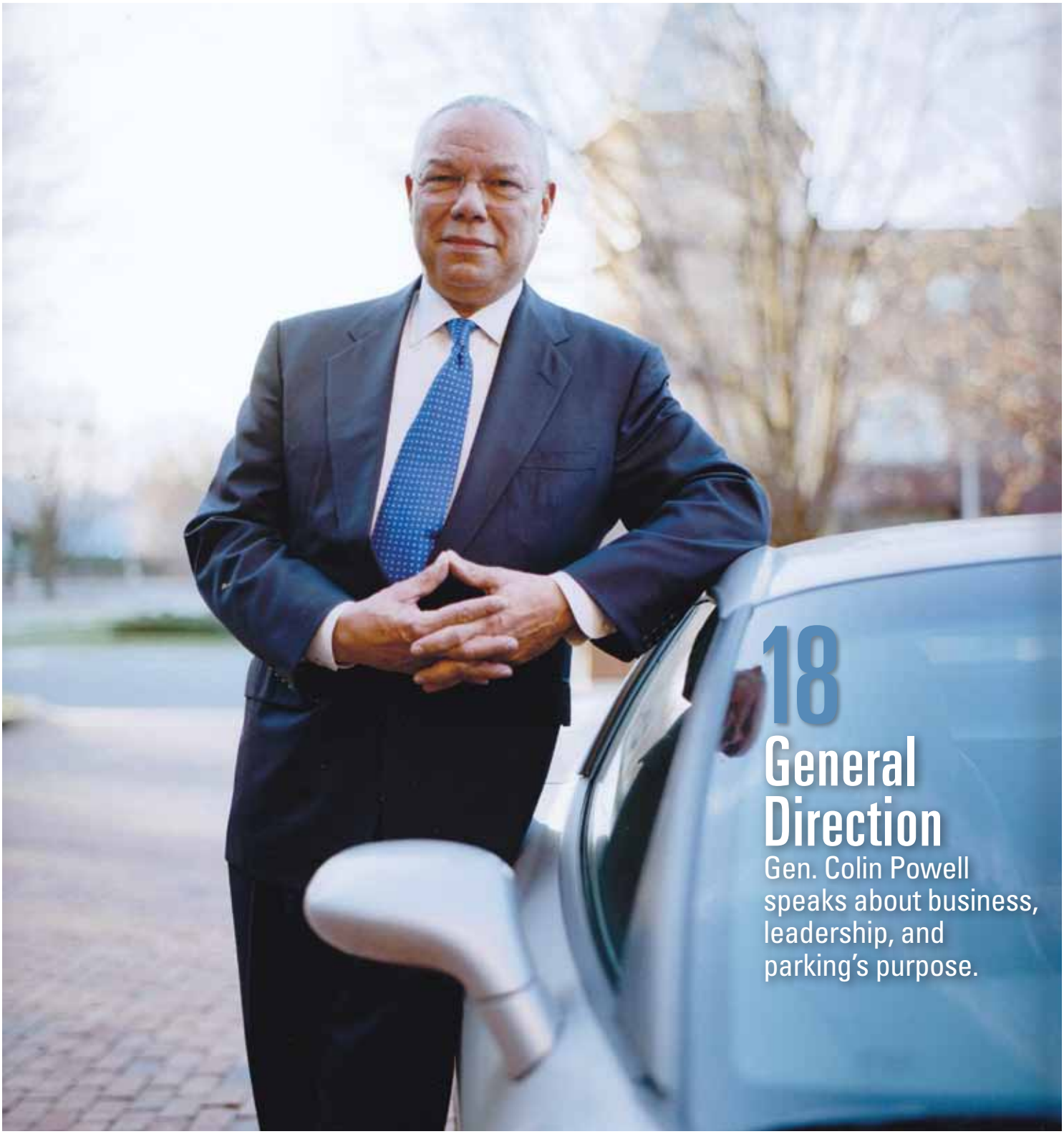
The Parking Professional

THE INTERNATIONAL PARKING INSTITUTE

AUGUST 2012



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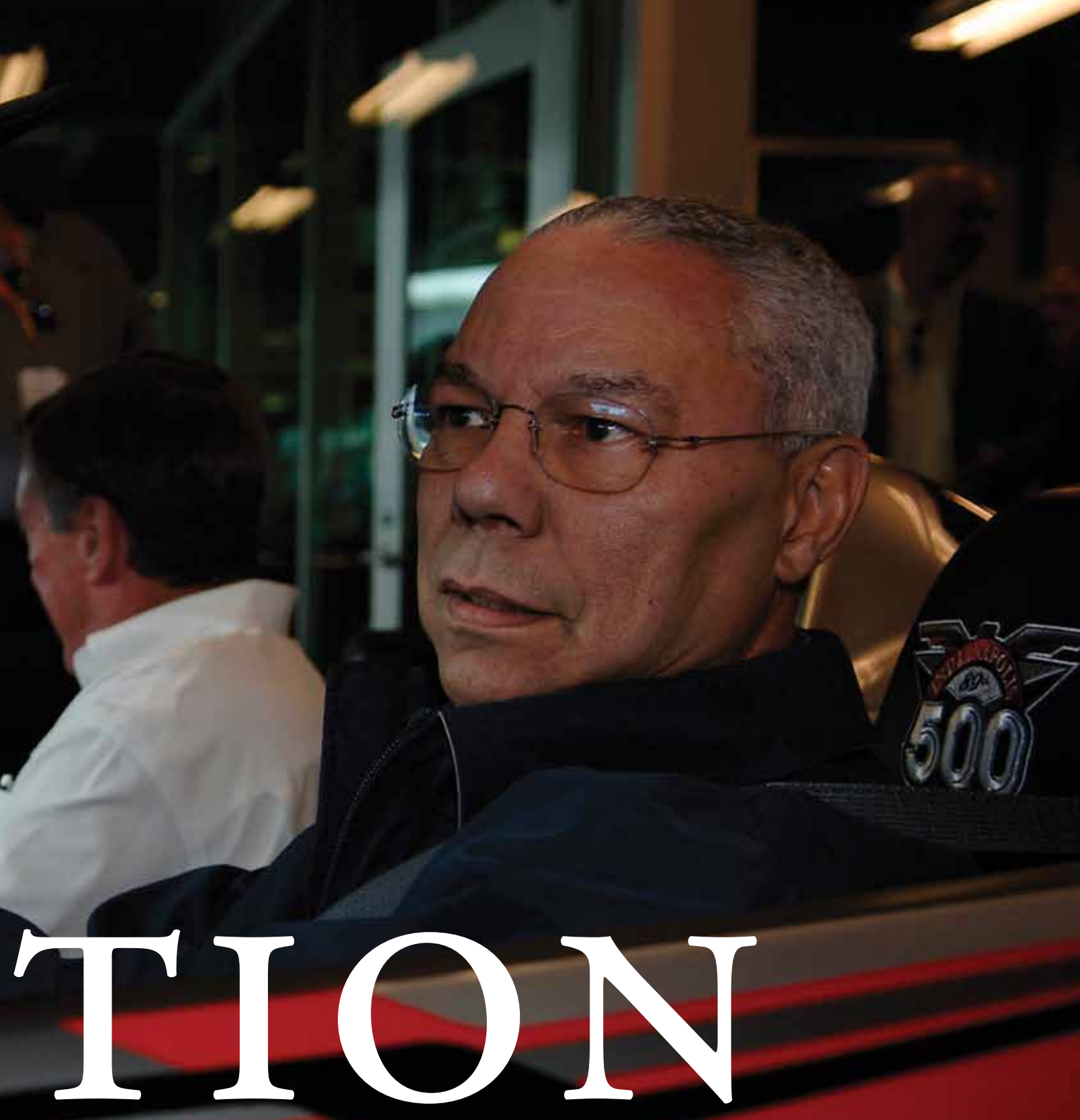
Gen. Colin Powell speaks about business,



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leadership, and parking's purpose.

F.PEIRCE WILLIAMS 2005 FOR CHEVROLET

What could an Army general and former high-ranking government official have to say about parking? Turns out, plenty.

