I called my brother shortly after his resignation. Our phone conversations, oddly enough, typically swirl around the contemporary political news, and tonight’s dialogue was no different. We ended our talk with a topic that resembled gossip more than politics: General David Petraeus’ affair. He was our role model, a fine and outstanding individual, and it wasn’t easy watching his fall from grace. To be sure, it was a tough year for us already. Lance Armstrong, another former star and idol, was stripped of his 7 Tour De France medals. This is of course after Brent and I spent months defending his honor, only to embarrassingly watch as he was publically humiliated. Petraeus’ scandal was different though— he didn’t cheat to win. It is no wonder Brent spent a great deal of time trying to convince me that personal matters do not have a place in the professional world. I did think it was a little strange to hear how passionately he defended him; but at the same time I didn’t quite know how to respond.

Our knowledge of Petraeus came from the Boy Scouts, an organization centered upon the same principles of leadership and responsibility as the military. Our Scoutmaster, David Palmer, routinely cited General Petraeus in the closing remarks of the meeting, crediting Petraeus for his convictions, and for standing out in a field that more often than not rewards uniformity over excellence. A WestPoint graduate once came to one of our meetings, complete with flashy uniform, cropped head, and commanding presence. He too spoke of the General, and told us that if we were to look up to any graduate of WestPoint, it would be Petraeus, since he was the one actually getting results out in Iraq.
We joined Scouting with the encouragement of my father, although it was an organization that I was initially hesitant to become a part of. Everything seemed a little daunting, and I was taken aback by the uniforms, the rules, and the homogeneity. I quickly learned to appreciate the odd things Scouting stresses, and there was a reason for the methods championed by my leaders and peers. As a perfectionist, I liked the no-nonsense approach one of my first leaders took to outdoors. There was a right way to light a fire, a right way to tie a knot, a right way to use a compass, a map. Everything had a correct and certified way, and everything could be mastered with the right amount of practice and determination. There is hardly anything arbitrary about Scouting. Each rank could be accomplished, the criteria was set and easily available. Every task was just another bar to climb, a skill to master. The Boy Scouts shared my dislike of uncertainty. Unfortunately the world doesn’t operate with the same kind of precision and exactness.

In light of all of Petraeus’ achievements, in only seems natural for reporters to focus on all of the wrong questions. Many ask why he cheated, and there appears to be numerous reasons. Most articles point out stresses of the job, or to the supposed link between success and infidelity. I don’t think these pieces offer any unique and worthwhile information with regards to Petraeus. Others still wonder if the scandal will forever tarnish his spot in history, given the numerous medals and wide admiration. This question still doesn’t offer any substantive truth. In all the reports I have read, not one journalist has posed the most basic and fundamental question: was it right for General David Petraeus to step down? My little brother seems to be one of the few who actually questioned the decision, and I do find that a little strange.
Petraeus’ affair isn’t the first in Washington, and certainly will not be the last. Given the recent transgressions of several well-known elected officials, his misdoings may seem petty at best. Mark Sanford took a “trip to the Appalachian Mountains,” Bill Clinton swore under oath that he “never had relations with that woman,” and Elliot Spitzer infamously hired “escorts.” Oddly enough, each of these individual’s undoings were not predominantly due to the affairs themselves. It was the accompanying crimes in tandem with the inappropriate relationships that brought these men trouble. Sanford lied about his escapades with the Argentinian woman, and walked out of his job as Governor. Clinton lied under oath. Spitzer hired prostitutes. True crime appears to be the only separation between the politician and the respective office. Immoral activity, like an affair, doesn’t seem to hinder a representative’s career.

This brings us back to Brent’s initial thoughts. Petraeus, as far as we know, didn’t have the accompanying crime to go alongside his transgression. He didn’t cheat to win like Armstrong, didn’t lie under oath like Clinton, didn’t hire prostitutes like Spitzer, and didn’t leave his post unannounced like Sanford. What Petraeus did was immoral, not illegal, and yet he still stepped down when, in theory, he could have easily stayed on.

Most do not question this decision to step down, even without an accompanying crime. This strengthens my belief that the proverbial bar for General Petraeus and the military is set higher than it is for most, and rightly so. Like it or not, the military is the world’s police force, and must be held with high esteem for our own image’s sake. If it were revealed that Petraeus’ affair took place in Iraq as standing general, he would have been court-martialed. This underscores the urgency that the military takes with regard to bad publicity. Petraeus may have been head of the CIA, a post that at least resembles a political
position, but he is still perceived as a military man. It is because of this that we expect more out of individuals like Petraeus. I don’t know how he will be viewed in 10 or 20 years, but I am sure the scandal will be sit alongside every single one of his accomplishments.

