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AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL T. FLYNN, THE EX- PENTAGON SPY WHO SUPPORTS DONALD TRUMP

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Photo: Kristyn Ulanday

RETIRED LT. GEN. Michael T. Flynn, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, is convinced the nation is facing a potential existential threat: a rising tide of Muslim extremists. Since being forced to retire in August 2014, Flynn

has been an outspoken critic of the administration, alleging the Obama White House has failed to confront what he calls “radical Islam.”

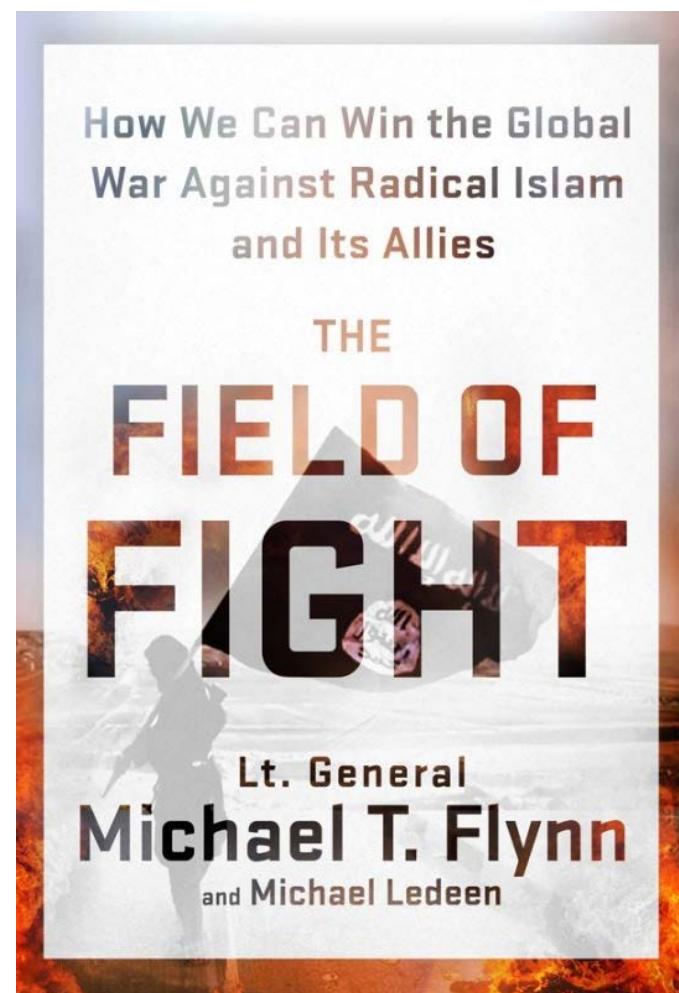
Flynn is now taking his message to the biggest stage possible: the 2016 presidential election. Last week, the *New York Post* [reported](#) that Flynn, a registered Democrat, was being considered as a running mate for Donald Trump on the Republican ticket. In the days since, Flynn has been making the media rounds praising the GOP frontrunner.

The odds are long for the retired three-star general. Flynn is up against a stable of veteran political operatives, including Newt Gingrich, Chris Christie, and Indiana Gov. Mike Pence. According to the most recent media reports, Trump is leaning toward a candidate with a background in politics, rather than the military. Trump is expected to hold a public event on Friday with his selected running mate.

Flynn has vowed to support Trump regardless of whether or not he gets the VP nod.

On Friday night, Flynn spoke to *The Intercept* on a range of topics, including his new book, *The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies*, his prescriptions for U.S. national security, and his admiration for Trump’s platform. In doing so, he offered a window into his worldview and a glimpse at a vision of national security that resonates in the Trump camp.

For Flynn, the decision to step into public life preceded the rise of Trump and boiled down to two core issues: perceived lies peddled by the Obama administration and



“The Field of Fight” by Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn.

his self-imposed duty to confront them. “I watched our own government lie to us about a number of things,” Flynn told *The Intercept*.

“I just see us going in the wrong direction, and that’s really why I sort of jumped into the middle of the fray,” he explained. “I don’t mind doing that. That’s kind of me.”

A native of Rhode Island, Flynn put in 33 years of service for the U.S. government, climbing the ranks as an Army intelligence officer. In 2004, he became director of intelligence for the Joint Special Operations Command — JSOC — the U.S. military’s elite hunter-killer force, which includes such well-known units as the Army’s Delta Force and the Navy’s SEAL Team 6. At the time, JSOC was run by Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal. Flynn made a name for himself under McChrystal, as JSOC set its sights on Iraq and pursued an intelligence-driven strategy for capturing and killing suspected terrorists known as “find, fix, finish.” Flynn went on to serve in several other roles in the years that followed, both stateside and in Afghanistan, before taking over the DIA in the summer of 2012.

