

EDUCATION

By John McAlley



General Badass

How God and the Hunt family lured one of the most decorated engineers in the country from Notre Dame to SMU.

ON A STACK OF UNPACKED BOXES IN HIS sliver of a new office at SMU, professor Jeffrey Talley unfurls the floor plans for the building going up directly outside his window. If he does this with the panache of a two-star general with months logged in military briefing rooms, it's because he is one.

"If you can imagine an upscale Hilton version of academia, that's it," he says, running his hand over the drawings of Caruth Hall, the latest addition to SMU's resplendent but increasingly gridlocked acreage.

Only six months ago, the 50-year-old Talley was occupied with a strikingly different construction project: the rebuilding of Baghdad. As the chief military engineer charged with restoring of infrastructure—electricity, plumbing, schools, hospitals, roads—to Iraq's obliterated capital city and the commanding general of the effort to clear Baghdad's streets of the Shiite militia's deadly IEDs, Talley and

his brigade of 2,000 troops were exposed to relentless danger and stress. Which makes his unflagging affability a surprise, his stockpile of Rambo-ism priceless, and his occasional bluntness understandable. The latter, he acknowledges, is a problem; residue from Iraq, where the "flash to bang time" demands directness.

Still decompressing from his tour there, Talley—the newly seated chair of the environmental and civil engineering department at SMU's Lyle School of Engineering—recently made quick work of a colleague whose fervor didn't match Talley's own ferocious ambitions for SMU: to make it not the fifth- or sixth-ranked engineering school in Texas but a tier-one research university with global impact. If this were the front lines, Talley might say he wire-brushed the guy.

"I was a little direct," he says. "It was at a private lunch, and this

AT EASE: Jeffrey Talley didn't want the job. Then SMU endowed a chair in his name and made him the director of a new institute.

MATTHEW COOPER

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person said to me, ‘Well, if we work really hard, SMU can become a regional Yale.’ And I said, ‘Regional *Yale*? Get *away* from me. I didn’t leave the University of Notre Dame to be a regional anything.’”

Talley has landed at SMU with all the subtlety of a bunker-busting bomb. The career Army reservist and, until just a few months ago, prized engineering prof at Notre Dame is the latest and potentially most game-changing star hire by Lyle School dean Geoffrey Orsak. Talley’s mission: to shake up the department and help catalyze Orsak’s lofty agenda to respark the problem-solving imagination of engineers around the globe. Caruth Hall will be the epicenter of Orsak’s vision, home to what he calls “the world’s greatest innovation machine,” a collective of heavily funded institutes that will bring together thinkers and, most important, doers from academia and the private and public sectors to aid ailing and underserved corners of the planet, from West Darfur to East Dallas.

In the late summer of 2008, Orsak had set out only to replace the chair of one of the smallest departments within the Lyle School. But when Talley popped up on his radar, it ignited a recruiting campaign of comical dimensions, one that ultimately would necessitate the Hail Marys of a bishop and a Hall of Fame quarterback, and dig into the deepest pockets of Dallas’ power elite. “There are things we did in this process that I hope will never end up in print,” Orsak says nervously, pulling on a Diet Coke. “But when it’s go time, man, you do everything you’ve got to do.”

WHEN JEFF TALLEY WAS GROWING UP, first in St. Louis, then in the shadow of the Pentagon, in Alexandria, Virginia, he never could have imagined a life in the military. In fact, his impulse was to *steal* government secrets, not keep them. One of five boys born to a computer-specialist father who worked for the Department of Defense, Talley remembers, as an 11-year-old, messing with the wrong civil servant. “My dad was a country boy from the sticks of Missouri who never finished college, so everything he got, he got the hard way,” Talley says. “He used to carry this briefcase—a beat-up thing that was always locked—and

stick it in his bedroom closet at night. So I got in there with a butter knife, and as soon as I popped it open—*whomp*—Dad was standing right over me. He was a belt guy, and he whupped the livin’ snot outta me. After that, he locked his door.”

