

Michael Flynn: Under Investigation

Michael Flynn had a decorated military career. He served in the United States Army for 33 years, was steadily promoted, and received numerous awards and honors. During his time in the military, he worked with operations in Grenada, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In 2011, he was promoted to Lieutenant General. In 2012, President Barack Obama nominated Flynn to be director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). But by 2014, Flynn had retired from the military. Reports later revealed that he was forced to retire because of his chaotic management style and the direction he wanted to take the DIA. He often clashed with both superiors and subordinates.

After retirement, Flynn became more outspoken about what he saw as the danger of “radical Islam.” In one interview, he stated, “I’ve been at war with Islam, or a component of Islam, for the last decade.” He was publicly critical of the Obama administration’s handling of Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, explaining, “I just see us going in the wrong direction, and that’s really why I sort of jumped into the middle of the fray.” Flynn was polarizing to many who worked with him. Some praised him as a visionary and others just the opposite. Nada Bakos, a former CIA analyst, said, “[Flynn’s] broad brush of how he views intelligence and analysis actually scares me.”

Flynn became a more polarizing figure when he announced his support for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016, despite being a registered Democrat. Flynn saw Trump’s proposed ban on Muslims entering the U.S. as part of a larger strategy against a common enemy. He stated, “Here’s what a guy like Donald Trump is doing,” adding, “He’s basically saying, ‘Hey, look, all options are on the table,’ and being very unpredictable in the face of a very determined enemy.” When Flynn spoke at the 2016 Republican National Convention, he criticized Obama for his administration’s handling of conflicts in the Middle East. He also denounced Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and led the crowd in chants of “Lock her up!” He added to the crowd, “And you know why we’re saying that? We’re saying that because, if I, a guy who knows this business, if I did a tenth—a tenth—of what she did, I would be in jail today.”

In 2017, Flynn resigned from his position as national security advisor, a position he served in for less than one month under newly inaugurated President Trump. Flynn was in a legal predicament. He pled guilty to lying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) about his communications with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Because of Kislyak’s position as a Russian



ambassador in Washington, D.C., Kislyak's communications were regularly monitored by the FBI. These communications included conversations with Flynn. Despite Flynn's earlier denials, the FBI's evidence revealed that Flynn spoke with Kislyak several times on December 29, 2016. Their conversations were about sanctions imposed on Russia after U.S. intelligence agencies determined that the Russian government tried to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Flynn told Kislyak to "refrain from escalating the situation in response to sanctions" and suggested that the sanctions could be lessened after Trump took office.

Flynn also misled others about the nature of these and other calls with Kislyak. In an interview with Fox News, Vice President-elect Mike Pence said he spoke with Flynn about the calls. Pence said that Flynn assured him "the conversations that took place at that time were not in any way related to the new U.S. sanctions against Russia or the expulsion of diplomats."

In his resignation letter, Flynn wrote, "I am tendering my resignation, honored to have served our nation and the American people in such a distinguished way." He continued, "I am also honored to have served President Trump, who in just three weeks, has reoriented American foreign policy in fundamental ways to restore America's leadership position in the world."

Concept: Fundamental Attribution Error

Ethical Insight:

Michael Flynn became known for his chaotic leadership style and his outspoken style of criticism. He was very hard on other people. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, he led chants of "lock her up" about Hilary Clinton. Yet Flynn seemed to be blind as to how his own greed and duplicity (for example, his failure to disclose payment and other information) constituted moral failings and led to his investigation by the FBI.

The fundamental attribution error means, in part, that we underestimate the impact that situational factors have on others' ethical decisions, and we overestimate the impact that they have on our own. This allows us to rationalize our moral shortcomings. Indeed, Flynn was quick to point out what he saw as others' moral shortcomings while consistently rationalizing his own.

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe Michael Flynn's fundamental attribution error in this case? Explain.
2. Do you think Flynn's own guilty plea would change his public criticism of Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama? Why or why not?
3. Why would Flynn, a decorated Lieutenant General with a long career and experience in defense and intelligence, take such a brash approach to criticizing others while not

seeing the questionable ethical behavior of his own communications with Sergey Kislyak?

4. At the Republican National Convention, Flynn stated, “If I did a tenth—a tenth—of what [Clinton] did, I would be in jail today,” and led the crowd in chanting “Lock her up!” How does this demonstrate the fundamental attribution error?
5. Does it make sense to you that we tend to think that other people do bad things because they are bad people, but we do bad things because of our situation? Explain.
6. When we think of our own actions, we may excuse our moral mistakes because, after all maybe our boss made us, or maybe we needed to do it to get an important job to feed our families, or maybe we were just under a lot of stress and may have made a poor choice. Should we try to take such circumstances into account when we judge the actions of other people? Why or why not?
7. Politicians are often susceptible to the fundamental attribution error, given the style and substance of their rhetoric. Can you think of any other examples of the fundamental attribution error in politics? Describe and explain why it would be a case of fundamental attribution error.
8. In what ways can we see parallels to the fundamental attribution error in politics, where Republicans and Democrats tend to excuse the actions of members of their own party, but not similar actions by members of the opposing party?
9. After Flynn’s indictment and guilty plea, many Democrats delighted in yelling “Lock him up!” whenever Flynn’s name came up. Why would they do this? Do you think this is appropriate or ethical behavior? Why or why not?
10. How can we encourage people to be more introspective regarding their own wrongdoing and more understanding regarding other people’s miscues?

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