Flynn’s outspokenness has never been in dispute, particularly in recent years as he’s transitioned from intelligence chief in the shadowy war on terror to a frequent media guest and source for national security reporters. In an [op-ed](#) for the *New York Post* published over the weekend, Flynn said his outspoken language on “radical Islamism and the expansion of al Qaeda and its associated movements” led to his firing at the hands of Gen. James Clapper, the director of national intelligence.

Flynn presents his personal story as one of an honest U.S. official punished for telling the truth. The full account of his exit from government is less clear-cut. When the *Washington Post* first [broke](#) the news that he was being pushed out of the DIA in April 2014, the paper reported that the forced retirement had less to do with Flynn’s views on the threats posed by radical Islam and more to do with his efforts to [remake](#) the agency into a spy service that could rival the CIA. Flynn’s plan

encountered pushback on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers raised questions about its necessity and potential costs, and it reportedly triggered clashes between Flynn and other senior U.S. national security officials.

Flynn is credited by many in the national security community for his work on a 2010 report on U.S. intelligence failures in Afghanistan, published by the Center for a New American Security. The influential report offered a stinging critique of the U.S. intelligence apparatus in Afghanistan, recommending “sweeping changes to the way the intelligence community thinks about itself.” The report argued that after nearly a decade of war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces still barely understood the country in which they were operating.

Since leaving government, however, Flynn has blasted the Obama administration on its Syria strategy, the Iran nuclear deal, and what he considers to be a debilitating White House desire to embrace political correctness in the face of dangerous trends in the Islamic world. What Flynn appears to view as speaking honestly has a tendency to veer into dangerous and Islamophobic terrain. Earlier this year, he called for the destruction of Raqqa, the Syrian city captured by the Islamic State where tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped. And on more than one occasion, Flynn has told an interviewer, “I’ve been at war with Islam, or a component of Islam, for the last decade.”



Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump during a campaign event in Raleigh, North Carolina, on July 5, 2016. Photo: Sara D. Davis/Getty Images

A Possible Veep

Conversations with former military and intelligence officials, including some who worked directly with Flynn and others who crossed paths with the retired general, as well as civilian researchers, offer a mixed picture of his reputation. Speaking largely on background, some praised Flynn as a free-speaking visionary, while others described his leadership style as one marked by abrasiveness and borderline contempt for civilian officials. None ventured to explain his recent attraction to Trump.

Nada Bakos, a former CIA analyst, described Flynn's depiction of the extremist threats facing the U.S. as unsettlingly familiar. Bakos, who led the hunt for the al

Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, said Flynn's "broad brush of how he views intelligence and analysis actually scares me."

"This reminds me of where we were in the beginning of the Iraq War, before the invasion," she added, "when you're talking to someone who doesn't actually understand the problem and applies very broad strokes to very specific issues."

Even given his history of provocative statements, Flynn's support for Trump has taken many former military and intelligence officials by surprise. Yet Flynn's flirtation with the Trump camp has been months in the making. *Bloomberg* first reported that he had met with the Trump team in January. "This guy is really switched on and has a strong understanding of what's going on in the world," Flynn said of Trump at the time.

Speaking to *The Intercept*, Flynn confirmed that he would attend the Republican National Convention, though he did not say how he would answer if offered the vice president slot on the Trump ticket. "You have to talk to his campaign about that," Flynn said. "There's obviously a lot of rumors." The Trump campaign did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Flynn claims it was Trump's economic positions that ultimately won him over. On national security and foreign policy, Flynn argued that Trump's stated openness to employing torture techniques, his endorsement of lethally targeting the family members of suspected terrorists, and his call to ban Muslims from entering the U.S. are part of a broader strategy aimed at keeping the enemy on its toes. "Here's what a guy like Donald Trump is doing," Flynn explained. "He's basically saying, 'Hey, look, all options are on the table,' and being very unpredictable in the face of a very determined enemy."

Regarding issues of interrogation, "I believe that the way we did interrogation operations post-Abu Ghraib worked very effectively," Flynn said. "We were going by the book." In addition to the CIA's widely reported use of torture and black-site detention facilities, JSOC, in Iraq, also faced allegations of abusing detainees, in particular at a location known as [Camp Nama](#), though Flynn has maintained that

he took an active part in shutting down abusive interrogation practices once he arrived in the country, rather than promoting or expanding them.

Nevertheless, Flynn indicated that he wouldn't exclude using harsh methods if there were an imminent threat of something like a dirty bomb attack. "Why not use some other legal techniques?" he said.