Talley’s parents had divorced a few years before, and the financial hardship caused his dad—who had custody of four of his five sons—to juggle multiple jobs. “I guess we were lower middle-class,” Talley says. “I remember



HAZARDOUS DUTY: Talley (second from right) talks with Gen. David Petraeus in Baghdad’s Sadr City in June 2008.

a lot of pot pies and that I couldn’t join the Boy Scouts because we couldn’t afford it. Any money I had, I had to earn on my own, and hard work was emphasized. I did every crap job you can think of.”

Talley likes to describe himself as “dumb as dirt.” It’s jest, of course, but there is a Gump-like magic in his extraordinary aptitude for success and his turnaround from directionless long-hair into one of the most uniquely accomplished academics and military officers in the United States. The thought of going to college hadn’t even occurred to Talley until the spring of his senior year of high school, in 1977, when, he says, “I kinda woke up and went, ‘Uh, oh.’”

Tracking the next 25 years of Talley’s ascent is as futile as trying to eyeball every flaring ember of a fireworks display. He started his undergrad misadventures at Old Dominion, in Norfolk, Virginia, and “did crappy in chemistry” before decamping to LSU, where he met his wife Linda in the library and partied till his money dried up. An ROTC scholarship saved his bacon and, to Talley’s surprise, reversed his antipathy to the military. “I did a total 180,” he says. “I realized I needed the discipline, the *structure*,

and they provided that.”

Enamored of the Army Corp of Engineers, Talley took his middling grasp of science and turned it into a CV now herniated with graduate degrees, each of them earned while ping-ponging Linda and their four kids from one Army reserve deployment to another: a master’s in religious studies from Assumption College, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and another, in history and philosophy, from Washington University, in St. Louis; an engineering M.S. from Johns Hopkins, in Baltimore; a master’s in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; and, finally, a Ph.D. from Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon, widely considered to have the most prestigious engineering Ph.D. program in the country.

His first taste of military conflict came in Korea, where, from 1989 to 1991, he served as company commander and lived with his young family in a “hootch, danger-close” to the DMZ. Ever the fiscally cautious kid, Talley laid down cash for a clunker, a used Daewoo Royale, which busted up the Republic of Korea Army soldiers who served under him. “How can No. 1 commander have No. 10 car?!” he remembers them saying.

Although he continued in the reserves, by the late ’90s Talley had settled into civilian life. He wound up in academia, landing at Notre Dame for just three semesters before his phone rang in late 2002. “The president may elect to invade Iraq,” he was told by the 416th Engineer Command, “and we have a critical need for engineers to do infrastructure assessment in Kuwait for a troop build-up there. Be on a plane Thursday.”

A stint in Operation Iraqi Freedom—largely spent in Kuwait, maintaining the forces pipeline into Iraq—was the total of Talley’s Middle East deployment until January 2008, when the Pentagon rang again. This time, Talley pushed back, and in the oddest way. He’d become fully tenured at Notre Dame by that point, an institution and noncombat mission he adored. Talley’s faith and Irish roots run deep. He carries with him a bound copy of the Liturgy of the Hours, prays twice a day, and, if it weren’t for his six-day-a-week workout routine, he would drink beer even more frequently than that. So he was not eager to be airlifted out

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of his bliss for rear-guard action. If he and his brigade of reservist engineers were to be deployed for a second time in four and a half years, he told them, “I gotta have Baghdad. *Don’t* take us away from our families and our civilian jobs, from everything we are, if you’re not gonna put us in the fight.”

IN A KUBRICK-WORTHY PARODY OF WAR AND administrative overzealousness, it was while ducking sniper fire in Sadr City, Baghdad’s most festering and violent district, that Talley began getting his first cheery e-mails from an SMU search firm whose foot soldier was a woman named Mary-Louise.