The military isn’t the only institution where the proverbial bar is set high. The Boy Scouts are seen as the do-gooders of society, the kinds of people who walk grandmas across the street, the kinds of people who go and volunteer on the weekends. This image has been cultivated over decades, and can certainly be hard to live up to. This doesn’t mean we dislike the image, we welcome the vulnerability that comes with such a characterization—we knew what we were signing up for. Every meeting we would recite the oath and law, a reminder of the responsibility we had, a reminder of what was expected of us. Petraeus understood this; it’s why he stepped down while others stayed on.

Is it fair for the military and scouting to be held to such a high standard, while others get a free pass? It depends who you ask. As individuals who are expected to lead and act, I believe it is perhaps necessary and logical to be held to a higher standard. For those who complain that the media has been harsh on Petraeus, I say to you, tough. He knew what he was getting into, and I think he would agree criticism is warranted.

Neither scouting nor the military are perfect; it is a fact I must stress. Don’t get me wrong, I respect both, but the two institutions are wrought with wrongdoing. I lament the fact that the BSA still bars openly gay members. Not only is this policy in direct conflict with our values, but it is perhaps the most blatant form of bigotry perpetrated by an organization today. While the military has overturned “Don’t ask Don’t tell,” many more issues remain. It is clear that military leaders have for too long sat idly by as servicewomen were raped by fellow soldiers. I’m not trying to say that the institutions are above anything
or anyone, because it is clear they just aren’t. Both are subject to scandal just like any other. My point is that each institution has something expected of it, and often its members ultimately do the right thing, even in times of scandal. I believe reform may be necessary for each organization to live by the Scout Oath and Law, or by the Soldier’s Creed. My only hope is that each organization actually does what is right, and I am confident that they will.

So back to Brent’s initial claim. Should there be a delineation between Petraeus’ personal and professional life, much like other politicians? In theory, yes, there should, but in reality, the answer is an unequivocal no. The military and scouting institutions necessitate the blend of professional and personal, more is just expected of us. However, while there is more expected of General Petraeus, it wasn’t what ultimately caused him to resign. He expected more of himself, and that in and of itself is the scouting way. I may be among the first to write this, but yes, I do believe it was it right for General Petraeus to step down, although I cannot be sure if it was for the right reasons.

I wish I could come to some brilliant and happy conclusion. I wish I could write that Petraues’ marriage is safe, that his family has forgiven him, that the worst is over. But the truth is I can only infer, speculate, and hope, that everything will work out for him in the end. His actions have led me to believe that he is doing the right thing, and I hope he is home with his family, but he could be elsewhere, his wife could leave him, and he could very well cheat again. Life isn’t like the military or scouting, in that nothing is certain—and often when we place our faith in human beings we will be disappointed, it is an inevitable fact. Yet, if nothing else, Scouting has taught me to keep my faith in people. It is why we still give back to the community, why trust is a mainstay in the scout law, and why we are instructed to be “cheerful” even in times of doubt. It is this trust that leads me to believe
that the Boy Scouts will reform their ways, and why I believe Petraeus stepped down for the right reasons. It is why I currently believe he is doing the right thing. The way I see it, he could have easily done what dozens of politicians before him have done and stayed the course, but I’d like to think that General Petraeus isn’t just another politician. In my mind, he understood that there was something beyond his own personal ambitions. For Petraeus, his family and wife mattered more than any position, and for that I believe he is a true soldier and scout.

I talked to Brent again a few days after that initial conversation. I was ready to tell him what I thought—to say that yes, it was right for Petraeus to step down. I knew what I was going to say. I would bring up the higher standard, the proverbial bar, and calmly tell him he was wrong to assume that the personal and professional are unrelated. I got a little way into my argument before Brent abruptly cut me off. He loudly defended Petraeus, and immediately took up his same talking points as before. He brought the same intensity, and the same passion, decrying the link between professional and personal. As I sat listening to his diatribe, I quickly realized that this really wasn’t about Petraeus’ actions at all, it was about our heroes, which got me thinking: who and what are we without our heroes? As Brent and I are both quickly realizing, each one of our role models have flaws, devastating flaws at that. Like before, I listened to his speech, and like before I barely said a word. I just wasn’t quite sure what to say.
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