



## The Broadwell Recognition

By: Daniel W. Drezner - November 26, 2012

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As near as I can figure, The David Petraeus/Paula Broadwell story is the ultimate pundit Rorschach Test. Whatever axe one had to grind against the foreign policy community prior to the story breaking, Petraeus and Broadwell merely sharpens it. It's evidence about the sexism and double-standards at play in Washington! It shows the insularity and kiss-assedness of the foreign policy community!! It shows that COIN doesn't work, or that Petraeus was a big phony!!

I'm not immune to this impulse, so I'd like to focus on a lesson that can be drawn from this for those young, impressionistic aspirants to positions of foreign policy influence. If there's anything you can learn from the rise and fall of Paula Broadwell, it's this: do not, *under any circumstances*, think of a Ph.D. as merely a box to be checked on the way to power and influence in Washington.

As Fred Kaplan notes, Petraeus both benefited from and propagated the desire to develop "officer-intellectuals" within the military:

The impulse was not unique to Petraeus. It grew out of the ethos of West Point's social science department, where Petraeus had taught in the mid-1980s. The department, known as "Sosh," was founded just after World War II by a visionary ex-cadet and Rhodes Scholar named George A. "Abe" Lincoln. Toward the end of the war, as the senior planning aide to Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall,

Lincoln realized that the Army needed to breed a new type of officer to help the nation meet its new global responsibilities in the postwar era. This new officer, he wrote to a colleague, should have “at least three heads—one political, one economic, and one military.” He took a demotion, from brigadier general to colonel, so he could return to West Point and create a curriculum “to improve the so-called Army mind” in just this way: a social science department, encouraging critical thinking, even occasionally dissent.

Lincoln also set up a program allowing cadets with high scores in Sosh classes to go study at a civilian graduate school, with West Point paying the tuition. In exchange, the cadets, after earning their doctorates, would come back and teach for at least three years. Once they fulfilled that obligation, Lincoln would use his still-considerable connections in Washington to get them choice assignments in the Pentagon, the State Department, the White House, a foreign embassy, or a prestigious command post.

Now, I've personally encountered a lot of these scholar-officers at most of my academic postings. Many of them are among the best that the military has to offer, and offer a necessary bridge between the scholarly and martial worlds. On the other hand, some of them are there precisely because they see the Ph.D. as a ticket to be punched on the way to something greater. And these are the ones who will usually flail about miserably.

This appears to be what happened to Broadwell at the Kennedy School of Government. By all accounts, she had succeeded at pretty much everything she had tried to achieve prior to entering the Ph.D. program. At that point, however... well, let's go to the *Boston Globe's* story:

One of Broadwell's former professors at Harvard described her as a self-promoter who would routinely show up at office hours.

“It was very much, ‘I'm here and you're going to know I'm here,?’” said the professor, who did not want to be identified because of the sensitivity of ongoing investigations. “She was not someone you would think of as a critical thinker. I don't remember anything about her as a student. I remember her as a personality.”

The professor said when Petraeus chose Broadwell to write his biography, there was shock among the national security faculty at Harvard because “she just didn't

have the background — the academic background, the national security background, or the writing background.”

A second Harvard faculty member who knows Broadwell and Petraeus had similar misgivings.

Now, these comments from the Harvard faculty are self-serving and indecorous; as the *Globe* story goes on to note, these professorial misgivings did not stop the school from embracing Broadwell's apparent success.

That said, as a professor in a policy school, those comments caused me to shudder in recognition. Any professor in one of these institutions recognizes the student profile in the *Globe* story. Even standard political science departments are littered with students who have sterling resumes, glittering letters of recommendation, and that disturbing tendency to look past the task at hand to plot out steps three, four and five of their Ascent to Greatness.

Here's the thing about these students: 95 percent of them will not earn a Ph.D. -- and most of the rest who do get it will only have done so by finding the most pliant dissertation committee alive. Ambition and intelligence can get someone through college and a professional degree. It can even get someone through Ph.D.-level coursework. What it can't do is produce an above-the-bar dissertation.

In my day, I've known too many students who were talented in many ways, and yet got stymied at the dissertation phase. For people who have succeeded at pretty much everything in life to that point, a Ph.D. seems like just another barrier to transcend. It's not. Unless you are able to simultaneously love and critically dissect your subject matter, unless you thrive in an environment where people are looking forward to picking apart your most cherished ideas, you won't finish. You can guess for yourself at which task Broadwell failed, condemning her to **the Jane Babbington fate**.

To be clear: I don't write this preroration to suggest that finishing a Ph.D. is a sign of superior intelligence: it isn't. I've met Ph.D.'s in my field who were actually quite stupid.

Consider this a public service message. As someone who has advised readers on **the relative merits of getting a Ph.D.**, it's worth pointing out -- repeatedly -- that getting a Ph.D. is not for everyone. If there isn't an idea or a question that truly animates you, if you think of a Ph.D. as merely a ticket to be punched, then know the following: you are looking at a half-decade of misery with nothing to show for it in the end except a terminal masters degree.

Am I missing anything?