“I immediately told her I wasn’t interested,” says Talley, whose engineering effort to return stability and services to the Iraqi people is considered a huge part of the Baghdad success story. Suffice it to say, Talley had plenty on his plate when the entreaties from SMU kept coming—and coming. “Maybe it’s a Texas thing,” he says, laughing, “but this Mary-Louise, she was very persistent. Every month I’d get another e-mail and I’d say, ‘I’m. Not. Interested. I’m very happy at

Notre Dame. And, by the way, I don’t *know* anybody at SMU. I’ve never *been* to SMU. So how did you get my name?”

The nagging continued up to and through February 2009, when Talley gratefully returned to South Bend, Indiana, and the comfort of Notre Dame. “God bless this Mary-Louise,” Talley says, “but she would call me on my cellphone every day. Finally, I lost my patience and sent her a note on Notre Dame letterhead. First sentence: ‘I am not interested in leaving the University of Notre Dame.’ Period. Second sentence, and this is where I maybe made my strategic mistake: ‘It’s not that I am not moveable, but I am extremely happy here and feel I’m making a difference. I wish you and SMU all the best, but please leave me alone,’ or something to that effect.”

The harder Talley tried to stand her down, the more dogged Mary-Louise became. “She finally just said to me, ‘Look, can I at least advance your name to the next group?’ I said to her, ‘I can’t tell you what to do, Mary-Louise, but I’m not interested.’ A week later, I get a call back: ‘Congratulations! You’ve advanced to the final six!’ ”

Only under duress did Talley concede to fly in and out of DFW for a one-hour meeting with the SMU screening committee, which encamped itself at the airport Hyatt for a day of sit-downs with its department-chair hopefuls. “Maybe I’ll make some friends in Dallas,” is how Talley rationalized the trip.

Mary-Louise greeted him at the terminal and walked him into a conference room crowded with 15 or 16 people. “Assistant professors, folks from the dean’s office, maybe somebody from the provost’s office,” Talley remembers. “It was very structured. And the first question they ask me is, ‘Why do you want to come to SMU?’ I said, ‘I don’t want to come to SMU,’ and you could have heard a pin drop. ‘I’ll be frank,’ I told them. ‘The only reason I’m here is that this woman Mary-Louise pestered the ever livin’ heck out of me. And I just gave up!’ ”

As a professional courtesy, Talley answered their questions for an hour and a half. Then, without ever having left airport property, he boarded his plane. When he touched down in Chicago, his cell rang. “It’s unanimous!” Mary-Louise said. “They want you.”



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If Mary-Louise was the grunt in this assault campaign, Talley came to understand that Geoffrey Orsak was its strategic commander. In a follow-up call, he pressed Talley to come to SMU and give a seminar, not only about his engineering research projects, but a second talk detailing his experiences in Baghdad. Talley was intrigued.

"I'm not throwing Notre Dame under the bus," he says, "but many of the folks there saw my work in the military as a liability. Most universities would. It took me away from my responsibilities at the school. Don't get me wrong. They support the soldiers. But as an institution, Notre Dame was very anti-Iraq War. I don't know if it's an SMU or Texas thing, but the people here were very patriotic, very interested in what I did in the military." Talley says SMU saw a link between the restorative-engineering initiatives he spearheaded in uniform and his aspirations to do similar work as an academic and civilian. "Notre Dame," he says, "never saw that."

Peter Kilpatrick, the dean of Notre Dame's College of Engineering, holds Talley in great regard, but protests his claims of intolerance

in South Bend. "Certainly, it's the case in general that the American academy tends to be a fairly liberal place to be in terms of its politics," he says. "And that is going to color perceptions. But there are a lot of people at Notre Dame who viewed Jeff as an American hero, including myself."

