multiple means and venues through which strategic leaders can communicate within an organization. Effective communication is a matter of identifying and using every one of those means. In Iraq, communication of the new big ideas began the day I took command – in my change of command speech in fact and then in a letter I sent to all of our leaders and troopers. Beyond that, we rapidly incorporated the new big ideas into our joint military and civilian campaign plan – it was joint – and in a host of addresses, command letters, presentations at commanders’ conferences, briefings to superiors and higher headquarters, press conferences and press releases, meetings with high-level visitors, and even Congressional hearings – indeed, sometimes especially through Congressional hearings.

Again, weaving the big ideas into every possible communication opportunity and forum reinforces the ideas throughout and even beyond one’s organization. Over time, relentless communication of the big ideas takes hold, and those responsible for executing them – again, the most important audience – as well as those witnessing that execution, come to understand what we’re trying to do and why.

### **Ensuring Their Implementation**

The third function of strategic leadership—overseeing implementation of the big ideas—is, of course, absolutely critical as well. Without proper execution, needless to say, getting the big ideas right and communicating them effectively are for naught. Thus, strategic leaders have to personally oversee the conduct of operations, to be present at various points of decision, to see various activities for themselves – and, in some cases, to conduct or direct them, and to identify and eliminate obstacles to the successful execution of the big ideas.

Now, this should not be taken to imply micromanagement, for 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, as we sought to do in Iraq. It is often observed that

all insurgencies are local – and, thus, all counterinsurgency operations have to be fine tuned to local circumstances as well. Consequently, leaders at lower levels have to be empowered to operationalize such big ideas as securing the population, promoting reconciliation, employing money as a weapon system, and so on in ways that work for their local circumstances. And that’s what we sought to do in Iraq, empowering brigade and battalion commanders in particular, but also the so-called strategic lieutenants – called that because young leaders at tactical levels often took actions with strategic consequences. In so doing, we sought to enable those leaders to turn big ideas at my level into real action at their level.

In fact, I realized we were making progress in that regard when I saw a sign in a company command post in Baghdad that read, and I quote: “In the absence of guidance or orders, figure out what they should have been and execute aggressively.” Not only did I take that sign back to the headquarters that day, I also incorporated that direction into the portion of the counterinsurgency guidance that began with the admonition, “Promote initiative.”

### **Institutionalizing Them**

When strategic leaders get the big ideas right, communicate them effectively, and then oversee their proper implementation, we then have the privilege of seeing ideas turned into reality to bring about impressive results. But, as this takes place, it’s also the responsibility of strategic leaders to ensure that best practices, as well as worst practices and lessons that need to be learned, are captured, shared, and, where appropriate, institutionalized. Indeed, the long-term effectiveness of an 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.

In fact, those of us in uniform have worked hard to ensure that our military Services are “learning organizations.” We have, for example, established lessons learned centers in our organizational structures and we’ve developed formal processes to capture best practices in order to refine our doctrinal concepts, the curricula in our military schools, and the scenarios at our combat training centers. Needless to say, that effort is of huge importance, and it has a great deal to do with whether our organizations continue to learn and adapt or get left behind as others – including our adversaries – prove more adaptive.

That, then, is the essence of strategic leadership, and my point today is that this wonderful university does a superb job of equipping its graduates with the skills, knowledge, and attributes needed in those who may, some day in the future, exercise strategic leadership.

We face numerous challenges at home and abroad as we embark on a new decade. And whether here in the United States or in Afghanistan or Iraq, we need strategic leaders who can work with partners to help chart the proper course by identifying the



right big ideas, communicating them effectively, overseeing their implementation, and capturing lessons in the course of that implementation.

This room is filled with businessmen and women and public servants who have given significantly of their energy and expertise to provide the kind of strategic leadership I've just discussed. And I know that there are many future such leaders among us, as well. Because that's the nature of the Old Nassau community – it's filled with Princeton graduates who are passionately committed to addressing the challenges of the day. As I've explained this morning, I'm very proud to be a part of this community and I'm always encouraged by our shared commitment to serve our Nation and, indeed, the nations of the world.

Over half a century ago, Adlai Stevenson, Class of 1922, returned to Princeton to address the Class of 1954. Perhaps a few of you were here then. During his remarks, he offered the following admonition: "Don't forget when you leave why you came..." he said.

And I'd encourage each of you here today – whether you're part of the Class of 1954 or the Class of 2004 or any of the other classes represented here this morning, to go and stand one more time on the front lawn of this great university... a lawn framed by tigers, under the sandstone visage of Nassau Hall, through which many of those who helped build this nation carried our Nation's early burdens – and remember why you came to Princeton.

Remember the refrain of our alma mater – "Our hearts will give while we shall live." And for a moment, remember the fire we all felt as we became citizens of Tiger Nation, a fire that always propels us forward in our commitment to serve. As you do so, be proud to be part of a community that more than lives up to its motto – Princeton in the Nation's Service and in the Service of all Nations. Thank you very much.