

Too Many Generals Spoil the Democracy Trump's Push to "Win" with Warriors is a Loss for America

Posted by Joan Russow

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By [William J. Astore](#)

America has always had a love affair with its generals. It started at the founding of the republic with George Washington and continued with (among others) Andrew Jackson, [Zachary Taylor](#), Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. These military men shared something in common: they were *winning* generals. Washington in the Revolution; Jackson in the War of 1812; Taylor in the Mexican-American War; Grant in the Civil War; and Ike, of course, in World War II. Americans have always loved a hero in uniform -- when he wins.

Yet twenty-first-century America is witnessing a new and revolutionary moment: the elevation of *losing* generals to the highest offices in the land. Retired Marine Corps General [James "Mad Dog" Mattis](#), known as a tough-talking "warrior-monk," will soon be the nation's secretary of defense. He'll be joined by a real mad dog, retired Army Lieutenant General [Michael Flynn](#) as President-elect Donald Trump's national security adviser. Leading the Department of Homeland Security will be recently retired [General John Kelly](#), another no-nonsense Marine. And even though he wasn't selected, retired Army General David Petraeus was seriously considered for [secretary of state](#), further proof of Trump's [starry-eyed fascination](#) with the brass of our losing wars. Generals who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan to anything but victory -- [pyrrhic ones](#) don't count -- are again being empowered. This time, it's as "civilian" advisers to Trump, a business tycoon whose military knowledge begins and ends with his invocation of two World War II generals, George S. Patton and Douglas MacArthur, as his all-time favorite military

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leaders.

Let's pause for a moment to consider those choices. Patton was a skilled commander of armored forces at the divisional and corps level, but lacked the political acumen and temperament to succeed at higher levels of command during World War II. MacArthur, notoriously vainglorious and -- does this ring a bell? -- completely narcissistic, was fired by President Harry Truman for insubordination during the Korean War. And yet these are the generals Trump professes to admire most. Not [Omar Bradley](#), known as the GI's general; not Dwight Eisenhower, the man who led the D-Day invasion in 1944; and not, most of all, [George C. Marshall](#), a giant of a man and the architect of military victory in World War II, who did indeed make a remarkably smooth transition to civilian service both as secretary of state and defense after the war.

If Truman appointed Marshall, [what's wrong](#), one might ask, with Trump surrounding himself with retired generals? Consider two obvious problems. First, the president already has a team of uniformed generals to advise him: the Joint Chiefs of Staff. By selecting career military men like Mattis and Flynn as his senior civilian advisers on military matters, Trump is in essence creating a rival Joint Chiefs, his own tight circle of generals trained and acculturated to think about the world as primarily a realm of conflict and to favor military solutions to geopolitical problems. Second, though it's getting ever harder to remember in increasingly [militarized America](#), this nation was founded on the fundamental principle of civilian control over the military, a principle that will be seriously eroded if the president's senior civilian advisers on defense-related matters are men who self-identify as [warriors](#) and [warfighters](#).

Having taken off the uniform only a short time ago, career military men like Mattis, Flynn, and Kelly are not truly civilians. In fact, when they served, they weren't even citizen-soldiers; quite the opposite, those in America's post-Vietnam military self-identify as professional warriors. For Mattis and Kelly, it's once a Marine, always a Marine (especially since each served 40-plus years in the Corps). Flynn occupies a spot all his own, since he specifically fancies himself as a warrior-crusader against Islam. These are the men who will soon occupy the highest civilian offices in America's colossal national security state.

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The bottom line is this: a republic -- or should I say, former republic? -- founded on civilian control of the military needs true civilians as a counterweight to militarism as well as military adventurism. Recently retired generals are anything but that; they're not even speed bumps on the road to the next set of misbegotten military "adventures." They are likely to be only one thing: enablers of and accelerants to military action. Their presence in the highest civilian positions represents nothing short of a *de facto* military coup in Washington, a coup that required no violence since the president-elect simply anointed and exalted them as America's security saviors.

