The United States has moved from the high of a presidential election to the low of a political sex scandal in one short week. For many Americans, the election demonstrated what is best about the country, only to be followed by the sadly familiar process of knocking heroes off their pedestals. For many non-Americans, the election brought the welcome and reassuring victory of Barack Obama, whereas the resignation of David Petraeus as Director of the CIA was an unnecessary, self-inflicted wound.

In fact, both the election and Petraeus’s resignation are pieces of a larger whole: an America that lives up to its promises.

The election reminded many Americans that the US is a country committed to and capable of progress – of moving forward toward an ideal vision. Obama was supported by a coalition of minorities: African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Muslim-Americans, gay and lesbian Americans, and an under-represented majority – women – all of whom perceive continuing inequalities and injustices that need to be remedied. But the winners were all who believe that America is, in fact, dedicated to “equal justice under law,” the words emblazoned on the pediment of the Supreme Court.

In the election of an African-American president less than a half-century after the end of official racial segregation in much of the country, these Americans see the triumph of the values enshrined in the US Constitution over America’s legacy of social, political, and economic prejudice. They see a president committed to the advancement of all Americans, regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, handicap, or economic status.

They also see a country that truly does reflect the world, attracting immigrants from every nation and giving them an equal chance to succeed as Americans. And they see a president with a vision of a country that can rebuild its infrastructure, reform its health care, strengthen its educational system, and boost its economic prosperity in ways that require all citizens to contribute – and that will, in turn, allow all citizens to flourish.

But how is this vision connected to the resignation of Petraeus, a storied and much-decorated general before he took over the CIA, following the revelation that he had an extra-marital affair?

Judging by my Twitter feed, most foreign observers simply cannot understand why a man serving his country in one of its highest and most sensitive positions should step down over something that happened in his private life – something that directly affects only those involved and their families. American culture, I explained, judges extra-marital affairs very harshly, so a senior official caught in such a position could easily be subject to blackmail – something that a CIA director, of all people, must avoid. My foreign interlocutors replied that, with the affair now exposed, the blackmail threat has been removed, so Petraeus should stay in office.
Many Americans agree. Indeed, Obama himself was reportedly reluctant to accept Petraeus’s resignation. From my perspective, however, Petraeus did the right thing: resigning was the only course open to him if he is to have any chance of repairing his reputation.

Petraeus, after all, had been General Petraeus, a four-star general who had spent his life in the military, commanding the US missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. He graduated from – and later taught at – the US Military Academy at West Point, an institution guided by the motto “Duty, Honor, Country.”

In our cynical age, many might scoff at such an old-fashioned motto (or, indeed, at the power of any motto or slogan). West Point cadets do not. As General Douglas MacArthur told them in 1962, those three words “build your basic character. They mold you for your future roles as the custodians of the nation’s defense. They make you strong enough to know when you are weak, and brave enough to face yourself when you are afraid.” They teach you, he continued, “to master yourself before you seek to master others; to have a heart that is clean, a goal that is high.”

MacArthur’s rhetoric is stirring; some would say overblown. The ideals he expressed are lofty; he himself fell short of them on more than one occasion. But, by and large, the men and women of the US military believe in these ideals and do their best to live up to them, just as US citizens generally believe in their Constitution’s lofty words and seek to correct their national shortcomings.

Petraeus violated his own personal code of honor and duty toward his wife and family – and thus, in his eyes, toward his country, particularly to the men and women whom he was entrusted to lead at the CIA. When his affair came to light, he faced up to his failure, took responsibility for the consequences, and did what he believed that duty, honor, and country required. The hubbub of tawdry disclosures and investigations addressing every aspect of a widening scandal may well last for weeks. In the meantime, Americans can only hope that their national elected representatives show an equal willingness to face up to and take responsibility for their failures, pettiness, and insistence on putting partisanship ahead of the country’s manifest and urgent needs.

These officials must now carry out their most fundamental duty: to govern. They must be willing to negotiate in good faith and compromise in order to enact laws, solve problems, avert crises, and build faith in the future. Let us hope that their oaths to defend and uphold the Constitution are more than just words.