Flynn did not elaborate on the techniques he would recommend, though he repeatedly said they would need to be in accordance with law. Flynn indicated that he would not support explicitly targeting the family members of suspected terrorists with lethal force. He added, however, that when the U.S. is "trying to capture or kill a high-value target," and that target is accompanied by family members, "that's a decision that has to be taken."

"We do make those decisions, and we did make those decisions fairly routinely in warfare," he added.

Flynn is careful in his remarks on some of Trump's most controversial statements, such as not allowing Muslims into the United States, and stressed the importance of being "really precise" on Trump's views.

"What he's talking about, and what I talk about, is we have to understand where the individuals are coming from," Flynn said. "The immigrants flowing into Germany, they're not even using biometrics or identifying them in any way, they're just letting them in. We can't just ship in thousands of people and park them in communities inside of the country. That's what this administration is going to do, that's what they are doing. So what we have to do is we have to document, just like we normally do, and we have to do it through legal channels. We have to be very precise about who's coming in, where they're coming from. We have to vet them properly."

In fact, the U.S. screening process for Syrian refugees is far more arduous and information-focused than Flynn suggests. As the *New York Times* [detailed](#) last year, the process often takes up to two years and involves applicants going through a rigorous 20-step evaluation involving multiple interviews, background checks, and

fingerprinting.

Flynn insists his concerns aren't "about shutting down an ability for some group of immigrants to come into our country," but determining who the immigrants are.

"I mean, we don't have people shooting up or blowing up, you know, clubs and marathons yelling 'Jesus Christ,'" he said. ([A New America study found](#) that since 9/11, jihadist attacks on American soil have killed 94 people, and far right-wing attacks have killed 48.)



U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton checks her phone while sitting next to South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, right, at a forum on aid effectiveness in Busan, Nov. 30, 2011. Photo: Saul Laub/Reuters/Newscom

A Double Standard

If selected to run alongside Trump, Flynn will find himself up against Hillary Clinton, whom he believes broke the law in transmitting classified information.

In Flynn's view, FBI Director James Comey committed an act of professional "malpractice" when he publicly recommended that the attorney general not bring charges against Clinton last week. "All Comey should have done was give the facts of the case and then said, 'I am turning this over to the attorney general to make a decision,' and not given his personal, legal assessment," he said. By offering his conclusion publicly, Flynn argued, the FBI director "put the burden on the American voter, which is totally wrong. It's so wrong."

As far as Clinton is concerned, "She obviously broke the law. According to [Comey] she broke the law," Flynn said. "I would be in jail if I had done that. I would have lost my clearance for the rest of my life." Flynn agrees that "absolutely there's a double standard" in the prosecution of cases involving the disclosure of classified information by U.S. officials. "There are so many cases where it's so much less" than what Clinton was accused of, he said. "I mean thousands of times less, and they lost their clearances, meaning they lost their jobs and their livelihoods."

"She could be potentially be the next president?" he said. "Unbelievable."

When asked about the case of another high-profile U.S. official disclosing classified information — retired general and former CIA Director David Petraeus's disclosures to his biographer and lover, Paula Broadwell — Flynn said the situation was less severe, though he conceded there were "some parallels."

"The case of Dave
Petraeus, you know, he's
the director of the CIA at
the time he's sleeping
with a woman and giving

■ He called Flynn's
analysis "a Tom Clancy

her secrets to benefit the writing of a book about him,” Flynn said. “I mean, that was blatant.

That was blatant.” Still, he added, “I think it’s apples and oranges.”

Flynn argues that the presumptive Democratic nominee for president “did something worse than Petraeus.” (In the case of the Petraeus investigation, the retired general **admitted he lied** when first asked about having given Broadwell access to classified information, and journals containing top-secret information were found in his home. The FBI **was reportedly unhappy** that Petraeus avoided prison time.)

“She’s a target of our adversaries,” Flynn explained. “We do the same to them. And we target senior government officials. And when a senior government official of another country gives us their information on a silver platter like Hillary Clinton gave to the Russians and the Chinese … oh man, it’s a great day for our adversarial intelligence systems.”

While he acknowledged that Petraeus, as the director of the CIA, would also have been a target for foreign adversaries, he argued the retired general “didn’t share too much electronically, you know, except with some computers.”



Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division patrol a street in Mosul, Iraq, 250 miles north of Baghdad, Sept. 13, 2003. Photo: Misha Japaridze/AP

An Updated Axis of Evil

The big lie Flynn says he's combating is the notion that the U.S. is not at war with radical Islam. In his book, co-authored with the neoconservative writer Michael Ledeen, Flynn declares that he aims to show readers "the war being waged against us" and "lay out a winning strategy." Flynn describes *Field of Fight* as "a book from a guy who's sort of been there, done that."

