

A social enterprise born in scandal

Many Americans are wondering whether Gen. David Petraeus can redeem himself. One of the most admired men in the United States -- leader of the country's military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more recently, head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he pursued an extramarital affair and it ruined his career. The story broke in early November and he resigned from the CIA November 9.

Fifty years ago, in a different nation, another man's behavior created a scandal that convulsed his entire country -- and brought down the government. Yet he went on to build one of the most successful social enterprises in the world and, in the words of British newspaper columnist Simon Heffer, carried out "the most spectacular act of atonement in the history of our public life since Henry II abased himself after the murder of Thomas à Becket -- and about the most spectacular act of redemption, too."

This is his story.

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He was living a fairy-tale life . . .

Born to an aristocratic family, educated at Harrow and Oxford, Fifth Baron of the late kingdom of Sardinia.

In 1940, at the age of 25, he became the youngest Member of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons -- and one of 30 Conservative MPs who joined with the Labour Party to bring down the government of Neville Chamberlain and pave the way for Winston Churchill's wartime ascension.

He landed in Normandy on D-Day with an armored brigade and fought in the fierce battles that followed. He was present when the Germans surrendered in Italy, later became Brigadier and Chief of Staff for the British forces serving under General Douglas MacArthur in post-war Japan. In his spare time he drew on an undergraduate flair for amateur theatricals by writing and producing a hit musical.

In 1950 he returned to Parliament as MP for Stratford-on-Avon, and in 1954 he married the famous British actress Valerie Hobson, whom he met while she was playing the lead in *The King and I* at Drury Lane Theatre. He and his wife quickly became one of the most glamorous couples in London society.

In 1957 he became Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and in 1960 Secretary of State for War -- and was widely expected to eventually become Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Then, in 1960, he went to a garden party . . . and launched a chain of events that led to Britain's greatest political scandal of the 20th century.

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Jack Profumo and his wife had been invited by Lord Waldorf Astor to spend a weekend on his estate at Cliveden in Buckinghamshire. Lord Astor had rented a cottage on the estate to Stephen Ward, a 47-year-old osteopath, socialite and collector of influential friends. Ward's client list included Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden and Frank Sinatra.

But Ward also had a darker side. He specialized in supplying call girls -- and one of them came with him that weekend. Her name was Christine Keeler.

Profumo first set eyes on Keeler when she stepped naked from Lord Astor's swimming pool after Ward snatched off her bathing suit. She left Cliveden that weekend with Yevgeny Ivanov, a Soviet naval attaché and friend of Ward, but Profumo asked Ward for Keeler's telephone number and soon began an affair that lasted several months.

But Keeler was also sleeping with Ivanov. British Intelligence suspected he was a KGB agent and warned Profumo, who immediately ended his relationship with Keeler and tried to distance himself from the people at Cliveden.



It didn't work. Rumors about the affair refused to die and eventually became a political nightmare. Things came to a head during a House of Commons session on a March evening in 1963 when a Labour Party MP pointedly asked Prime Minister Harold Macmillan whether the Secretary of State for War had been involved with Christine Keeler.

His Conservative Party colleagues roused Profumo from bed in the middle of the night. He denied having the affair and, the next day, with the Prime Minister sitting beside him, he told the assembled MPs there had been "no impropriety whatsoever" in his relationship with Keeler.

He maintained his denials for three months, but Stephen Ward was facing trial for living off immoral earnings and sought to gain favor with the courts. He wrote to Macmillan and the opposition leader, Harold Wilson, giving his version of events. And it was rumored Christine Keeler had made a series of taped confessions revealing the affair.

In early June, during a vacation trip to Venice, Profumo blurted the truth to his wife over lunch. "Oh, darling," she said, "we must go home as soon as we can and face up to it." On June 5, in a stunning reversal, he resigned from the government and also from Parliament. In his letter of resignation to Macmillan he expressed "deep remorse" at the embarrassment he had caused his colleagues and constituents.

The Labour Party seized on the scandal as evidence of sleaze at the top, and the satirists loved every minute of it. One widely repeated limerick ran:

*"Oh what have you done?" said Christine.
"You've disrupted the Party machine.
To lie in the nude is not very rude,
But to lie in the House is obscene."*

Lying for political purposes is almost *de rigueur* today in the United Kingdom and the United States, but in the Cold War world of 1963 Profumo's liaison with a woman linked to a possible Russian spy rocked the nation. The affair triggered a crisis of confidence in Macmillan's leadership and brought down the government. For years, many of his former colleagues shunned Profumo, blaming him for the decline of the Conservatives during the 1960s.

Stephen Ward committed suicide. Christine Keeler went to jail for nine months because of unrelated perjury charges.

And Jack Profumo disappeared from public view.

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Fast forward 35 years to the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Chicago.