General Colin L. Powell (Ret.) served as the U.S. National Security Adviser from 1987 to 1989, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993, and Secretary of State under President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2005. He is author of the book, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership*, about business, values, and—believe it or not—parking. He recently sat down for a conversation about all of that with *The Parking Professional*.

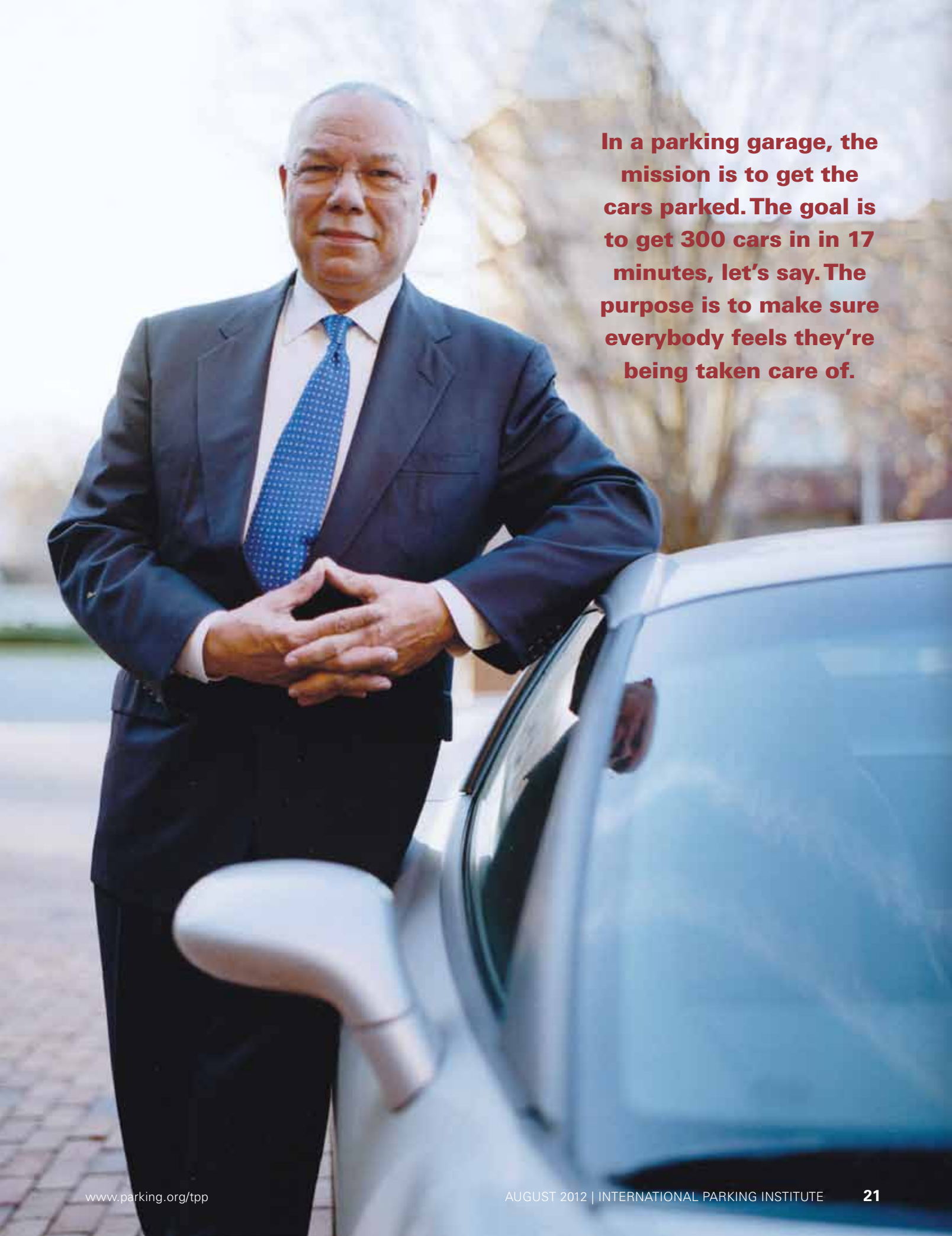
The Parking Professional: **You tell a story in your newest book about visiting the State Department garage and chatting with the parking attendants there (see sidebar p. 24). Were you surprised by that conversation?**

