

Trump's national security adviser says he's ready to fight World War 3

Review of "The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and its Allies" by Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn and Michael Ledeen

President-elect Donald Trump named retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn his national security adviser on Nov. 18, but Flynn has a history of making incendiary and Islamophobic statements that have drawn criticism from his military peers. (Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)



Late in the presidential race, Donald Trump warned that his opponent would start a new world war. “You’re going to end up in World War III over Syria if we listen to Hillary Clinton,” he [told Reuters](#).

As it turns out, there was no need to worry about Clinton’s hawkishness. The next world war is already here. It’s a religious war. And the United States is losing. Trump and his cabinet are getting ready to fight.

Such is the vision of Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, the retired Army three-star general who is set to become White House [national security adviser](#) after President-elect Trump takes the oath of office. Thus far, Flynn is best known for his fire-breathing speech at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland this summer. But six days before leading GOP delegates in a frenzy of “USA!” and “Lock her up!” chants, Flynn published a book detailing this new fight — in his telling, a multi-generational and civilizational conflict against radical Islam. “We’re in a world war,” he writes, “but very few Americans recognize it, and fewer still have any idea how to win it.”

“[The Field of Fight](#),” co-authored with foreign policy writer [Michael Ledeen](#), offers an apocalyptic vision of Islam and terrorism, rails in Trumpian tones against political correctness, and assures readers of Flynn’s “maverick” credentials (even though calling yourself a maverick is pretty much the least mavericky thing possible). It also offers a tantalizing glimpse of the worldview Flynn may already be sharing with his new boss.



(St. Martin’s Press)

Though he calls for “destroying the jihadi armies,” Flynn is as focused on ideological warfare as he is on drone strikes or special operators. While Trump has said he’ll pursue a closer relationship with Russia and Vladimir Putin, in his book Flynn regards Moscow as part of a worldwide “enemy alliance” against the United States and concludes that the Russian president is an untrustworthy partner in the fight against the Islamic State.

Perhaps most revealing, Flynn seems quite comfortable with the prospect of a religious war. “This kind of war is not at all new. It created our world,” he writes, citing the Protestant Reformation. “The world badly needs an Islamic Reformation, and we should not be surprised if violence is involved. It’s normal.”

In the parlance of the day, one might say Trump’s national security adviser is normalizing holy wars.

A decades-long veteran of military operations from Grenada to Afghanistan, Flynn made his name as an intelligence officer skilled in tracking terrorist networks, distinguishing himself in particular as part of the team that battered al-Qaeda in Iraq. In 2012, President Obama appointed him to run the Defense Intelligence Agency, but in 2014 he was [dismissed](#) because of concerns about his management. That blemish notwithstanding, Flynn highlights his record. “I’ve fought in this war on physical and bureaucratic battlefields, from Afghanistan, Iraq, and African jungles, to the highest level of the United States’ intelligence and military establishments,” he writes. “I know our enemies better than most ‘experts,’ and I’m plenty scared. We could lose. In fact, right now we’re losing.”

Flynn spends a great deal of time urging readers to define the enemy and to say it out loud. “We’ve got to stop feeling the slightest bit guilty about calling them by name and identifying them as fanatical killers acting on behalf of a failed civilization,” he writes. He does so repeatedly himself, calling jihadists a “tribal cult” and declaring that “a global war is being waged against us by all true Radical Islamists in the name of Allah.”

This obsession with naming names echoes the 2016 campaign, when just about every GOP candidate had to thunder about “radical Islam” and decry Obama’s reluctance to do so. But for

Flynn, the rhetoric is inseparable from the war effort. During World War II and the Cold War, “the wars unleashed against us were waged in the names of our enemies’ doctrines, just like jihad today,” he argues. “We can’t win this war by treating Radical Islamic terrorists as a handful of crazies. . . . The political and theological underpinnings of their immoral actions have to be demolished.”



[Yes, there's something 'going on' with Muslims. But it's not what Donald Trump suggests.]

How to do so? He endorses “digital warfare,” including code-breaking and tracking terrorist communications, which are things that already happen. He urges the tech industry to help, too, writing that “we can’t possibly have an effective campaign against Radical Islamic ideology without the cooperation of the likes of Google, Facebook, and Twitter.” But he neglects to specify much of what these companies should actually do, beyond providing “their own positive messaging campaign about the betterment of humankind,” an approach only slightly more developed than Trump’s thoughts on “the cyber.”

Flynn also suggests that military operations should feature a sort of follow-up mockery. When U.S. forces succeed in taking down terrorist groups, we should go on “the ideological offensive, asking whether the Almighty had changed sides in the holy war,” he suggests. “After all, if

previous victories were the result of divine blessing, were defeats not proof that their cause had been rejected on high?" It's the sick-burn approach to counterterrorism.