But here's a question for you: If these men and their three- and four-star colleagues couldn't win decisive military victories while in uniform, what makes Trump and the Washington establishment think they'll do any better while wearing mufti?

Of Highly Groomed (and Flawed) Generals

Americans, who [strongly admire](#) their military, like to think that its most senior leaders rise on merit. This is not, however, the way the military promotion system actually works. Officers who reach the rank of general have usually been identified and sponsored at a young age, often when they are still company-grade officers in their mid-twenties. They are, in a word, [groomed](#)

. Their careers are carefully "curated," as a friend of mine (and colonel in the Air Force) reminded me recently. They're placed on a fast track for early promotion and often given jobs in Washington at the Pentagon or as liaisons to Congress. Their sponsors and patrons, flying "top cover" for them, have found them worthy and they may indeed be talented and hard-charging. They are also judged to be "safe" -- in the sense of being

[true believers](#)

in the professional military way of life.

As my colonel-friend put it, "There's little room for innovation [in today's military] because the next generation of GOs [general officers] has been incubating for ten years, learning all the

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talking points and preparing to venerate the sacred cows. It's why when a truly innovative idea breaks through and the colonel behind it is publicly commended, there's no answer to 'Wow, he's great. I wonder why he's retiring as a colonel?'"

True mavericks in the military often stall out at that rank. By disrupting the status quo, they make powerful enemies. A sterling example is Colonel [John Boyd](#). Arguably the finest strategist the U.S. Air Force has produced in the last half-century, Boyd originated the [OODA loop](#) concept and fought hard against the brass for more maneuverable and affordable fighter jets like the F-16. Stymied within the ranks, he only [gained influence](#) after retirement as a Pentagon consultant.

General officers, by the way, have come to resemble a self-replicating organism. The grooming process, favoring homogeneity as it does, is partly to blame. Disruptive creativity and a reputation for outspokenness can mark one as not being a "team player." Political skills and conformity are valued more highly. It's a mistake, then, to assume that America's generals are the best and the brightest. "The curated and the calculating" is perhaps a more accurate description.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at Trump's chosen threesome, starting with General Mattis. He has his virtues: a distinguished career in the Marine Corps, a [sensible stance](#) against torture, a dedication to all ranks within the military. Yet like [so many](#) high-ranking military retirees -- take [General Mark Welsh](#) of the Air Force, for example -- Mattis quickly cashed in on his career, reputation, and continuing influence via the military-industrial complex. Despite a six-figure pension, he joined corporate boards, notably that of military-industrial powerhouse General Dynamics where he quickly earned or acquired [nearly \\$1.5 million](#) in salary and stock options. Mattis is also on the board at Theranos, a [deeply troubled company](#) that failed to deliver on promises to develop effective blood-testing technologies for the military.

And then, of course, there was his long military career, itself a distinctly mixed bag. As head of U.S. Central Command under President Obama, for instance, his hawkish stance toward Iran

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led to his removal and forced retirement in 2013. Almost a decade earlier in 2004, the aggressive tactics he oversaw in Iraq as commanding general of the 1st Marine Division during the Battle of Fallujah have been characterized by some as [war crimes](#). For Trump, however, none of this matters. Mattis, much like General Patton (in the president-elect's view), is a man who "[plays no games](#)."

And Mattis seems like the voice of reason and moderation compared to Flynn, whose [hatred of Islam](#) is as virulent as it is transparent. Like Trump, Flynn is a fan of tweeting, perhaps his [most infamous](#) being "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL." A brusque man convinced of his own rectitude, who has a reputation for [not playing well](#) with others, Flynn was forced from his position as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2014, after which he became a harsh critic of the Obama administration.