Gen. Colin Powell: I see them all the time. I know they do a good job. And they have a tough job, getting all the cars in there. That kind of work doesn't surprise me—it takes place all over the building, with people who straighten up our offices and clean the floor and check the air conditioning system. They're the infrastructure of the building. I thought I'd ask a few questions and bond with them, and I asked how they were and whether carbon monoxide was a problem. They didn't expect the Secretary of State to ask them questions like that. Then, I asked them how they fit all the cars in in the morning. That's where the fun started.

I've used this story over and over since then. I tell the story of them saying, "If you look at us and smile at us and lower the window..." and then at that point if I'm talking to an audience, all I have to do is raise my index finger in the air and say, "You're number-one." The audience gets it. They all laugh. I usually add, "Is this brain surgery? Is there something about this you don't understand, or do you really need to read 12 leadership books to get it? You look out the window and see another human being who has the same kinds of dreams and anxieties and fears and hopes you have. By smiling and saying 'good morning' and 'how are you,' you bond with that individual and say you'll help that person. I assure you that parking attendant will smile back, which says 'I'm going to help you, too.'"

TPP: **You write that mission, goals, strategy, and vision are useful in business, but that you prefer the term "purpose." What's the difference?**

CP: I've been drawn to that word increasingly over the years. In a parking garage, the mission is to get the cars parked. The goal is to get 300 cars in in 17 minutes, let's say. The purpose is to make sure everybody feels they're being taken care of. You've gotten them into a space, and now they can be on time for work.



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You have to look at the mundane aspects of a job—how do I park a car, how do I get them all in here, how fast do I do that—as the missions and goals, and those are great. But the real purpose is to have 500 people get to their offices on time. If you've done that, they'll be happy. So you always want to go above the mudane.

The first time I thought about that, I was watching a T.V. documentary about the Empire State Building. It concluded with a photo that was shot in the basement of five guys standing there in their work uniforms, about to do something with thousands of bags of garbage that had accumulated that day. The camera pans up and someone asks, "What's your job?" As if it's not obvious that the job is to throw all of this stuff out of the building. But the guy doesn't say it's to get these bags out of here. He says, "My job is to make sure that when people come from all over the world to see this building, it shines." That's his purpose.

What do you think is more important for the management team to be pushing? The fact that this guy knows his purpose is to make the building shine, or that his job is to get the bags out by morning? In terms of parking, I can't get my job done—me, the Secretary of State—unless you guys in the garage get your jobs done. Your purpose serves my purpose.

TPP: **You tell a story in the book about a passenger who wrote to a railroad to complain about bedbugs. He received a nice apology letter in return from the president of the railroad and all was well until he read a handwritten note clearly mailed by mistake that said "Send this jerk the bedbug letter." What lesson is there in that story for people in the parking industry who likely hear the same complaints over and over from irate customers? Why are bedbug letters a bad idea?**

CP: I hate those letters. They're a sign of disrespect to the person who made the complaint. Any organization that doesn't take complaints seriously and try to do something that lets the person know, "We heard you and this is what we've done about it so it's not going to be the same," isn't going to do well.

I doubt people in parking get as many compliments as they do complaints. Getting all those complaints gives you the opportunity to improve your performance, and responding to the complaints makes a difference.

The other day, I complained about an airline to somebody who knew the president of the airline. I got an email from that president; I'm not sure everybody

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would have, but I did. He said he was sorry I didn't have a good experience and that he was going to try harder, and to let him know if anything like that happened again. I appreciated it. It wasn't a bedbug letter.

Every organization that says, "Let us know how we're doing," had better mean it and had better respond. Getting an answer that's not a bedbug letter is important. I've used this philosophy my entire career, and I've sent letters back and said, "This doesn't answer the question. It's a bedbug letter."