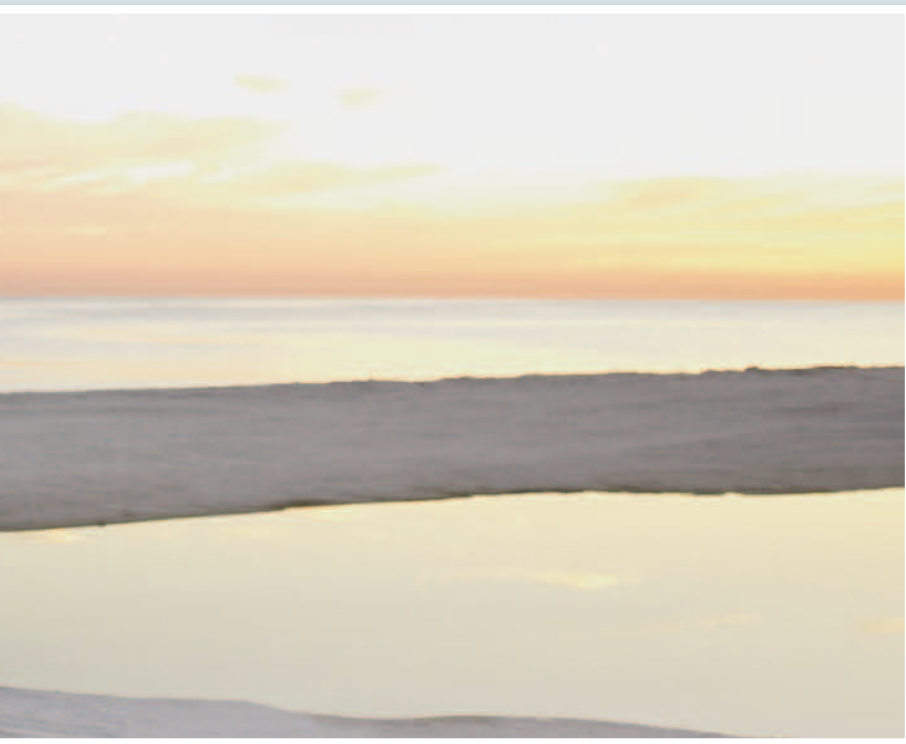
Against Kilpatrick's strong objections, Talley took Orsak's bait and returned to Dallas for a second visit. On the third and last night of Talley's stay, Orsak arranged for a special dinner, a high-powered summit he won't discuss at all. "It was a private affair," Orsak says, "so I don't want to get into who was or was not there, because some of it had to do with the things we talk about late at night. You know, when the door's closed."

Talley is, above all else, task oriented. Today's assignment, at the behest of the marketing-savvy Orsak: tell your remarkable personal story to *D Magazine*. And Talley is ecstatically on-task about Orsak's secret shindig. "It was at this real swanky place called the Petroleum Club," he says excitedly. "And we were in this private room with just an unbelievable view of Dallas. And the purpose of the

dinner was for them to kinda get to know me and for me to meet some new folks."

Talley fires off the names of the attendees: Dr. Bobby B. Lyle, the energy mogul whose millions in donations to SMU have made him among its most generous alumni and namesake of the engineering school; Delores Etter, the chair of SMU's electrical engineering department, a former undersecretary of the Navy who will have a substantial role in Orsak's "innovation gym"; Stephanie and her husband Hunter Hunt, a senior vice president of Hunt Oil, son of Ray Hunt, and grandson of H.L. Hunt; Orsak and his wife Catherine; and Bijan Mohraz, then the acting chair of the environmental and civil engineering department.

"Anyway," Talley says, "we go into this bar area and drink for an hour, which is always a good way for an Irishman to get started. And they asked me what excites me, which, of course, is a setup. It was all choreographed, but I wasn't smart enough at the time to figure it out. At dinner, Bobby B. Lyle asked me to talk about what I did in Iraq and how I thought I could apply the same use of engineering—the



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stabilization and enhancement of war-torn terrains—to South Dallas and other economically challenged places here and abroad. This whole thing went on for three, four hours. As I'm leaving, Geoffrey Orsak asks, 'What are you thinking?' And I said, 'Not interested. It's not about *you* guys. You're great. I'm just happy at Notre Dame. Good luck.'

