

The Enduring Double Standard



By Jan Collins

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Paula Broadwell graduated at the top of her class at West Point, where she also won numerous varsity letters. She has two master's degrees, was an Olympic-distance triathlete, and was a research associate at Harvard and deputy director of the Center of Counterterrorism at Tufts University.

Broadwell was also mentored by former General David H. Petraeus. She became his biographer and ended up having a romantic relationship with him. At some point, Petraeus, the high-profile, popular general from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, let Broadwell read classified material that was contained in eight of his personal notebooks.

After a much-publicized F.B.I. investigation, Petraeus ultimately resigned from the military, apologized to the Senate Armed Services Committee, and pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of mishandling classified material. He was sentenced to two years' probation and a \$100,000 fine. Broadwell was never charged.

So four years later, what's the upshot? Short answer: it's the double standard all over again.

According to a recent article in The New York Times, Petraeus "is now a partner in a New York private equity firm, and has advised the White House on the war against the Islamic State. He publishes op-ed articles, speaks publicly and has affiliations with three universities, including Harvard. He was recently listed among five former military leaders suggested by a Washington Post columnist whom Republicans might have considered drafting for president." Just last week, Petraeus was front and center on PBS, being interviewed by host Charlie Rose about the current situation in Iraq.

And Broadwell? She "lost her military security clearance; her promotion from major to lieutenant colonel was revoked when the news broke. The F.B.I. still has her computers – including her dissertation research – and she withdrew from her Ph.D. program. She said she was told in more than one job interview that, while she was qualified, hiring her would be a public-relations nightmare."

Broadwell, who lives in Charlotte with her husband and two young sons, told The Times, “I’m the first to admit I screwed up. Really badly, I know that. But how long does a person pay for their mistake?”

If you’re female, the answer is: probably forever. Paula Broadwell is just the latest example, but most of us haven’t forgotten earlier scandals involving Monica Lewinsky, Rielle Hunter, Donna Rice. The nasty word “mistress” was applied to them all. There is no equivalent word for men.

And let’s not forget who was sentenced to wear the scarlet letter (“A” for “adulterer”) in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous tale set in Puritan New England. It wasn’t the weak Reverend Dimmesdale; it was the feisty Hester Prynne.

Speaking of “feisty,” here is another double standard: words that appear to be gender neutral but are invariably used to describe women – negatively. Besides “feisty”, there is “airhead”, “ambitious”, “abrasive”, “bimbo”, “bitchy”, “bossy”, “breathless”, “bubbly”, “ditsy”, “emotional”, “frigid”, “frumpy,” “headstrong”, “high-maintenance”, “hormonal”, “hysterical”, “illogical”, “pushy”, “sassy”, “slut” (the male equivalent is the admirable “stud”), and “working mother”. (Do you ever read about a “working father”?)

Finally, we have “shrill,” typically used to describe a female high-pitched voice but rarely used to describe an equally high male voice, says The Telegraph newspaper of London, which provided this interesting list of words.

Now, none of this is to excuse Broadwell – or Lewinsky, or Hunter, or Rice -- for their transgressions. The ever-present double standard, though, seems to ruin the lives of the women involved. As for their male paramours? Not so much.

And now for the ultimate double standard: If Hillary Clinton had engaged in multiple extramarital infidelities over the years and then bragged about them as Donald Trump has done (he boasts about his many affairs, some with “seemingly very happily married and important women,”) would Mrs. Clinton now be the presumptive Democratic nominee for president of the United States? I won’t ever bother to answer the question.

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