TPP: **A common phrase we hear a lot is that almost everyone falls into the parking industry. You make a point in the book that 99 percent of work is noble and that nearly every job is a learning experience with potential for development and growth. We talk a lot about parking being a vital part of keeping cities and people moving, but how can managers convey that to frontline staff members who came to their jobs accidentally? How can they instill a sense of pride into rookie workers who may feel their tasks are mundane?**

CP: This goes back to purpose. In parking, I would line up everybody in the garage and say, "This building doesn't get started until we get our job done. We're important—we're as important as anyone in this building. We need to get our job done efficiently, without damaging cars. We need to master getting cars into tight spaces, smile at everyone, say good morning, and let people know that we're here to help and we want to get you in as fast as we can."

I've always had good experiences with parking attendants. I park lots of places in D.C.—hotels and such—and I can usually go into almost any garage or pull in front of any hotel, give a smile, and get a smile back. I usually try to say something like, "I'll be back in 30 minutes," which means "please keep the car pretty close," and they always do. I've had good experiences with parking professionals who seem to want to do their best, and I don't think it's because I'm General Powell. It's because they were taught to do their best and display courtesy and professionalism.

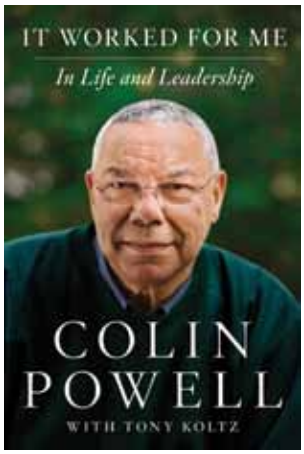
TPP: **The parking industry has undergone a technological revolution recently, embracing equipment and tools that were only pipe dreams just a few years ago. You talk about the importance of "permanently changing brainware" as a bigger priority. What does that mean and how can managers achieve it?**

CP: You don't just give people who have been doing things a certain way—a manual way—for decades a computer and hook up software and connect everything and that's the end of it. You've got to change the way they've been operating. You need to train them to get the most out of it, send them to school if that's necessary. If you don't change the brainware, you're not going to get the most out of this technology. They'll only adapt to it if you train them how to use it.

We're all getting used to these computerized parking meters. I'm afraid of them! I don't know how to use them yet. I have to work on my understanding, but I still haven't. Technology is driving all of us to new levels of expertise.

TPP: **The International Parking Institute has partnered with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to offer First Observer anti-terrorism training to more than 12,000 parking professionals in the U.S. What role do you think parking professionals can and should play in fighting terrorism?**

CP: They are the eyes and ears and smart people who can watch things. It's unlikely you're going to stop major terrorist activity. But you should be observing everything that's going on around you as cars go in and out and people



THE PARKING GARAGE STORY

In his book, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership,* Gen. Colin Powell tells the story of visiting the State Department parking garage during his tenure as Secretary of State. He broke the ice with the surprised attendants by asking about their jobs—whether it was too hot, if carbon monoxide was a problem, whether they liked what they did. After that, he says, "the fun started:

After a while I asked a question that had puzzled me: "When the cars come in every morning, how do you decide who ends up first to get out, and who ends up second and third?"

They gave each other knowing looks and little smiles. "Mr. Secretary," one of them said, "it kinda goes like this. When you drive in, if you lower the window, look out, smile, and you know our name, or you say 'Good morning, how are you?' or something like that, you're number one to get out. But if you just look straight ahead and don't show you even see us or that we are doing something for you, well, you are likely to be one of the last to get out."

I thanked them, smiled, and made my way back to where I had abandoned my now distraught bodyguard.

At my next staff meeting, I shared this story with my senior leaders. "You can never err by treating everyone in the building with respect, thoughtfulness, and a kind word," I told them. "Every one of our employees is an essential employee. Every one of them wants to be viewed that way. And if you treat them that way, they will view you that way. They will not let you down or let you fail. They will accomplish whatever you have put in front of them."

get in and out of those cars. You should be looking for crime and predators and all kinds of things. The parking attendants of America can be a first line of defense against pedophilia, abuse, crime, assaults, and terrorism. The training program with TSA is certainly good, but it's more effective when you think in terms of TSA and everything else out there. Parking attendants are out there all day long. They know the neighborhood—not just the garage, but the neighborhood. They know everybody who lives there, and they can be a first line of defense. I'm glad the TSA is working with the International Parking Institute, and I hope parking professionals work with their local law enforcement agencies as well.

