

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sidney Blumenthal [redacted]
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The Petraeus affair's resulting witch hunt

By David Ignatius,

Washington superlawyer Joseph Califano once passed a message to a client being grilled by a congressional committee that read: "Keep cool in Kabul." That phrase has a certain piquancy now, but Califano simply wanted to calm the witness, slow the process a bit and get everyone to chill out. The "keep cool" advice seems especially useful now that Washington's latest set of scandals is entering the phase of congressional investigation, righteous political indignation and public penance. At times like this, people tend to repeat the old bromide "Sunlight is the best disinfectant." But it can also be toxic under the wrong circumstances.

When you look at the various scandals entwined around leading national-security figures, they have a common feature, which is that they were all driven to the surface by the fear of political exposure. It's worth considering for a moment the way in which politics — and the rush to get out ahead of anticipated disclosure — has driven this process and made it more damaging than it needed to be. This political nexus was spotted by Jane Mayer of *The New Yorker* in a recent blog post. She noted that the dominoes began to fall when a self-appointed FBI whistleblower went to Republican members of Congress, first Rep. Dave Reichert of Washington state and then House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, to warn them of a possible coverup of an investigation of CIA Director David Petraeus. Cantor's staff called the office of FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, and the fat was in the fire. Knowing that the supersensitive investigation (which apparently was then winding down) had become a political football, Mueller's deputy Sean Joyce called Director of National Intelligence James Clapper on Nov. 6. Clapper summoned Petraeus, counseled him to resign and informed the White House. Three days later, Petraeus was gone.

Fear of political blowback also triggered the revelation that Gen. John Allen, the U.S. commander in Kabul, had been exchanging possibly inappropriate e-mails with Jill Kelley, the Tampa socialite, military liaison and, judging from what we've read, all-around busybody. The FBI had already reviewed Allen's e-mails as part of the Petraeus investigation, but last Sunday the FBI decided to inform the Pentagon and turn over 20,000 to 30,000 pages exchanged between Allen and Kelley. On Monday afternoon, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta decided to go public, open a Pentagon investigation of Allen and suspend his confirmation as the next U.S. commander in Europe. Why did the Pentagon suddenly and publicly drop Allen into limbo? We still don't know what is in the e-mails, beyond some "sweetheart" language. But Panetta clearly was worried about political fallout. Allen was due to testify before Congress on Thursday and, as a senior Pentagon official explained: "If you don't inform Congress of the FBI referral, that becomes a problem."

In the aftermath of the McCarthy investigations in the 1950s, when Americans wondered how responsible officials could have allowed such a reckless "witch hunt" that ruined reputations on the flimsiest evidence, Arthur Miller wrote a play called "The Crucible" about the Salem witch trials of 1692. The genius of the play was that it explained how sensible early Americans could have been swept up in a process of public shaming and destruction of character.

Amazingly, many members of Congress talk as if the real outrage here was that they weren't informed earlier about the investigations of Petraeus and Allen. "We should have been told," said Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, last Sunday. To which an observer might respond vernacularly: Give me a break.

The idea seems to have developed that the CIA and the military work equally for Congress and for the executive branch. They don't. They work for the president, who is commander in chief. Congress appropriates the money and has a legitimate role in overseeing how it's spent. But the idea that these scandals demonstrate the need for greater congressional involvement in sensitive investigations is preposterous.

The day Petraeus resigned, I received an e-mail from an Arab intelligence contact who expressed what surely has been going through the minds of many people around the world. I will quote it precisely, punctuation and all: "He needs to resign cause he has an affair? What da hell??? He is brilliant!!!! Why like this?????"

Petraeus is gone, but the hunt for miscreants is still gathering force. For a reminder of why it's dangerous, take a look at "The Crucible" and the lessons of history.

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