"I'm barely on the ground in Chicago the next day when I get a call from Orsak," Talley

continues. "Jeff,' he says. 'We're not interested in you becoming the chair of the department anymore.' And I said, 'Hal-le-lu-jah. Nice meetin' ya, gotta go.' And he said, 'Wait a minute! We want to offer you something in addition to being the chair. Remember Bobby B. Lyle? This morning, he came over to SMU and had a conversation with the president of the university. He has put down a large sum of money to endow a chair for you by name.

We believe it's the first such endowed chair in the United States focusing on leadership and global entrepreneurship. And it's only for you. If you come, he puts down the money; if you don't, we get nothing. And there's more. The Hunt family, as you know, has put down a very large sum of money to endow an institute here to help the global poor, and they've been looking for a founding director. Based upon meeting you last night, they want you to be the founding director. So it's a three-for. We think this provides you an unequaled academic platform to do the things you indicated were important to you.'"

Talley was speechless. "Well," he finally managed, "this changes things, and I need to talk to my wife and pray about it. I'll get back to you."

The phone campaign continued unabated. Come-hither calls from Kay Bailey Hutchison and, to Talley's astonishment, Roger Staubach. "Like hell this is Roger Staubach," he barked into his cell.

On a third trip to Dallas, this time with his wife Linda, Talley met with Mayor Tom Leptert and talked at length about—what else?—the Trinity River project. Private audiences with the CEO of the Catholic Foundation and Bishop Kevin Farrell, chief shepherd of the Diocese of Dallas, were aimed directly at Talley's faith. "Oh," he remembers thinking about the scheming, "these people are good."

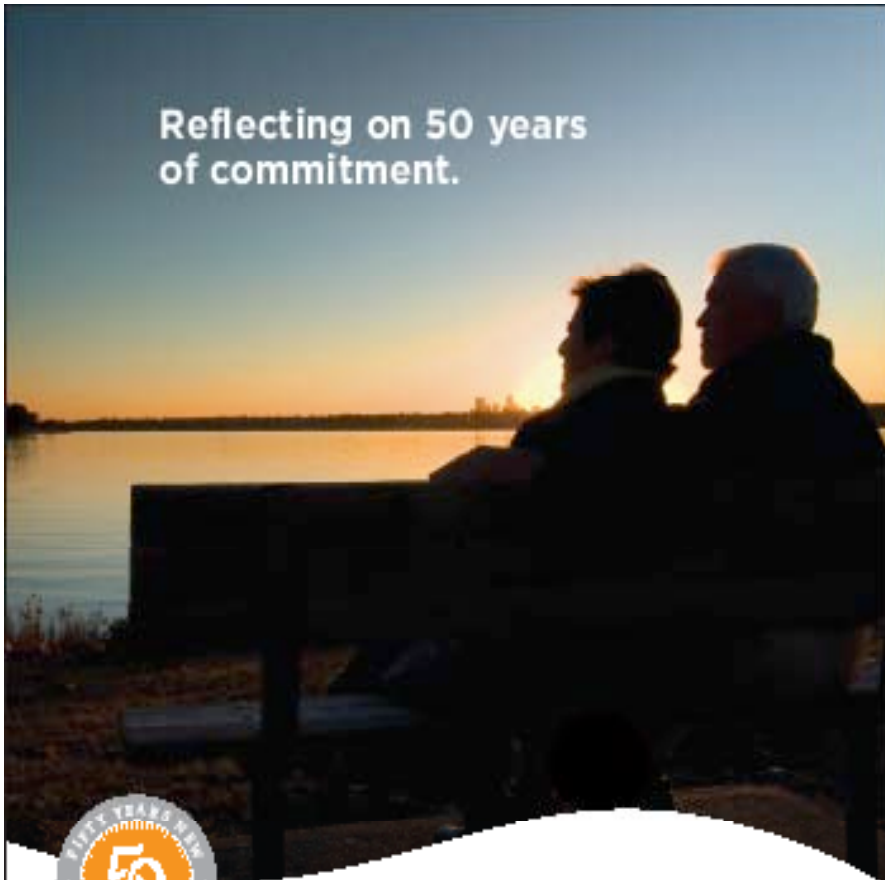
The seduction continued at another luxe eatery, Stephan Pyles, where the meal was prepared by Pyles himself, a coup the aspirational Orsak is glowingly proud of ("best ceviche I've ever had in Dallas") but one utterly lost on Talley, an unapologetic Arby's guy. At the dinner were Orsak and Lyle, but this time they brought the special ops team: Mitch Hart, the Dallas-based Home Depot magnate, and his highly connected attorney wife Linda; Bob Zollars, DART system mastermind and CEO of the industrial design giant Huitt-Zollars; and Karen Shuford, a philanthropist and inductee in SMU's Hall of Engineering Leaders. As Talley remembers it, miscalculating by a hundred million here or there, "a who's who in America of business, every one of them, I think, a billionaire."