"It's my language," he said. "It's simple language. It's straightforward. It offers solutions. It's not just another bash about radical Islam. It's very practical ideas."

The book's language, at times, mirrors the rhetoric against political correctness that has become a hallmark of the Trump campaign. "This administration has forbidden us to describe our enemies properly and clearly: they are Radical Islamists," Flynn writes. "They are not alone, and are allied with countries and groups who, though not religious fanatics, share their hatred of the West, particularly the United States and Israel. Those allies include North Korea, Russia, China, Cuba, and Venezuela." "Let's face it: right now we're losing, and I'm talking about a very big war, not just Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan," Flynn goes on to write. "We're in a world war against a messianic mass movement of evil people, most of them inspired by a totalitarian ideology: Radical Islam. But we are not permitted to speak or write those two words, which is potentially fatal to our culture."

Militarily, the campaign Flynn envisions would be "similar to the effort during World War II or the Cold War" and would be guided by a single leader answering to the president. Additionally, Flynn adds, "Another more fundamental and dramatic effort would be a call for a complete reformation of the Islamic religion. This must start inside the Muslim community in order to succeed — but it must start somewhere."

Flynn does not shy away from hyperbole. "There is no escape from this war," he writes. "Do you want to be ruled by men who eagerly drink the blood of their dying enemies? Such questions are almost never asked. Yet if you read the publicly available ISIS documents on their intentions, there's no doubt that they are dead set on taking us over and drinking our blood."

Flynn insists that his views are not the extension of personal religious convictions and that he does not view the conflict he describes as a fundamentally religious one. "This is a political

■ "Anybody who thinks Venezuela and Cuba pose a threat to the United States is

struggle,” he said. “Islam is a political ideology masked behind a religion, using religion as

an advantage against us. Islam is a political ideology. Sharia, the law of Islam, OK? Sharia is the law. Just like our Constitution is our law.”

While Flynn at times draws distinctions between what he describes as radical Islamists and ordinary Muslims, in conversation he often refers simply to Islam when referencing the United States’ chief enemy. Whether the rhetorical slippage is intentional or not, that lack of precision, which can so easily generate horrific consequences, has military and intelligence professionals concerned over Flynn’s role in a possible Trump administration.

Malcolm Nance, a 35-year veteran of the intelligence and counterterrorism world, said the portrait Flynn paints of an updated and expanded version of Bush’s axis of evil — one linking ISIS to the governments of North Korea, Venezuela, and Cuba — strains credulity. Nance, who has written a book on defeating the Islamic State, called Flynn’s analysis “a Tom Clancy novel.”

Andrew Bacevich, a professor of history and international relations at Boston University and a West Point graduate who fought in Vietnam, was equally unsparing in his critique of Flynn’s national security prescriptions. “Anybody who thinks Venezuela and Cuba pose a threat to the United States is truly unhinged,” Bacevich said. “If Gen. Flynn would spend 10 minutes reading a newspaper, he would note that Venezuela is really a country that is on the verge of internal collapse. It doesn’t threaten anybody.”

Flynn’s characterization of the radical Islam threat flies in the face of the past two administrations, Bacevich argues. “Unlike Gen. Flynn, both President Bush and President Obama have wanted to avoid any implications that the United States is at war with Islam and/or the roughly 1.4 billion people on the planet who are Muslim,” he said.

For Flynn, this is a conflict with centuries of historical precedent. “In my book, I talk about how in the 15th and 16th century, people were fleeing from Europe to flee the Christian reformation and coming to the new world,” he explained. “These immigrants that are coming into Europe and the U.S., they’re fleeing this revolution that’s going on in the Islamic world and they’re trying to find a better life.”

The problem, he claims, is that the “enemy is infiltrating inside of that and they’re bringing it to us, they’re bringing it to our homeland,” Flynn said, “And they already have.”

Flynn’s clash of civilizations worldview is precisely what worries his critics, and there is scant evidence that his prescription for the region — which Bacevich paraphrased as a “try harder” model of what the U.S. has been doing for three decades — would yield new results. What’s more, Bacevich added, implicit in Flynn’s prescription is the unanswered question of how much his vision would cost the United States.

“How many Americans and other allies are going to die?” he asked. “In the war that we have fought since 9/11, it’s cost us trillions of dollars and there simply is no evidence that things have gotten any better.”

Correction: July 15, 2016

Due to an error in the editing process, the original version of this story incorrectly stated that results of a recent study indicated that right-wing extremist attacks have killed more people on American soil than jihadist attacks. While this was accurate when the study, conducted by New America, [was released in 2015](#), following more recent attacks, including those in Orlando and San Bernardino, the numbers have been updated and [now conclude](#) that jihadist attacks exceed those of right-wing attacks.



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