BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH AIR FORCE MAJOR GEN. T. GLENN DAVIS

Retired U.S. Air Force Major General T. Glenn Davis with Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.
Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with retired U.S. Air Force Major General T. Glenn Davis, the inaugural executive director of USC Upstate's recently established National Security and Government Institute.

Harris: I'd like to start at the beginning. Can you tell me where you grew up, what your upbringing was like, and what drew you to your career in the military?

Davis: I'm from Columbia, South Carolina — both my parents were from here — and I'm a product of the South Carolina education system. I graduated high school and headed to the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Originally, I was bound for Duke on a pre-med scholarship, but at the last minute decided on USC. That meant I didn't have a scholarship, so I looked for ways to pay for school. The Air Force ROTC offered a quick scholarship, and that's how I landed in the military — not because I'd planned it. My parents both worked multiple jobs, and I worked two or three jobs while in college. That background taught me work ethic and resourcefulness early on.

Harris: After a distinguished military career, you went on to lead major defense industry programs, including at Pratt & Whitney and United Dynamics Aerospace & Defense. What were some of the most important lessons you learned in leadership and life from those roles?

Davis: I spent 37 years in the Air Force, starting as a lieutenant, mostly in combat assignments with fighter aircraft. Eventually, I became Director of Logistics for Air Force Materiel Command, responsible for 5,500 aircraft and a $14-billion budget, and later Deputy Director of Logistics for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

When I moved to Pratt & Whitney, I thought leading 600 people and managing $225 million in revenue would be easy compared to the Air Force. But earning $225 million is far harder than spending $14 billion. Running a small aerospace company with just 55 employees and $20 million in revenue was equally challenging — just in different ways.

In the military, the pressure was about bringing people and aircraft home safely and stewarding taxpayer money. In business, it was about ensuring employees could buy groceries or pay for their kids' braces. Both pressures are intense, just from different directions.

Harris: You've led organizations with budgets from billions to millions. What leadership lessons apply across that range?

Davis: Whether the budget is huge or small, deciding how to allocate resources is equally hard. In the Air Force, different aircraft communities — fighters, bombers, trainers, refuelers — all thought they were the top priority. Rather than picking favorites, we focused on readiness: bringing all units up to a certain capability level.

And today's all-volunteer military is full of smart, committed people. Leading them requires creativity, collaboration, and adaptability.

Harris: Can you talk more about where you've been and what brought you home?

Davis: After commissioning in 1984, my first assignment at age 21 had me leading 310 people, managing $14 million, and overseeing 27

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> My goal is to bring the best of places like Georgetown and Harvard to the Upstate through short courses, a certificate program, and a speaker series featuring leaders like former U.N. Ambassador Kelley Currie.

aircraft. Over 37 years, I served in 30 countries, deployed four times, was stationed in Germany when the Berlin Wall came down, and led missions after 9/11, including being the first F-16 unit to drop bombs in Afghanistan.

The Air Force also pushed education. I earned a master's equivalent at Georgetown while working on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and later attended Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. One of my commanders told me, "I'm not sending you to Harvard to learn. I'm sending you so Harvard learns from you." That took the pressure off and let me fully engage in the experience.

Harris: Now you're the inaugural executive director of USC Upstate's National Security and Government Institute. What's your vision?

Davis: My goal is to bring the best of places like Georgetown and Harvard to the Upstate through short courses, a certificate program, and a speaker series featuring leaders like former U.N. Ambassador Kelley Currie. We're also working on national security and cybersecurity programs. Right now, South Carolina has 5,020 unfilled cybersecurity jobs. No one school can meet that demand alone, so we should collaborate statewide. Our partnerships with the Pentagon and other agencies can position USC Upstate as a key player in solving this challenge.

Harris: You also spent a year in Saudi Arabia working on Vision 2030. What was that like, and how might it impact your work here?

Davis: I was recruited by retired Gen. James Jones, former National Security Advisor, to merge Saudi Arabia's Air Force and Air Defense forces — a huge challenge involving systems, leadership structures, and cultures. Vision 2030 aims to produce 50 percent of Saudi weapon system components domestically by 2030, up from 10 percent today. They'll do this by sending people abroad for training, partnering with U.S. companies, and acquiring capabilities. My goal is to position USC Upstate to benefit from some of that investment.

Harris: What struck you most about living in Saudi Arabia?

Davis: It was far safer than most Americans imagine — no gangs, no drugs, no alcohol abuse. It's technologically advanced and economically ambitious. Saudi Arabia is a critical regional power whose stability benefits U.S. national interests, particularly in energy.

Harris: I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

Davis: The Air Force moved me often — sometimes every 18 months — to "fix" struggling units. In those situations, I had to be authoritative and decisive. In other roles, like five-year planning at the Pentagon, I had to be collaborative and deliberative. Leaders must be ready for both styles and know when to apply each.

Harris: Outside of work, you enjoy gardening, hiking, and cycling. What draws you to those activities?

Davis: They're all outdoors. Hiking and cycling let me focus entirely on the physical challenge. Gardening is something I share with my wife. And yes, there's a little competition to have the best yard in the neighborhood.

Harris: Do you have a favorite quote or mantra?

Davis: Rudyard Kipling's poem "If." One part talks about giving "the unforgiving minute" your all — a reminder not to give up when things get tough. Another part says, "If you can walk with kings — nor lose the common touch." That's been a guiding principle for me as a leader.