"The purpose of this group," Talley recalls Orsak saying, "is simply to convince you and Linda to come to Dallas." Soon after, Lyle raised a toast to the then one-star brigadier general. The astonished recollection is Talley's:

Lyle: "The first thing we want to do is celebrate your promotion."

Talley: "Dr. Lyle, Linda and I have not

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yet decided to come here, so I think it's premature."

Lyle: "I don't mean SMU. We understand that you're on the two-star list, and you should be hearing from the Pentagon any day now. So we want to be the first ones to celebrate your promotion to major general."

Talley: "Sir, how do you know that? Yes, the list has been decided and the president is nominating the candidates for two-star to the Senate for confirmation. But that list is very close-hold. I certainly have not seen it. I have been told unofficially there's a likelihood my name will be on it. But it won't be released, sir, until next Monday."

Lyle: "Well, we have it on reliable sources that your name will be on the list, and we want to be the first to celebrate. Is that okay?"

At meal's end, Talley remembers Lyle, again, taking command: " 'Son,' he said, 'we understand you haven't made a decision yet, but we've got a lot of resources at this table.' And with that he pulls out a pen, kinda like a checkbook, implying, Well, what exactly has SMU not offered you that we around this table might be able to help with? 'Dr. Lyle,' I said, 'this isn't about resources. This is about loyalty. You're asking an Irish Catholic to leave Notre Dame, and when you do that, God gets involved. From everybody else's foxhole, this may seem like a slam-dunk, but it's not about resources; it's about loyalty.' 'Well,' he said to me, 'isn't the God at SMU the same God at Notre Dame?' 'It is the same God,' I said. 'That's why I'm gonna think about it.' "

When Talley finally said yes—an announcement he made the following night at Orsak's Lake Forest home—the reaction in South Bend was swift and incredulous. "This is *Notre Dame*," Talley recalls Kilpatrick telling him. "We cannot be outbid by *anyone*."

Text messages from distressed colleagues began pouring in: "You'll have to convert to Methodist. Don't do it!"

Kilpatrick made impassioned and protracted pleas, blaming himself for the inability to envision a larger role for his major general and, according to Talley, insisting again that what SMU had to offer was beer money compared to Notre Dame's fat endowment.

Talley and Orsak are strenuously discreet in regard to the size of the Hunt family outlay for Talley's new institute. Not Kilpatrick. "Twenty-six million," he says. "We've got a lot of endowments at Notre Dame, but we don't have a donor with that amount of capital to invest in that kind of an initiative. I wish we did. We could have kept him."



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Talley's decision, though heartrending, was definitive. "I love Notre Dame. I love Notre Dame," he told Kilpatrick. "But when you put it all together, this opportunity seems too unique; probably, once in a lifetime. I've got to believe that, for reasons I can't explain, God wanted me to leave Notre Dame for a Protestant school in Texas. What can I say? He's got a sense of humor."

