REVIEW ESSAY

***The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies*.** By Michael T. Flynn and Michael Ledeen, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016, 208 pp.

***Twilight Warriors: The Soldiers, Spies, and Special Agents Who Are Revolutionizing the American Way of War*.** By James Kitfield, Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2016, 416 pp.

Mark Ward, Dunnville, Ontario

I suggest that these two books are worthy of consideration by scholars who study sociology and those who self-identify as Christian, even though none of the authors self-identify as a sociologist or a Christian.

Michael Flynn is a controversial retired US Army lieutenant general chosen by Donald Trump to be his national security adviser. *Business Insider* website reports that Flynn has "promoted tweets alleging Hillary Clinton was involved in sex crimes" (businessinsider.com Nov. 18, 2-16). Journalist Dana Priest claims that "He had technicians secretly install an internet connection in his Pentagon office even though it was forbidden" (*The New Yorker*, Nov. 23, 2016). She explains that he lost his job as director of the *Defense Intelligence Agency* for behaving erratically, including making statements that were brash and which undermined the administration. Others have described Michael Flynn joining in anti-Hillary chants of "Lock her up!" at campaign rallies. And more recently, Flynn was appointed National Security Advisor to the Trump administration, and quickly removed from that position for having allegedly lied to Vice President Mike Pence about involvement with representatives of the Russian government.

Before I heard Krys Boyd's Nov. 14, 2016, NPR interview with James Kitfield, I knew nothing of Michael Flynn. Upon hearing Kitfield describe CIA interrogation techniques as un-American and ineffective, I decided to read *Twilight Warriors*. In his book, Kitfield articulates and seemingly endorses a common "conservative" (US military) narrative about the American war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan which maintains that the whole problem has been the Obama administration's refusal to ignore politics and press through to victory. Further, Kitfield seems unaware that anything might be wrong with America's aims at home and abroad. There is no allusion to any legitimate critique of America's goals or even any clear description of them.

Clearly admiring Michael Flynn, Kitfield begins *Twilight Warriors* with a description of the ceremony for Flynn's August 2014 "retirement" as Director of the *Defense Intelligence Agency*. Kitfield sees Flynn's "retirement" as premature, a year short of a normal term. He

understands Flynn's termination as the result of differences of opinion with the White House about how to manage and when to reduce the American troop presence in Iraq.

Kitfield is clearly enthusiastic about the U. S. military, and bears no sense that American society might require any significant critique. On the other hand, as a student of the Bible, I have assumed since 2001 that any response to militants fighting in the name of Islam must be two-pronged. First, self-examination: victims of the attack ask themselves why it was launched. What is it about us that created such murderous anger in Muslims? Second: instead of defining the attacks acts of war and responding with the ill-fated attack on Afghanistan, treat the attacks as crimes and get busy with police methods to bring perpetrators to justice. That initial self-examination might include such questions as: What do we (Christians, Americans) believe? How well are we living up to it? How can Islam's critique of us be helpful as we try to reform ourselves and our society? We are foolish and arrogant to assume that our society is above critique (thought flying planes into buildings is the wrong help to offer!).

Instead of leading a time of appropriate self-examination and repentance, the Bush administration seemed to oppose any talk of why the attacks were launched. Susan Sontag was famously excoriated for her essay in *The New Yorker* (September 24, 2001) examining the question of why those attacks may have been launched, and thereby encouraging Americans to engage in honest, humble self-examination which could lead to repentance and reformation. Reading *Twilight Warriors* piqued my interest in Michael Flynn and his ideas about what the U.S. should do in the face of attacks around the world by groups claiming association with ISIS and various branches of al Qaeda. Pursuing this, I watched a PBS interview with Michael Ledeen discussing Michael Flynn. I discovered Ledeen coauthored a book with Flynn and promptly obtained a copy of *The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War against Radical Islam and Its Allies*.

Flynn reports that they wrote for two reasons: "To show that war is being waged against us," and "To lay out a winning strategy." Contempt for President Obama permeates the book. A principle theme is that our enemies are radical Islamists, and that the Obama administration has forbidden us to say this. Flynn insists that many different instances of fighting around the world are actually part of one war against the West (primarily the US) by what he calls Radical Islamists. He scoffs at President Obama's careful attempts to distinguish Muslim faith from those who plan and execute strikes against the West, such as the Paris attacks of November, 2015. Flynn is impatient with such "politically correct" niceties and seems unaware of the importance of fairness to millions of American (and other) Muslims who want nothing to do with "terrorist" attacks. He seems unaware of the strategic importance of keeping such Muslims of good faith on side with other Americans.

Lieutenant General Flynn, the career intelligence officer, stresses the importance of knowing your enemy if you are to fight well. He accuses the American people of not understanding the struggle with "our enemies," and further, of not wanting to understand. He

is bitterly critical of President Obama's determination to end the "post 9/11 wars" as part of his legacy. According to Flynn, announcing a date to end wars in Iraq or Afghanistan ahead of any ongoing assessment of the "facts on the ground" plays into the hands of the enemy and coddles the American people in their war weariness.

Flynn's claim that we don't know what is going on behind the scenes of various attacks around the world will make many of us uncomfortable. The planning and execution of unconventional warfare around the world is only one of many aspects of our changing society that contribute to some of us feeling confused and uninformed. Most people have only a shaky grasp of the different militant groups operating across the globe. When Flynn urges us to know our enemy, we might feel out of our depth and ready to listen to this veteran of intelligence work.

