

Michael Flynn's fall tells a much bigger story



By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer April 27 at 7:44 PM

"I was one very lucky kid," wrote retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn in a [2016 memoir](#) about his bumpy childhood in a working-class Rhode Island family. "I was one of those nasty tough kids, hell-bent on breaking rules for the adrenaline rush and hardwired just enough to not care about the consequences," he wrote.

Flynn described how he was arrested but given probation after "some serious and unlawful activity." But he added: "I would always retain my strong impulse to challenge authority and to think and act on my own whenever possible."

Flynn's luck has run out in recent months. He was fired as national security adviser for misleading colleagues about his questionable discussions last December with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Now he's [under investigation by the Pentagon's inspector general](#) for failing to get approval for payments he received from Russian and Turkish sources, despite a clear warning in 2014 that such approval was required.

The puzzle is why Flynn, who had a reputation as a meticulous tactical intelligence officer during his Army career, was so careless when he left the military. The story is a personal tragedy for Flynn, but it illustrates a larger problem in the national-security community.

When intelligence officers such as Flynn move from compartmented boxes to a wider world, they often make mistakes. They've been living inside super-secret units that resemble a closed family circle. They don't understand the rules of public behavior. They're not good at being normal. And they often pay a severe price.

There are numerous examples of this transition problem. James J. Angleton, the CIA's legendary counterintelligence chief, was secretive to the point of paranoia when he was at the agency. But when he left in the 1970s, he couldn't stop talking to journalists and others about his conspiracy theories. Some other former CIA officers are similar: They work the press or lobbying clients the way they used to work their agency assets.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, one of Flynn's mentors, got fired as commander in Afghanistan after he and his staff made inappropriate comments to a Rolling Stone journalist. Gen. John Allen, a much-admired commander in Afghanistan, got involved in an [email correspondence with a would-be Florida socialite](#) that led to a Pentagon investigation, which [derailed his](#)

appointment as NATO commander. Gen. David Petraeus, perhaps the most celebrated commander of his generation, pleaded guilty to improperly sharing classified information with his biographer, with whom he was romantically involved.

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Each of these people served the country in remarkable ways. But looking at the difficulties they encountered, one senses a pattern. Senior command is a world unto itself. The tribal culture that envelops all our military and intelligence personnel is especially tight for our most secret warriors. They sometimes miss the signals that life outside will be different.

Flynn certainly got a clear warning when he left the military after serving as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. On Thursday, the Pentagon released a letter he received Oct. 8, 2014, about “the ethics restrictions that apply to you after your retirement.” The instructions listed eight areas of “post-employment restrictions,” including an obligation to get approval for any foreign compensation.

Flynn apparently cruised through that red light when he accepted \$45,000 for speaking to the Russian government’s television-propaganda channel in 2015, and when he received more than \$500,000 in 2016 from a firm with close ties to the Turkish government. Flynn retroactively registered as a foreign-government representative for work on behalf of Turkey that occurred on the eve of Donald Trump’s election and Flynn’s selection as national security adviser.

It’s unclear whether Flynn disclosed these foreign-government payments and other foreign contacts, as required, in renewing his security clearances at the White House, where he oversaw the nation’s most sensitive, compartmented programs. Failure to reveal such information can sometimes violate Section 1001 of the U.S. criminal code, known as the “false statements” provision.

When military and intelligence promotion panels review candidates for top positions, it’s said they pay special attention to whether officers have the judgment to manage the subtle, unpredictable problems that arise for commanders. Can they communicate to their subordinates, colleagues at other agencies, members of Congress and, when appropriate, the public? The military and intelligence agencies promote some spectacularly talented people, but something in this process is misfiring.

Military commanders need to know how to communicate in a wide-open world. But a word of caution: The sunlight can be blinding. Good people can do dumb things. They get so used to living by their own code that they sometimes don’t register what the law says.

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