Flynn dismisses concerns about Islamophobia, contending instead that excessive "Islamophilia" (when "leftists treat Muslims as children whose feathers should not be ruffled") makes it hard for leaders and citizens to grasp the challenge at hand. "If, as PC apologists tell us, there is no objective basis for members of one culture to criticize another, then it is very hard to see — and forbidden to write about or say — the existence of an international alliance of evil countries and movements that is working to destroy us," he writes.

That alliance is where Russia comes in. Though Flynn has taken heat for traveling to Moscow last year and [sitting beside Putin](#) at a gala for the Kremlin-run news network RT, in "The Field of Fight" he assails Russia and its autocratic ruler. Flynn brands Iran and Russia as leaders of an enemy alliance of nations, in league with anti-American forces, crime networks and terrorist groups. "The Russians and Iranians have more in common than a shared enemy," he writes. "There is also a shared contempt for democracy and an agreement — by all the members of the enemy alliance — that dictatorship is a superior way to run a country, an empire, or a caliphate." (For the record, other alliance members include North Korea, China, Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and even Bolivia.)

[How to anticipate unthinkable terrorist attacks? Hire oddballs to think of them.]

Flynn criticizes Obama for having "tiptoed around open criticism of Vladimir Putin's many aggressive actions," and despite Trump's frequent statements that the United States and Russia can join forces against the Islamic State, Flynn expresses deep skepticism. "When it is said that Russia would make an ideal partner for fighting Radical Islam, it behooves us to remember that the Russians haven't been very effective at fighting jihadis on their own territory, and are in cahoots with the Iranians," he writes. "In Syria, the two allies have loudly proclaimed they are waging war against ISIS, but in reality the great bulk of their efforts are aimed at the opponents of the Assad regime." In addition, he explains, "there is no reason to believe Putin would welcome cooperation with us; quite the contrary, in fact."

A few weeks before the election, Flynn [emphasized](#) that Trump knows “that when it comes to Russia or any other country, the common enemy we all have is radical Islam” — suggesting that any daylight between the two men is being eliminated. Indeed, while there is little in “The Field of Fight” to suggest that Flynn has some overarching doctrine to impart to the incoming commander in chief, there are flashes that suggest further differences: Whereas Trump has [pledged](#) to “get out of the nation-building business,” for instance, Flynn proffers a vision reminiscent of George W. Bush’s freedom agenda. “Removing the sickening chokehold of tyranny, dictatorships, and Radical Islamist regimes must be something our nation stands for whenever freedom-loving people around the world need help,” Flynn writes. “If we don’t stand for this, we stand for nothing.” And though he says it is a “pipe dream” to believe that Washington can bring democracy to the Middle East, “we could certainly bring order.” Trump’s agreement is all that counts; for Flynn, whether the American public is on board is inconsequential. “The consensus that matters is not the one that exists at the beginning of fighting, but the one at the end of the war,” he writes. “If we win, our leaders will be hailed, while if we lose, they will be despised.”

When he attempts to sum up his recommendations, however, the result is a generic jumble of buzzwords. “We must engage the violent extremists wherever they are, drive them from their safe havens, and kill them or capture them,” Flynn explains. “We have to organize all our national power, from military and economic to intelligence and tough-minded diplomacy,” he lectures. (Reminder: Invoking diplomacy can come off as wussy, so always preface it with “tough-minded” or another macho hedge.) He warns that battling religious extremists will be expensive, “and it’s probably going to last through several generations.” And he lists the elements of a “winning” strategy: “clearly define your enemy; face reality — for politicians, this is never an easy thing to do; understand the social context and fabric of the operational environment; and recognize who’s in charge of the enemy forces.”

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None of which sounds any more groundbreaking than when Hillary Clinton went on about [smart power](#).

As The Washington Post has [reported](#), former military colleagues wonder how a respected intelligence officer such as Flynn morphed so quickly into a rabid and influential partisan. “The Field of Fight” reflects these sides of him, oscillating between straightforward analysis and vague, impassioned diatribes, untroubled by contradictions or evolutions. The notion of a transformation — from flag officer to political insider — may be too simple. The national security adviser serves the president’s policy needs as well as his political interests, and different advisers and presidents have emphasized distinct aspects of the job. Through his book and public pronouncements, Flynn is demonstrating a political and professional malleability rivaling that of his new chief.

And he demonstrates similar personal ambition, too. In waging this forever war, he concludes, “one leader must be in charge overall and accountable to the president — if this leader does not meet the test, which is to win, then fire him or her and find another who can.”

There’s another field on which Flynn is eager to fight.



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