TPP: **You write that "the more senior you become…the harder and more necessary it is to know what is going on six floors down." How can managers and executives in the parking industry best stay in touch with what's going on beneath them? Why is that so critical?**

CP: Managers aren't living in their garages. They have bigger responsibilities at headquarters. I've experienced headquarters as a commander of several agencies, and I found that I had to make time to go out in the field and talk to people and see what was going on. I'm sure folks at a senior level in parking understand this. You can't run these kinds of organizations by sitting in an office putting together PowerPoint presentations. You

have to go into the garage. Don't tell them you're coming. Drop down and pretend to be a customer. Walk around. Is your latrine clean? Is there oil on the floor that needs to be cleaned up? Is the office tidy? What kind of reception do you get from the first person who sees you?

TPP: **IPI offers the Certified Administrator of Public Parking (CAPP) program, which is a rigorous two-year line of study for parking professionals. Apart from offering a solid educational foundation about the industry, why should managers invest in such programs for their employees? What messages might that investment send to workers who are offered the opportunity?**

CP: It's a terrific idea. People can always learn. For the most part, parking attendants learn on the job. You are showing them respect and putting confidence in them by sending them through the program. Taking them to school pushes them up to a higher level of proficiency, teaching them how things run at a higher level, letting people improve themselves. When you certify someone with a card or something they can wear that says, "I'm a certified parking professional," that means something to folks. I've noticed in the last several decades that more associations have certification programs that give people three or four letters behind their names that identify them as being certified. There are lots of reasons to do that do that not only for management people, but for people who are parking cars too. Give them the pin to wear on their uniforms. It makes a big difference.

TPP: **The book talks about constructive competitions between workers and after-project reviews that go beyond finding a winner or criticizing. Why are they so important?**

CP: People want to be recognized. At the same time, it's important for leaders to critique things that aren't going well. If the criticism is honest, fair, and you're straight up with that person, more often than not, you don't have hurt feelings and they appreciate that you care about them and you care about the job they're doing. Constructive criticism doesn't mean chewing somebody out. It's "Let me show you how to improve your performance and be more valuable to us." Any organization not running after-action reviews or constructive competitions isn't operating at top performance.

I've found that in every organization I commanded or managed, people wanted to be part of a good team. They don't want to be mediocre. Competition gives people a chance to improve and gives them a chance to win something. There can be so many competitions that on any given day, anybody could win. Americans have that winning spirit—look at football, baseball, basketball. We like to win, so why not incorporate that into management?

TPP: **You talk about "taking charge" being an instrumental lesson for new Army recruits. Why is that so important in a business such as parking?**

CP: If somebody's not in charge, then nobody's in charge and we have an inefficient, fatally flawed organization. What we teach our soldiers early on is that when you're at the gate, you're in charge of the gate. You are responsible for everything else going on around there. It seems to me that's a good value and virtue to build into parking employees. You're in charge, so take charge. You're watching and looking for anything that needs to be picked up, for anything that seems amiss. You're watching for the security of cars, for flat tires, you're looking to see what you might have to tell an owner when he or she comes back—your left taillight isn't working or something. Taking charge means being responsible for everything in your space.

TPP: **You write a lot about the importance of kindness, respect, and community involvement. Why are those important qualities for parking professionals? How can executives foster those qualities in their companies?**

CP: Those qualities are important for not only parking professionals, but any human being involved in a collective activity. After I met with the parking attendants at the State Department, I shared that story with my staff. I said, "You need to understand that there are people seven floors below us who are doing an important job for us. Treat them with respect."

Managers need to hold their employees accountable. Tell them they're doing an important job, and that the rest of us can't do what we do without them, and they'll take care of you. If you treat them as tools and not as human beings, they won't do as much for you. They'll go through the motions but they won't be doing their jobs with pride and enthusiasm.