

Retired General David Petraeus Shares Insights on Leadership and Warfare

By Robert D. Martin, USAWC PAO 05 December 2023



Retired Gen. David Petraeus sits to the left of Dr. John Nagl, USAWC professor of National Security Studies during his presentation to the Class of 2024, Nov. 20, Bliss Auditorium, Carlisle Barracks.

On Nov. 30, the Army War College welcomed retired Gen. David Petraeus, co-author of "Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine," to address the class of 2024 students in Bliss Auditorium. Petraeus, known for his leadership and strategic knowledge, offered his insights into the secrets of success and effective leadership, especially in strategic military operations.

During Petraeus's discussion, he introduced the concept of "forecast of strategic leadership," an intellectual theory he had developed over the years. He emphasized its significance by revealing that he implemented this framework, starting from his service and extending to his time as Director of the CIA. This construct outlines four crucial tasks for a strategic leader.

Petraeus stressed the understanding of the nature of war and the importance of a battlefield or theater commander comprehending the intricacies of warfare. This involves a detailed knowledge of one's forces, the enemy's forces, geographical terrain, human terrain, and various other factors influencing the conflict. This deep understanding is the foundation for formulating the right strategy.

Once the right strategy is formulated, Petraeus emphasizes the need to communicate big ideas effectively throughout the organization and all stakeholders involved in the conflict. The ability to convey big ideas is a mark of successful leadership.

As Petraeus defined it, leadership is not just about envisioning big ideas but also overseeing their implementation. This involves ensuring the strategies are executed effectively and achieving the desired outcomes.

An often overlooked task in strategic leadership is the continual refinement of big ideas. Petraeus highlighted the importance of incorporating action-forcing mechanisms into the battle rhythm to improve strategies iteratively.

Drawing on historical context, Petraeus reflected on the lessons learned from Vietnam. He emphasized the necessity of having large military units mirroring their own as a response to the challenges faced in Korea. This insight underscored the importance of adapting military strategies to the unique demands of each conflict.

Transitioning to contemporary concerns, Petraeus touched on the future of warfare. He envisioned a shift from a small number of large platforms to an emphasis on massive, small, unmanned systems driven by algorithmic piloting. The fusion of cutting-edge technology and human ingenuity will redefine the landscape of high-end warfare.

A recurring theme in Petraeus's talk was the interconnectedness of global actions. He highlighted the far-reaching consequences of decisions made in one part of the world, underscoring the need for strategic leaders to consider the broader implications of their choices.

Petraeus was in Carlisle to receive the inaugural Dickinson College President's Award. The symbol of excellence and distinction is given by college President John E. Jones III to individuals who lead lives of service, forge new paths in their fields, contribute meaningfully to the betterment of the world, and inspire future generations. The Petraeus's were honored during a special celebration hosted by Jones. Thursday, Nov. 30, in the

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