

The Petraeus Scandal

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, NOV 21 2012

Part of the Petraeus scandal is quite easy to understand. As South Park points out in an episode based on Tiger Woods' problem, there is apparently an incurable disease which strikes mainly rich, powerful married men in America, one that our National Institutes of Health labels ominously "a sexual addiction." If David Petraeus were the normal highly paid business executive or sports star, this would be just titillating tabloid stuff. But he was a former four star general in the US Army, former commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the time his affair with Paula Broadwell, a former officer, his biographer, running companion, and a doctoral candidate at Kings College, supposedly began, the Director of all things of the US Central Intelligence Agency. Having an extramarital affair when you are the head of the CIA is a bad thing because it opens one up to blackmail and is thus clearly against agency rules, a dismissible action. Petraeus did do the honorable thing by resigning when the affair was revealed.

Part of the Petraeus scandal is, however, difficult to understand. The affair became public when Paula Broadwell apparently wrote several very threatening emails to another woman, Jill Kelley, an aspiring Tampa Florida socialite who showed them to a friend who was a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent. A bit of work on the FBI's cyber squad's part revealed that they were from Broadwell's Gmail account and that Broadwell was carrying on an illicit affair with Director Petraeus that was thoroughly documented in the emails. The investigation explored the possibility of blackmail as well as mishandling of classified information, but first thought that Petraeus' email account may have been hacked. It seemed both dumb and dangerous for a CIA Director to be using such a means of communication for such an activity.

The dumbness and dangerousness in the list of Petraeus and friends' follies piles up. Jill Kelly in turns out is barely a step away from bankruptcy, is of Lebanese extraction, and is somehow a quasi-official but unpaid social hostess at McDill Air Force Base in Tampa, the home US Central Command and US Special Operations Command, the American military commands that are running the Global War on Terror aka the Long War. With a social hostess' role apparently comes a pass to this closely guarded base and friendship with General Petraeus and other senior officials, including Marine Corps General Allen, currently the commander in Afghanistan and slated to become the Supreme Commander Allied Forces Europe, the military head of NATO. At one point Petraeus was head of Central Command and Allen was his deputy. As a result of this friendship, both Petraeus and Allen wrote on their official stationary letters to a local judge supporting Kelly's twin sister's child custody request in her unpleasant divorce proceedings, a highly unusual and likely inappropriate action for busy generals fighting a war. Add to the list the fact that the FBI agent involved was sending shirtless pictures of himself to the married Jill Kelley, that General Allen had also an extensive and perhaps inappropriate email relationship with the same Jill Kelley, and that Paula Broadwell, though trained in security procedures, had a collection of classified documents from unknown sources in her possession. What were they all thinking?

The story only gets worse with the excuses Petraeus' friends in the media are offering for his behavior. A major theme of the defense currently is that General Petraeus was depressed in his transition from general to civilian, losing his servants and entourage in the process, and thus supposedly becoming more vulnerable than usual to the temptations of the flesh. It is a bit of an outrage for the normal citizen to discover that four star generals get servants, drivers, cooks, aides, assistant, photographers, speech writers, and security that can number in the dozens. Cut that off at retirement and one at least reaches for a bottle if not worse. But Petraeus wasn't just retiring to civilian life; he was becoming the head of the CIA where entourages are easily assembled on request. It is the CIA Director's choice

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how many assistants and yes men walk in his shadow. Military officers in the past held that office and were not caught with their pants down. Either they weren't depressed by the transition or knew that their private email could and would be read, and decided to suffer the strain stoically for God and Country.

Others want to dismiss the problem by saying we shouldn't care about the extra marital affairs our leaders have, but rather with their public actions. General Eisenhower had a mistress and so did President Roosevelt during World War II. Many knew then and no one cared. Petraeus, they claim, was a great general, the real star of the war on terror, the savior of Iraq and the man who lead us to the way out of Afghanistan. Leave his private life alone they say.

There are two problems with this. One it is more than poor judgment to take up with a person who will be sending threatening emails to those she apparently perceived as her rival. Once the FBI was involved a private affair slides quickly into the category of very newsworthy. They supposedly don't care about generals or CIA directors having mistresses, but they must care about hackable email accounts, potential blackmail situations, and the handling of classified information. It is a machine that can't be stopped without real crimes being committed by any who would try to stop it. Bad personal judgment is not good especially by people who know, or should know, how the system works.

Knowing how the system works is General Petraeus' real claim to fame. He was not a great tactician or great strategic thinker though some would claim he was. He was, I think, a great self-promoter, a man who knew how political system, the Army, the media, think tanks, and academia works, and made them work to his advantage. He had reporters describing him as an innovative, fresh thinker in his first tours in Iraq, a general who so unlike the others cared about protecting populations and making counter-insurgency work. He assembled a team of officer acolytes who spread the Petraeus gospel and became part of his entourage. He then wrote joint counter-insurgency doctrine with the Marines, earning praise from the adherents of the Jointness religion so prevalent in Washington and support from the Marines who appreciated recognition from an Army general. No one had better PowerPoint slides or more statistics than did King David as he was known disparagingly by rivals in the Army. He also began acquiring a team of Neocon and think tank strategists to be his consultants, gaining a loyalty among them that has held to this day. He listened, he consulted, and he reached out. Oh my, what a general! Reporters loved it all and so did counter-insurgency specialists, especially those who were asked to visit him in the field. It is not surprising that he found a fawning biographer, a writer who needed the help of a ghost writer, but a woman who could run with him. Too bad she was married and apparently had a mean streak in her.

Petraeus was thought to be a possible US presidential or vice presidential candidate on a Republican ticket. Obama passed him over for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, preferring another Army general instead. Wisely though he kept Petraeus close and subordinate by accepting the suggestion, supposedly offered by the ever ambitious Petraeus himself, to head the CIA. Books, money, and maybe even the presidency of Princeton University, where he earned his PhD, await him. The affair ruined his governmental opportunities, but will not stop him from being part of the discussion of future national security issues if he chooses. I think though that we should pay attention more to his role in the continuing war. I wish he had.

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Read more from Harvey M. Sapolsky in his e-IR blog: The High Ground: Observing International Security

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edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.