

By The New York Times Editorial Board

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Granted, Americans love a comeback story.

But it is astonishing how quickly [David Petraeus](#) seems to have bounced back from the sordid aftermath of his extramarital affair, which cost him his job running the Central Intelligence Agency and added a rap sheet to the carefully managed legacy of the most famous American general of his generation.

Compared with the Obama administration's aggressive prosecution of whistle-blowers and

other leakers of classified information, Mr. Petraeus stands to emerge largely unscathed despite the extraordinarily poor judgment he showed while serving in one of the nation's most critical national security jobs.

Abbe Lowell, an attorney for Stephen Kim, a former State Department contractor [serving a 13-month term](#) for leaking information about North Korea to Fox News, [complained in a letter](#) to the Department of Justice that the disposition in Mr. Petraeus's case showed a "profound double standard."

Federal prosecutors have charged more public servants for leaking classified information to journalists during the Obama administration than all previous administrations. Yet top officials, who often seek to advance self-serving political agendas in their dealings with the press, appear to enjoy significant leeway in disclosing classified information. Prosecutors agreed not to seek jail time when Mr. Petraeus is sentenced next month as part of his [guilty plea to a misdemeanor](#) charge of mishandling classified information. Mr. Petraeus, who charmed and provided extraordinary access to handpicked journalists and national security experts during his tours running the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was all too familiar with the currency of classified information in the battleground of public opinion. Journalists and think tank analysts who could be trusted to report favorably often got invited to sit in on his classified briefings.

Mr. Petraeus took that custom to a new level with Paula Broadwell, who was his biographer and lover. His decision to give her access to personal notebooks that [contained information classified at the highest levels](#) — including notes about intelligence methods, discussions with the president and even the names of covert officers — appeared to have been motivated by vanity, lust or a combination of the two. While Ms. Broadwell's book, "All In: The Education of General David Petraeus," contains no classified information, sharing the notebooks displayed a shocking level of hubris and recklessness.

In sharp contrast, the government has been unsparing in its prosecution of lower-ranking officials who have shared sensitive information for more defensible reasons. The former C.I.A. officer [John Kiriakou](#) served nearly two years in prison for disclosing the name of a colleague involved in the agency's brutal interrogation program. And Mr. Kim has said that he was trying to draw attention to the threat posed by North Korea when he told a journalist that the country was likely to test a nuclear bomb.

Mr. Kim and Mr. Kiriakou are unlikely to have second acts in government or national security circles, and the prosecutions left them with huge legal bills. While Mr. Petraeus receded somewhat from the limelight after the scandal broke in the fall of 2012, he [managed to remain influential](#) and well paid. The former general recently became [a partner in a New York private equity firm](#) and is advising the White House on the war against the Islamic State terrorist group in Iraq and Syria.

On Monday, Mr. Petraeus's rehabilitation seemed complete when the White House spokesman Josh Earnest [said that it "makes a lot of sense"](#) for senior administration officials to consult with him. "He is, I think, legitimately regarded as an expert when it comes to the security situation in Iraq."