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A Brilliant Career with a Meteoric Rise and an Abrupt Fall

By Scott Shane and Sheryl Gay Stolberg

11/12/2012

WASHINGTON - David H. Petraeus's "Rules for Living" appeared on The Daily Beast's Web site on Monday, posted by his biographer, a fellow West Point graduate 20 years his junior named Paula Broadwell. The fifth rule, beneath his familiar portrait in full military regalia, began: "We all make mistakes. The key is to recognize them and admit them."



Paula Broadwell, author of the David Petraeus biography "All In," poses for photos in Charlotte, N.C. Petraeus, the retired four-star general renowned for taking charge of the military campaigns in Iraq and then Afghanistan, abruptly resigned Friday, Nov. 9, 2012 as director of the CIA, admitting to an extramarital affair.

Mr. Petraeus took his own advice on Friday and resigned as director of the Central Intelligence Agency after admitting to an extramarital affair; officials identified the woman in question as Ms. Broadwell. The full back story is not yet clear, though his affair came to light after F.B.I. agents conducting a criminal investigation into possible security breaches examined his computer e-mails. The decision to step down was his.

Few imagined that such a dazzling career would have so tawdry and so sudden a collapse. Mr. Petraeus, a slender fitness fanatic, is known as a brainy ascetic. He and his wife, Holly, whose father was the superintendent at West Point when Mr. Petraeus graduated in 1974, and their two grown children had long been viewed by military families as an inspiration, a model for making a marriage work despite the separation and hardship of long deployments overseas.

After he began the C.I.A. job in September 2011, the couple settled into a house in the Virginia suburbs and began the closest thing to a normal life together that they had had in years, even if the basement he had designated for a home gym was commandeered for secure C.I.A. communications gear.

After years in war zones, Mr. Petraeus told friends, he was amazed to eat dinner most nights with his wife and to discover weekends again. He told friends that on the day his daughter was married last month, he went for a 34-mile bike ride.

“It’s a personal tragedy, of course, but it’s also a tragedy for the country,” said Bruce Riedel, a C.I.A. veteran and a presidential adviser.

Like many others in jaundiced Washington, Mr. Riedel wondered whether the affair really required Mr. Petraeus, who turned 60 on Wednesday, to step down and leave the agency leaderless. But under the military law that governed his 37-year Army career, adultery is a crime when it may “bring discredit upon the armed forces.” And a secret affair can make an intelligence officer vulnerable to blackmail.

The C.I.A. director, Mr. Riedel said, probably felt he had no choice.

“I think Dave Petraeus grew up with a code that’s very demanding about duty and honor,” he said. “He violated the code.”

Ambition and Ability

He was the pre-eminent military officer of his generation, a soldier-scholar blazing with ambition and intellect, completing his meteoric rise as a commander in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Worshipful Congressional committees lauded him as a miracle worker for helping turn around the war in Iraq, applying a counterinsurgency strategy he had helped devise and that was widely viewed for a time as the future of warfare. Then, dispatched to Afghanistan to replace Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who had been fired by President Obama, he sought to apply the doctrine he had championed, while also applying an aggressive counterterrorism strategy.

He was fiercely competitive and carefully protective of his reputation. Asked to throw out the first pitch at the 2008 World Series, he brought his security detail to Washington's stadium to practice getting the ball over the plate.

Mr. Petraeus had seemed all but indestructible. He had been shot in a training accident, had broken his pelvis in a sky diving mishap and survived prostate cancer. Criticized by the advocacy group MoveOn.org in 2007 as "General Betray Us," he shrugged off the attack and rallied his indignant supporters. Until Friday, fans speculated that post-C.I.A. he might become president of Princeton University, where he had earned his Ph.D. in international relations in 1987, or conceivably even president of the United States. (He has told friends he will never run for president; to show his impartiality, he did not vote when he was in the military.)

But as the news sent astonished Petraeus watchers to the Web on Friday night, many people discovered a January episode of "The Daily Show," where Ms. Broadwell, who served on active duty in the Army for a decade and is a reserve lieutenant colonel, made an appearance to promote her book, "All In: The Education of General David Petraeus."

She recounted how she had first e-mailed Mr. Petraeus about her doctoral dissertation and then showed up in Afghanistan, where he helped her in what she called a mentoring relationship, as he had many young officers. She said she and Mr. Petraeus shared an interest in fitness and that he took her running.

"That was the foundation of our relationship," she said. From time to time, they would go running in Kabul. "For him, I think it was a good distraction from the war."

From her many profiles and interviews, Ms. Broadwell, who was born while Mr. Petraeus was a West Point cadet and turned 40 on Friday, emerges as a younger, female version of him: travel to 60 countries; service in intelligence, special operations and with an F.B.I. counterterrorism task force; Harvard degree; wife of a physician; mother of two boys.

In her Charlotte, N.C., neighborhood on Friday night, television trucks converged on her house as curious neighbors stopped by to ask what was happening. One thought it was a crew filming "Homeland," which is shot in that city. A woman on a bicycle rode by, calling out to the crowd of reporters: "Go home. Go home."

Written in the family's driveway in gold-colored chalk was a child's inscription: "Dad ♥s Mom."

Ms. Broadwell's book, which reportedly earned her an advance in the mid-six figures, paints a glowing portrait of her mentor. But inside the military, where Mr. Petraeus compiled such a stunning record, views of him were more complex.

His circle of advisers included iconoclasts from the Army's ranks as well as freethinking civilian analysts, unusual for a military service in which senior officers often surrounded themselves with yes men. Mr. Petraeus was well known for sending e-mails to lower-ranking officers to get a sense of what was happening on the ground instead of relying on reports that filtered up the chain of command.