Military intelligence is Michael's Flynn's life work and his passion. He explains that the fundamental requirement for good intelligence is "total commitment" to the truth. In lockstep, James Kitfield tells exciting stories about successes in Iraq, and Mike Flynn is right in the middle of his narrative. As Kitfield tells his stories, he describes a transformation into a new style of war for 21st century America. In 2009, General Stanley McChrystal was commissioned to bring to Afghanistan the approach that had worked so well in Iraq.

Michael Flynn, the general, and his admirer, James Kitfield, the journalist, both understand that war is a conflict around rival conceptions of truth. Kitfield is excited about the transformation on the battlefields of Iraq which successfully broke down thick walls of distrust between FBI, CIA, and other intelligence agencies. Key to various U.S. successes in Iraq was unprecedented cooperation among traditionally antagonistic U.S. agencies, bringing their considerable expertise together in many different operations. Similarly key was shrinking the time between initial intelligence gathering and providing that (actionable) intelligence to commanders in the field. That required getting smarter with technology and getting competitive men to cooperate. According to Kitfield, substantial credit for these changes goes to Flynn.

In *Field of Fight*, Flynn offers the American people a call to action. He starts by establishing his authority to speak on the war between the United States and Radical Islamists. He describes in some detail the American effort in Iraq after the September, 2001, attacks, speaks more briefly about the war in Afghanistan. He has a major section on "The Enemy Alliance" which he identifies as Iran and Russia, before including other nation states such as North Korea, and non-state entities such as the Islamic State. Then he explains how to win the war.

The section on Iraq is his best. Flynn was personally involved in the transformation of the American war effort there, and he sounds informed and committed. As he moves from Iraq to Afghanistan, his account is sketchy and less convincing. He sounds much like an aging ex-basketball player who always harkens back to that one big game when he was a star. His

objective, though, is to use events in Iraq as a springboard to the more ambitious task of clarifying the geopolitical situation today and charting the American course forward. But events in Iraq won't bear that weight. As he defines the enemy alliance, he becomes (understandably) rambling and less convincing. In his description of how to win, his tone becomes shrill and sounds more like campaign rhetoric from the 2016 presidential election than of any credible projection or serious blueprint for the future.

When I finished the book, I had reached two conclusions. First, Flynn, like Kitfield, is not interested in a critique of "the American way of life." Flynn is critical of the American public (culpably ignorant of imminent danger), but offers no indication of willingness to look critically at the American way of life with a view to repentance and reformation. He seems unaware of how faith could inform national self-examination, repentance, and reformation, and even less aware of how such faith could then inspire an energetic defense of the reformed way of life it had engendered. In his frustration, Michael Flynn lashes out at Radical Islamists as evil, and as far as readers can tell, he sees the U.S. simply as right.

As a Presbyterian minister and student of ministry, I believe in self-evaluation, repentance for what has been wrong, and reformation (theology would say "conversion") based on a standard that transcends the points of view in a discussion. In the church, we call that standard the Word of God in its several forms. Arguably, that would not be the way to formulate a suggestion for a secular nation such as the United States. Flynn insists that the U.S. is founded on "a Judeo-Christian ideology." He includes a powerful statement of American exceptionalism, claiming the U.S. is the only truly revolutionary society. He assumes that what's wrong in the world originates somewhere else – we will not find Michael Flynn urging a reformation of the U.S. Interestingly, he explicitly recommends the reformation of Islam. His plan for how we can win includes replacing subtle attempts to include Muslims within the American conversation with ideological warfare based on a shooting war. Ideological war should include a call by Americans to Muslims to reform Islam.

Michael Flynn insists that we know our enemy, and claims a commitment to truth. But he is foggy on the importance of knowing ourselves. He assumes we all agree on the goals of American society, and that the righteousness of our cause is beyond question. This blinds him to reasons Muslims might have to fear and oppose an American reach into Muslim lands. Evidently, he has no clue as to why anyone would be upset with American society or presence in the world. He shows no interest in the American contribution to global carbon emissions, ongoing problems of racism, and difficulties of various minorities such as the LGBTQI communities. He makes no mention of political polarization freezing the ability of the federal government to address the nation's problems. However, he does mention American's commitment to entertainment, not as a problem, but as a warning of what would be lost in a world run by the Taliban.

Flynn's explanation for Radical Islamists' hatred of the US is their contempt for democracy. That's a version of the famous misdirection to American people after September 11, 2001, attributed to George W. Bush: "They hate us because we're free."

My second conclusion was that the age-old democratic principle of civilian control of the military is crucial for a healthy (and secure) society. Michael Flynn has much to offer from a defense intelligence perspective. No conversation about the American military should ignore his important contribution. However, he, like Kitfield, does not seem to have a grasp of the big picture that would enable him to step back and criticize the direction and lived goals of the U.S. today. Democratic societies require civilian control of the military partly so that the people can make decisions about the direction of society. We can only hope for a growing consensus among people and political leaders, a consensus that includes that essential, critical self-examination, repentance, and redirection for the future. That consensus will have to be built on some standard that transcends the self-interest of warring factions that seem to be undermining even the independence of the judiciary.

Sociology can offer a critical perspective from which to examine and understand forces at play both in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the recent turbulent election cycle. A sociologically informed historical study can help us understand earlier examples of societies that have navigated struggles like those facing the U. S. today, and can, in turn, help us understand the puzzling situations that define our present situation. Michael Flynn might help in this effort, but only after he commits himself, and America, to a bit more self-critical self-reflection.