I had been invited to conduct an afternoon workshop at an international conference of settlement houses sponsored by the Jane Addams Hull House Association of Chicago and Toynbee Hall of London. The workshop had gone well and I was decompressing in my hotel room when the telephone rang.

It was Tony Wagner, a long-time friend and the veteran head of Pillsbury United Communities, the second largest nonprofit in Minneapolis/St. Paul. A few years later, Tony would become President of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers.

But, on this day, he was facing a mini-crisis. Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar had agreed to deliver the keynote address that would close the conference the next evening -- but political stirrings in the state capital had caused him to cancel. Would I be willing to take his place?

I drew a deep breath and said I'd be happy to do so -- then hurriedly began outlining the speech.

There were more than 300 people at the closing banquet the next evening, leaders of the settlement house movement from all over the world. I spent most of the dinner chatting with people at the head table and mentally rehearsing my speech.

But, as dessert was being served, I glanced at the program for the evening and realized something special would be taking place before my speech.

An awards ceremony.

For Jack Profumo . . .

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"It isn't what happens to a man, it's what he does with it that matters." (Valerie Hobson)

A few days after he submitted his letter of resignation to Prime Minister Macmillan, Jack Profumo arrived at the door of Toynbee Hall and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

Toynbee Hall is not a posh person's charity. It's located in one of London's roughest and most deprived areas, backing onto the street where Jack the Ripper killed his last victim five years after an Anglican priest and his wife established Toynbee Hall as a settlement house in 1873. Over the past few decades, it has been a center for social reform, popularized legal aid throughout England, became the single biggest provider of adult education in the country, and recruited the nation's largest group of volunteers. Today, in what is now primarily a Bangladeshi community, it helps the very young, the very old and anyone in between, including programs addressing community safety, prostitution, housing, domestic violence and education. The organization has spawned imitators from Finland to South Korea.

But in 1963, when Jack Profumo began his journey of redemption, the center had just five staff and 22 volunteers.

He cleaned toilets, washed dishes in the kitchen, danced with lonely elderly ladies at the Hall's social events. Made himself useful. And, as time went by, the organization's senior executive finally took him aside. "Look," he said, "we can always find somebody to clean the toilets. We need you to help us raise money."

Profumo tackled fundraising armed with a bulging address book of contacts, and over the years he persuaded many of the people in his book to lend their time and money to Toynbee Hall. He kept the settlement afloat -- and more. He founded a low-income housing association, introduced an after-care unit for ex-offenders, built a family center for those with learning difficulties. He served as Chairman of the Board from 1982 to 1985, and the people at Toynbee Hall still marvel at "the twinkle in his eye" and his ability to talk to anyone without condescension.



In 1995, in a signal to the country of the esteem in which he was held, Profumo was seated next to the Queen at the head table during Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 70th birthday celebration.

And by the time of the awards dinner in Chicago in 1998, he was the organization's longest-serving volunteer -- and Toynbee Hall had become known as "the house that Jack built."

His friend Jim Thomson, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, once said about the scandal, "No one judges Jack Profumo more harshly than he does himself. He says he has never known a day since it happened when he has not felt real shame."

But he accepted responsibility for his mistake. In a 2006 editorial entitled “Profumo’s salvation,” the *Telegraph*, one of Britain’s leading newspapers, had this to say about his career:

“As a man of honour, John Profumo understood that his offence of lying to his wife (and) his Cabinet colleagues ... was immense. And so he acted decisively when he admitted his deceit in June 1963. Unlike so many politicians today, he did not prevaricate, or seek sympathy, or claim he was protecting his family by denying a brief affair with Christine Keeler. He did not seek to strike a bargain to turn his disgrace into a ‘revolving door’ resignation, with a promise of a swift return to the front benches. Profumo resigned, as a member and an MP, withdrew from public life and concentrated on good works in the East End of London. He did this not because he wanted to look good, but because he knew he had behaved badly. And in so doing, he showed he understood the meaning of atonement, and did far more good for his fellow man than any politician of his time.”

Profumo never spoke publicly about the events of the early 1960s. He was devastated by the end of his political career, but he never moaned in public, never tried to excuse or defend himself.

But he did do something far more important -- and when he passed away in early 2006, all England mourned.

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The rest of the evening passed in a blur. My speech went well and my wife Linda and I celebrated with Tony and his wife Marie.

But all that night, and for many days afterward, I found myself thinking about a man who fell from the very heights -- and only then began his life’s work.

If a man like Jack Profumo could face the facts, admit his mistakes, pick himself up and try again -- then why should any of us fear to do the same?

We all make mistakes. None of us is immune. But it doesn’t matter how flawed we are -- there is still so much we can give. As novelist James Michener once wrote, “Character consists of what you do on the third and fourth tries.”

Ultimately, what matters is what we do next. And Jack Profumo did “next” better than most.