



## **How Washington Makes Love for War**

*What Paula Broadwell teaches us about the foreign-policy elite.*

By: JUSTIN LOGAN - November 21, 2012

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The salacious details of the Petraeus affair are pretty captivating. Foreign-policy observers are mostly reading about the sex scandal, but now there's also the kabuki Benghazi controversy over who said "terror" when and how to define "spontaneous." While nobody should be surprised that these superficial stories have captured Washington's attention, the concurrent obsessions point to a substantive problem. The Washington foreign-policy elite is an insular, cosseted clique that obsesses over minutiae and discourages strategic thought.

Cards on the table: I am a dissenter from the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus, so I have an interest in highlighting the pathologies of how the establishment works. But the problems have gotten tough to dismiss.

Consider the C.V. of Paula Broadwell. As a piece by the *Post's* Greg Jaffe and Anne Gearan points out, she was "a rising star who seemed destined for a sparkling career in foreign policy." The question is why. She had no academic accomplishment to speak of, and was bounced from Harvard's public policy school to a doctoral program in England, which itself is now reconsidering her status because of ethical concerns. According to an unnamed professor of hers at Harvard, "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."

So why is it that this sort of person looks to be a rising star, someone destined for greatness? Simple: She was an effective self-promoter and networker and, most important, she never stopped to question the conventional wisdom. Broadwell's ascent to prominence was a stepwise progression. The essential first step for Broadwell was allying herself with the emerging conventional wisdom that population-centric counterinsurgency was the missing tool in America's defense arsenal and that General Petraeus could use it to fix America's wars. But the crucial step Broadwell took was to use

her status as a promoter of the conventional wisdom to attain access to power: in this case, General Petraeus. It was this proximity to power that made her a boldfaced name and won gushing blurbs for her mash-note book about Petraeus from an array of pundits and think tankers, whose imprimatur then signaled that Broadwell was a part of the establishment with wisdom to be heard.

There is one anecdote about Broadwell that perfectly captures the pathology of the foreign-policy establishment: according to one account, when Broadwell would be mildly challenged on aspects of her presentations, she “would frequently become defensive and beg off,” offering responses along the lines of, “Whoa, I thought we were just having a friendly discussion here, not a debate.” In the Beltway foreign-policy community, strategy debate is inherently unfriendly and to be avoided. Part of the reason so much attention is spent on process and operational details and so little time on strategy is that everyone can get together in a room and complain about the inter-agency process without disagreeing with another person in particular. The same isn’t true about choices over strategy. If one strategy is appropriate, the other possibilities are wrong.

While agonizing over process and operations, the Beltway foreign-policy elite goes to great lengths to avoid debate about strategy. Don’t take it from me, take it from the Brookings Institution’s Michael O’Hanlon. In *USA Today* before the election, O’Hanlon argued that there were no fundamental differences between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney on foreign and defense policy. In O’Hanlon’s view, this is “a good thing for America.”

But think of this reality in light of the decision to invade Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet report not having been asked and not having volunteered their views on whether Washington should invade. By contrast, more than 80 percent of international relations academics opposed the war, but Washington didn’t care to listen.

After the initial conventional wisdom produced the Iraq blunder, the new conventional wisdom emerged. According to this view, Bush and Rumsfeld were unduly obsessed with minimizing America’s exposure to the chaos they unleashed in Iraq, and determined nation building was the way to salvage a victory in that theater (and later in Afghanistan). An important feature of this new conventional wisdom was that it failed to indict the initial conventional wisdom. The problem wasn’t that the Beltway consensus about invading was wrong. Rather, it was Bush’s fault for taking a basically sound policy and implementing it poorly. So Democrats and Republicans alike climbed over each other to get a chance to hug the purveyors of counterinsurgency and embrace COIN themselves.

There was, of course, little debate about the new approach and Washington said to push on.

Or, looking to the future, consider Iran. Are policymakers hearing arguments that a nuclear Iran could fairly easily be contained and deterred? Of course not. This is despite, once again, academics and others arguing over and over that a nuclear Iran could be managed at an acceptable cost. There is no debate about this in the political arena, where doves insist that the sanctions currently torturing the Iranian people can prevent the Iranian regime from going nuclear and hawks insist that because sanctions will fail, America needs to start another war in the Middle East.

So let's not blame Paula Broadwell too much for not being the brilliant iconoclast that so few of us are. Most people respond rationally to incentives, and in the foreign-policy world those incentives discourage challenging the conventional wisdom.

In a biting piece at the *New Republic*, Noam Scheiber described Broadwell as “a flatterer in a community of flatterers, a networker among networkers, a credentialist embedded with the credential-obsessed.” While it's worth pushing back from the table to consider the case, it's also worth asking what the case says about the Washington foreign-policy elite in general. Paula Broadwell supplied a service that is in high demand in Washington: flashy promotion of the conventional wisdom. If members of the Washington media/think tank establishment want to complain or snicker that someone like her rose to such prominence, they ought to look in a mirror. While it might cause more social friction in fancy Georgetown salons, the country would benefit from elevating people who promise a bit less consensus and a bit more debate about foreign policy.