"I HAVE NEVER BEEN MOTIVATED BY RANK or money," Talley says in mid-September, just two weeks into his new life in Dallas. "I can guarantee you *that*," says his wife Linda, whose warmth and winning lack of pretension are right there in the spread of chips and Sam Adams she's laid out in their still barely furnished off-campus bungalow, an SMU property the couple will call home in their transition year. Any money Talley has ever earned, she says, has gone to their kids, the youngest of whom is now 20. After a lifetime of driving heaps, the Talleys—with hesitation, a measure of embarrassment, and more than a little glee—just bought a preowned Lexus Hybrid SUV. It's a gift to Linda, Talley says, for being the glue of his family through wars and so many uprootings.

Naturally, Talley has hit the ground running and, without apology, already put a jolt into his department of environmental and civil engineers. At the very first meeting with his staff of teaching and lecturing profs, the major general laid out his expectation that his troops will rapidly transition from an entrenched teaching fleet into a world-class teaching and research force, one that will publish its findings regularly and will see the world, not just the leafy quads of SMU, as its campus.

"I am here," he said, "to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted." He's prepared for their return fire—as long as it's respectful. "Come in my office and pee on my Cheerios every day. I'm good with that," Talley says. "But don't pee on me. Don't disrespect me. I probably deserve everything I get, so bring it on."

Talley will enjoy the full support of Orsak, who is braced for the grumbling, some of which he's already heard: "Whoa, man, take the foot off the accelerator. You're scarin' us! I've certainly heard people say, 'This is a completely different type of animal than we've seen before.' And all I can say is, 'You're right! Why do you think we brought him here?'"

Less clear is Talley's charge vis-à-vis his Caruth Hall-based institute, the name of which Orsak, of course, declines to reveal

prematurely for fear of unsettling his donors.

"The Institute for Engineering and Humanity," crows Talley. "It should be the Stephanie and Hunter Hunt Institute for Engineering and Humanity. That's what I think."

It's a sexy concept, this notion of saving the planet from behind a CVS on Mockingbird Lane. But what will it mean for Dallas, which, occasional outbreaks of gangbanging and sewage backup notwithstanding, isn't Sadr City? In terms of innovation and infrastructure, are we talking about free cable in every household south and east of Village Burger Bar?

"Well," says Orsak, regarding the city's neediest, "if they all want cable, and we can make cable possible for \$30 a month, and that's gonna change that community, why not? But that's not what they're going to say they want. They're going say they want parks their kids can play in and houses that aren't crack houses. They'll want blight removed where blight exists and transportation that gives them access to one of the great metropolitan cities in the world. All these things we have attempted [and failed] to solve through public policy. Now we can try something different, the thing that has been most durable in this country: innovation."

If that sounds like just more cozy Green Zone talk, Talley, at least, is happy to strap on his brain bucket and live outside the wire. This is, after all, the guy who had the gumption to preach his thesis about counterinsurgency to the mighty Gen. David Petraeus himself, as they toured the streets of Sadr City on Talley's lone extended encounter with his four-star superior. There is an important and direct relationship, Talley told Petraeus, between quality-of-life-restoring engineering efforts and the shutting down of violence in war-ravaged regions. Talley's thoroughly considered and researched conclusion: "Failed diplomacy is what war is."

"Be careful, General Talley, about your use of cause and effect," Petraeus cautioned.

"Sir," Talley replied, "I didn't say 'cause and effect.' I'm an academic. I was very careful with my words. I said there's a relationship."

"Well," Petraeus huffed, "I do know something about this counterinsurgency stuff."

To which Talley responded with a completely inappropriate exuberance that might be the best of his extraordinarily bright qualities: "I acknowledge that, sir, but I'm not stupid, either. I'm not one of those liberal arts guys, like you. I'm an engineer!" **D**

John McAlley is a contributing editor at NPR.org.