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What should the Biden administration do about far-right military figures?

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It sparked outrage when former national security adviser and retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn said that he favored a Myanmar-style military coup in the United States. The beneficiary of such a coup would be, presumably, Flynn's old boss, former president Donald Trump, who has been telling people that he expects to be restored to the White House in August. While these ideas are fantasies, voicing them is dangerous because they can prompt some followers to react with violence.

We learned as much on Jan. 6, when individuals who believed Trump's false claims about a stolen election stormed the Capitol. Of the insurrectionists criminally charged, 1 in 5 were veterans, some bearing prisoner restraints and body armor. One of them was retired Air Force Lt. Col. Larry Rendall Brock Jr., who saw "no distinction" between the outcome of the 2020 election, which he perceived as "a group of Americans seizing power and governing with complete disregard to the Constitution" and Chinese communists invading and doing the same thing. Brock's paranoia has been echoed by some active-duty military officers.

Yet, this is not the first time that the U.S. military has faced such a radicalization problem. Today's headlines about military service members, both current and former, flirting with extremism could be ripped right out of the 1960s, when newspapers and politics were filled with fears of conniving communists, fifth column anti-racists and counterrevolutionary rumblings. The 1960s even had its own set of radicalized former military generals. Long before Flynn, there was Army Major Gen. Edwin Walker.

Walker was a war hero, having led a commando unit at the Anzio beachhead during World War II. Later, he commanded the paratroopers sent to Little Rock in 1957 to protect the "Little Rock Nine" as they integrated Central High School. But by the early 1960s the general had become a politically polarizing and controversial figure. In 1961, Congress censured Walker for claiming that the Democratic Party and the Kennedy administration were filled with communist sympathizers. After his resignation, Walker became a cause celebre on the right, which portrayed him as a victim of creeping liberal authoritarianism.

After he resigned from the Army, Walker helped foment the riots at the University of Mississippi in 1962 when James Meredith — a fellow veteran — attempted to integrate the college. Walker

went on the local airwaves and declared, “Now is the time to be heard! Thousands strong from every state in the union! Rally to the cause of freedom! The battle cry of the republic! ... It’s now or never!” A mob of white supremacists poured into town. When the smoke cleared, two people were dead and more than 300 injured.

In response, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had Walker arrested and charged with insurrection, a reasonable measure given the severity of the riot. However, the administration then went too far. The Justice Department claimed, with no substantiation, that “it held some doubt as to General Walker’s competence to stand trial,” and had him placed in isolation in a maximum-security ward at a federal medical center for a 90-day psychiatric evaluation. After protest from the ACLU and noted psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, the Justice Department freed Walker after five days.

This overreaction dramatically backfired. Instead of looking like someone who incompetently fomented a failed race riot — though he later protested that the riot was not his intent — Walker now looked even more like a brave victim of government authoritarianism than before. This left Walker, who had just finished a distant sixth in the Texas Democratic gubernatorial primary, considering a third-party run for president in 1964.

In 1963, the general began holding campaign-style rallies around the country with right-wing radio preacher Billy James Hargis. Walker and Hargis called their tour “Operation Midnight Ride,” a reference to Paul Revere’s warning during the Revolutionary War. They stoked fear among conservatives of imminent communist invasion; one if by Congress, two if by White House.

Liberal observers, by contrast, worried that Walker’s anti-communist paranoia and revolutionary rhetoric presaged an attempt at a military coup. President John F. Kennedy even signed off on special access for a camera crew to film at the White House for the movie “Seven Days in May,” in which a disaffected general — modeled partly after Walker — launches a coup to prevent a cowardly Congress from disarming America.

Concerns about a coup weren’t outlandish. Walker’s actions exposed a lack of respect for the law and, at a minimum, a tolerance for violence against Black Americans. Yet despite his provocative language, there is no indication that Walker — then under FBI surveillance — intended a potential coup in 1963.

But that wasn’t clear to many Americans, including a disgruntled Marine veteran and communist sympathizer who believed that Walker would launch a fascistic coup and invade communist-controlled Cuba. On a warm night in April 1963, the Marine staked out Walker’s Dallas home with a mail-order rifle, firing a shot as the general sat in his kitchen. Only a deflection from the window frame saved Walker from death instead of injury.

When the attempted assassin’s wife questioned what right he had to try to kill the general, he allegedly replied, “Well, what would you say if somebody got rid of Hitler at the right time?” Seven months later, the man, Lee Harvey Oswald, used the same rifle to shoot and kill John F. Kennedy, retaliation for Kennedy’s attempt to overthrow the Castro regime at the Bay of Pigs.

Ironically, Walker's political aspirations — boosted by the Kennedy administration's overreach — faltered after Kennedy's assassination. He was eventually replaced as the cigar-chomping, war hawk *du jour* in conservative circles by ex-Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay, who would run as George Wallace's vice-presidential sidekick in 1968. The last time Walker landed on the national news radar, it was because of his arrest in 1974 for "public lewdness" after fondling an undercover police officer.

Today, the pathway to continued political relevance for ex-military generals is wider. Right-wing radio in the 1960s, although significant, pales next to the right-wing media ecosystem that exists today. Today there are dozens of Hargises, pundits and broadcasters willing to amplify the grievances of disgraced ex-service members. And while the anti-communist paranoia of the 1960s has waned, distrust in American institutions has exploded and inchoate fears about enemies within have metastasized.

This combination has produced a Republican Party and a right-wing media that thirsts for bombastic figures willing to deploy incendiary rhetoric in slash-and-burn political fights. It's a perfect fit for Flynn even after losing his position as Trump's national security adviser for failing to disclose that he was a paid foreign agent of the Turkish government and for lying to the FBI. Even after his latest comments, Flynn still remains a fixture on cable news, a mainstay of the Make America Great Again rally circuit and plugged into a highly profitable network of QAnon grifters. There is even buzz about a 2024 Flynn campaign for president.

Flynn is just one example of a dangerous erosion in the wall between the military and domestic politics. During last summer's Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) — a veteran — called for Trump to send troops to occupy urban America. And last month, 124 retired generals and admirals signed a letter that falsely called the "Democrat Congress and the Current Administration" a "tyrannical government."

People like Cotton and Flynn are going where even Walker dared not tread. Last December, Flynn even called on Trump to "temporarily suspend the Constitution," "silence the destructive media" and order an election revote under military supervision.

The likelihood of a military coup remains as slight today as it was in the 1960s, but the possibility of further, insurrectionary violence by current or former military personnel has never been higher. As Walker's post-military career demonstrated, high ranking, former officers like Flynn possess the power to inflame political tensions and foment mass violence. It can happen here, again.

Yet, as the case of Walker shows, overreacting to the problem of military radicalization with heavy-handed measures can backfire too. By committing Walker to an asylum, the Kennedy administration turned him into a martyr, boosting his political aspirations and creating further opportunity for reactionary action. The Biden administration therefore faces a tough balancing act; it can't afford to ignore the far-right radicalization of the military nor should it overreact and throw additional fuel on the fire.

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