“P4,” as he was called for the four stars he earned, was viewed with respect — but often grudging respect. His celebrity brought positive attention to an all-volunteer force that at times struggled to meet recruitment numbers over a decade of grinding ground conflict. But that same publicity, and the fiercely ambitious man who pursued it, drew private criticism from some officers, who nicknamed him King David.

Biblical Echoes

As word of his resignation resounded across the Pentagon on Friday, more than one officer cited the biblical adultery of King David and Bathsheba.

Yet even officers who criticized the high-profile general acknowledged that he renewed a sense of intellectualism across a muddy-boots Army. And while the military’s new field manual on counterinsurgency — published in 2006 and tested on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan — was written by a number of staff officers and officially had a senior Marine Corps general as a co-author, the document was universally known as Mr. Petraeus’s doctrine.

Mr. Petraeus grew close to President George W. Bush, with whom he spoke frequently, and clashed with then-Senator Obama about the troop surge in Iraq. When Mr. Obama traveled to Iraq in the summer of 2008 as his party’s presumptive nominee, the two men had a spirited argument in private over the future president’s plan to withdraw combat forces from Iraq.

Once Mr. Obama took office, he did not speak regularly with Mr. Petraeus, preferring to restore what he considered the normal chain of command. Mr. Petraeus was effectively barred by the administration from Sunday talk shows but maintained private communications with journalists and lawmakers.

A key moment in the turnaround of the tense relationship between the president and the general came when Mr. Petraeus met with Rahm Emanuel, then Mr. Obama’s chief of staff and his lookout for possible rivals. In roundabout ways, not quite explicit but understood by both men, Mr. Petraeus assured Mr. Emanuel that he had no intention of running for president, according to people informed about the conversation.

Mr. Petraeus aspired to the top job in the military, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but the White House feared he would resist Mr. Obama’s schedule for winding down the war in Afghanistan. When Robert M. Gates, then the defense secretary, told him he would not get that post, Mr. Petraeus floated the idea of becoming C.I.A. director.

Mr. Obama liked the idea but, recognizing the C.I.A.’s institutional suspicion of the military, insisted that Mr. Petraeus retire from the Army. He reluctantly agreed to the condition, sailed through Senate confirmation and, as he had promised, showed up at the agency in Langley, Va., without a single aide from his large military retinue. His office at the C.I.A., however, was decorated with military memorabilia from his multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, including photographs, coins and Iraqi weapons.

He moved swiftly to take over C.I.A. counterterrorism operations, helping smooth conflict over drone strikes between agency Counterterrorism Center officials and State Department diplomats. He pushed the C.I.A. to stay on the frontiers of technology, taking an interest in the agency's high-tech incubator, In-Q-Tel.

He deliberately lowered his profile, rarely saying anything publicly about his new work. But he showed up at embassy parties and attended private Georgetown dinners, where he would sometimes talk about the cultural differences between the C.I.A. and the military he had grown up in.

"His was a short tenure," said Mr. Riedel, the C.I.A. veteran, now at the Brookings Institution. "But he was beginning the transformation of the C.I.A. from counterterrorism only to counterterrorism plus China, plus the euro zone, plus what the world will look like in 15 years."

Jack Keane, the former vice chief of staff of the Army and a mentor to Mr. Petraeus, said he believed Mr. Petraeus would eventually be rehabilitated: "We have not heard the last of Dave Petraeus, possibly even in a public service role."

The Military Wife

But amid the media storm, many friends and admirers of the family thought of Holly Petraeus, his wife of 38 years, herself descended from a distinguished line of military officers. In a March 2012 profile, USA Today referred to her as "Army royalty," noting that her great-great grandfather fought in the Civil War and the Indian Wars, and that her great-grandfather and grandfather had also served.

Mrs. Petraeus has carved out a prominent role for herself as an advocate for the financial education of military families. In 2010, after six years running the Military Line, a program of the Better Business Bureau, she joined the Obama administration's Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. There, she runs a branch dedicated to monitoring military families' consumer complaints.

"She is a role model for many of us because she found a way to develop a career for herself outside of her husband's very prestigious career," said Bianca Strzalkowski, who is married to a Marine and visited a military base with Mrs. Petraeus last year. "That is something we all aspire to, not just to be the Marine's wife or the soldier's wife, but to attain our own goals."

But the long separations from her husband seemed to weigh on Mrs. Petraeus. During a 2011 visit to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, she spoke of her dedication to her job. "I really can't think of anything better to be doing while my husband is deployed," she said with a pause, adding, "forever."

As news of Mr. Petraeus's affair spread, people who know Mrs. Petraeus reacted with shock and sadness. Amy Bushatz, who writes on military spouse issues (including for the At War blog of The New York Times) said that while the Petraeuses were stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky., Mrs. Petraeus became a beloved figure there.

“When you are a general’s spouse, it is easy to be kind of untouchable,” Ms. Bushatz said. “You live in the big house, nobody ever sees you, you appear at events and give speeches. The feeling here is that she is not untouchable. She spent a lot of time being one of the people.”

Jacey Eckhart, the spouse editor for the Web site military.com, said the fact that the Petraeuses had been married for so long, and survived so many separations, was a source of inspiration to younger military couples.

“The sense was they had a strong marriage, that this was a functioning relationship, that they had good kids. It’s one of those relationships that you look up to: if they can do it, we can do it. This is what success looks like. So this is shocking. This is what it looks like when a hero falls.”