In his brief retirement, Flynn served as a [paid lobbyist](#) to a Turkish businessman with close ties to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, while running a business consultancy that is due to profit by providing [surveillance drones](#) to patrol the U.S.-Mexican border. Rising to prominence during the Trump campaign, he led the chant against Hillary Clinton ("Lock her up!") at the Republican National Convention in July. (His son recently helped [spread the false rumor](#) that Clinton was involved in a child sex trafficking ring involving a Washington, D.C., pizzeria.) Flynn, who sees Islam as a political conspiracy rather than a legitimate religion, is an [angry warrior](#), a dyed-in-the-wool crusader. That Trump sees such a figure as qualified to serve as the nation's senior civilian security adviser speaks volumes about the president-elect and the crusading militarism that is likely to be forthcoming from his administration.

Serving in a supporting capacity to Flynn as chief of staff of the National Security Council (NSC) is yet another high-ranking military man (and early supporter of Trump's presidential run), Army retired [Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg](#). Almost a generation older than Flynn, Kellogg served as chief operations officer for the ill-fated Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, which badly [mismanaged](#) the U.S. military's [occupati on](#) of the country after the fall of Baghdad in 2003. Like most retired generals, Kellogg has profited from close links to defense-related industries, including [CACI International](#)

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, Oracle Corporation (Homeland Security Division), and

[Cubic](#)

, where he was senior vice president for ground combat programs. It's hard to see fresh ideas coming from the NSC with long-serving military diehards like Flynn and Kellogg ruling the roost.

[General John Kelly](#), the last of the quartet and soon to be head of the Department of Homeland Security, is yet another long-serving Marine with a reputation for bluntness. He [opposed efforts](#)

by the Obama administration to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, claiming that the remaining detainees were “

[all bad boys](#)

,” both guilty and dangerous. He also ran afoul of the administration by criticizing efforts to open combat positions to qualified servicewomen, claiming such efforts were “

[agenda-driven](#)

” and would lead to lower standards and decreased military combat effectiveness. Despite these views, or perhaps because of them, Kelly, who served as senior military assistant to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and has been well vetted by the system, is likely to be confirmed with little real debate.

Of Coups and Crusades

Collectively, the team of Mattis, Flynn, and Kelly could not be more symbolic of the ongoing process of subversion of civilian control of the military. With Trump holding their reins, these self-styled warriors will soon take charge of the highest civilian positions overseeing the military of the world's sole superpower. Don't think of this, however, as a "[Seven Days in May](#)" scenario in which a hard-headed general mounts a coup against an allegedly soft-hearted president. It's far worse. Who needs a coup when generals are essentially to be given free rein by a president-elect who fancies himself a military expert because, as a teenager, he spent a few years at a

[military-themed boarding school](#)

?

In all of this, Trump represents just the next (giant) step in an ongoing process. His warrior-steeds, his “dream team” of generals, highlight America's striking twenty-first-century embrace of militarism. At the same time, the future of U.S. foreign policy seems increasingly clear: more violent interventionism against what these men see as the existential threat of radical Islam. In the process, one radical idea will be pitted against another: American exceptionalism, armed to the teeth and empowered by war-lovers (some deeply involved in an

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evangelizing Christianity) against Islamic jihadist extremism. Rather than a "clash of civilizations," it's a clash of warring creeds, of what should essentially be seen as fundamentalist cults. Both embrace their own exceptionalism, both see themselves as righteous warriors, both represent ways of thinking steeped in patriarchy and saturated with violence, and both are remarkably resistant to any thought of compromise.

Put another way, under Trump's team of "civilian" warrior-generals, it looks like the crusades may be back -- with a vengeance. Yet for all the president-elect's tough talk about winning, count on the next four years, like the [last 15](#), being filled to the brim with military frustrations rather than victory. And fear a second possibility as well. Whatever else they do, Trump and his generals are likely to produce one historically stunning result:

[the withering away](#)

of what's left of the American democratic experiment.

William J. Astore, a [TomDispatch](#) [regular](#), is a historian and retired lieutenant colonel (USAF). His personal blog is [Bracing Views](#).

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