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Of vice and men

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

He entered the hilltop cloister at 17 and spent the next four years surrounded by men. Next, he was in the system for 37 years. Then Gen. David Petraeus retired from the U.S. Army.

Now the world laughs at Petraeus' resignation as the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The country's chief spy got caught because he detailed his lust for a married woman 20 years his junior on Gmail.

Laugh away. The slightly off-color jokes of late-night comics and political cartoonists miss the point. Petraeus' fall from grace is a silly embarrassment, yes. But the moral fiber of the country is on display as political pundits insist it is "merely" his personal business and, after all, he was a great leader, and he is just oh, so smart, and the poor guy went from having 10 aides in the military to zero in civilian life, and the CIA is a different culture, and maybe he was depressed, and anyway, so what if he picked up his biographer?

Give me a break. The tentacles of reactions to Petraeus' story stretch from deep within the public psyche and demonstrate symptoms of the larger ailment: Nobody really cares about lies, large or small.

Nobody really cares that a four-star general of the United States Army "bonded" with an ambitious West Point graduate. It happened at headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, Afghanistan, better known as -- you cannot make this up -- "Camp Cupcake." Nobody really cares that he -- and she -- violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice each swore to live by. They lived by their own "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Nobody really cares that he, as CIA director, and she, as an Army Reserve intelligence officer, ignored the most basic of security rules: Don't have anything to hide. They were above it all.

Do you think at some level they actually thought they were above reproach? Or that, if caught, they would be forgiven because whether Kabul or Washington, it's desert out there, and this is war. Did they see themselves living in the tradition of the television series "M.A.S.H.," where she was his "Hot Lips" Houlihan, and it's all in good fun anyway?

How did this happen?

Did it have anything to do with the rarified air of the system he breathed for 41 years, from the first days of his plebe summer to the defeating realization there would be no more promotions, no more stars or ribbons or medals? He lived in the he-man's world, where wives mind home and children while the men take care of Important Things.

You have to think he'd fit right in at the Vatican, in a system so like the military. Get your ticket punched. Become an aide. Get promoted. Get languages. Get degrees. Meet and greet the right men.

Careerism is a dangerous game. It warps the soul and cordons off the moral section of the mind. There are traps all along the way.

The two players in this little soap opera were of a kind. They fell into all the traps.

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They say she told her senator she wanted to be famous and influential and powerful. That's why she wanted to go to the United States Air Force Academy. She didn't say she wanted to fly, so the senator sent her to West Point.

He was all Army, all career, all ambition. Just months after he threw his hat in the air at graduation, he married the superintendent's daughter. Not a bad set of stars to hitch his wagon to.

So either at Camp Cupcake or soon after, they began the little affair. Somehow it stayed under the FBI's rug until just after the elections. And when the story hit, members of Congress, news commentators, all manner of civilians and military, and maybe even a few religious leaders alike said, Oh, just forgive him, forget about it, it is not such a big deal.

But it is a big deal.

On the one hand, it happens every day. A wandering eye meets a willing admirer, and sparks fly. On the other hand, we expect military officers and senior government officials to have deeper character, greater honesty, even some humility. (They say he did not think about resigning until after he was caught.)

On the other hand, the world no longer really looks askance at broken marriage vows.

The story, entwined with U.S. policy and encrusted with intrigue, is not over. The story is more than one of the blatant stupidity of those who hold the secrets of national security. They risked themselves and the careers they so carefully honed and polished. They risked the rest of us as well.

I think it is entirely possible that future episodes of this incomplete drama will teach us more about the pair. Will they teach us more about the levels of our own characters as well?

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