

Will Michele Flournoy Be the Angel of Death for the American Empire?

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If the Democrats manage to push Joe Biden over the finish line in November's election, he will find himself presiding over a decadent, declining empire. He will either continue the policies that have led the American empire to decadence and decline, or seize the moment to move our nation into a new phase: a transition to a peaceful and sustainable post-imperial future.

The foreign policy team Biden assembles will be key, including his choice for Secretary of Defense. But Biden's rumored favorite, Michele Flournoy, is not the gal for this historic moment. Yes, she would break the glass ceiling as the first female Secretary of Defense, but, as one of the architects of our endless wars and record military budgets, she would only help to steer the American empire farther down its current path of lost wars, corrupt militarism and terminal decline.

In 1976, General John Glubb, the retired British commander of Jordan's Arab Legion, wrote a little booklet titled *The Fate of Empires*. Glubb observed how each of the world's empires evolved through six stages, which he called: the Age of Pioneers; the Age of Conquests; the Age of Commerce; the Age of Affluence; the Age of Intellect; and the Age of Decadence and Decline. Despite enormous differences in technology, politics and culture between empires and eras, from the Assyrians (859-612 B.C.) to the British (1700-1950 C.E.), the whole process in each and every case took about 250 years.

Americans can count the years from 1776, and few of us would deny that the American empire is in its Age of Decadence and Decline, riven by the very traits that Glubb identified for this stage, including systemic, normalized corruption, internal political hatreds, and a fascination with celebrity for its own sake.

The decline of an empire is rarely peaceful, but it does not always involve the invasion, destruction or collapse of the imperial heartland, as long as its leaders eventually face up to reality and manage the transition wisely. So it is tragic that the 2020 presidential election offers us a choice between two major party candidates uniquely unqualified to manage America's post-imperial transition, both making vain promises to restore mythical versions of America's past, instead of drawing up serious plans for a peaceful, sustainable and broadly prosperous post-imperial future.

Trump and his "Make America Great Again" represent the epitome of imperial hubris, while Biden pushes the time-worn idea that America should be "back at the head of the table" internationally, as if America's neocolonial empire was still in its prime. With enough pressure from the public, Biden might be persuaded to start cutting the imperial military budget to invest in our real needs, from Medicare For All to a Green New Deal. But that's

unlikely if he picks Michele Flournoy, a die-hard militarist who has played instrumental roles in America's failed wars and catastrophic imperial adventures since the 1990s.

Let's look at her record:

As Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy under President Clinton, Flournoy was the principal author of the May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which laid the ideological foundation for the endless wars that followed. Under "Defense Strategy," the QDR effectively announced that the United States would no longer be bound by the UN Charter's prohibition against the threat or use of military force. It declared that, "when the interests at stake are vital, ...we should do whatever it takes to defend them, including, when necessary, the unilateral use of military power."

The QDR defined U.S. vital interests to include "preventing the emergence of a hostile regional coalition" anywhere on Earth and "ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources." By framing the unilateral and illegal use of military force all over the world as "defending vital interests," the QDR presented what international law defines as aggression, the "supreme international crime" according to the judges at Nuremberg, as a form of "defense."

Flournoy's career has been marked by the unethical spinning of revolving doors between the Pentagon, consulting firms helping businesses procure Pentagon contracts, and military-industrial think tanks like the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), which she co-founded in 2007.

In 2009, she joined the Obama administration as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, where she helped engineer political and humanitarian disasters in Libya and Syria and a new escalation of the endless war in Afghanistan before resigning in 2012. From 2013-2016, she joined Boston Consulting, trading on her Pentagon connections to boost the firm's military contracts from \$1.6 million in 2013 to \$32 million in 2016. By 2017, Flournoy herself was raking in \$452,000 a year.

In 2017, Flournoy and Obama's Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken founded their own corporate consulting business, WestExec Advisors, where Flournoy continued to cash in on her contacts by helping companies successfully navigate the complex bureaucracy of winning enormous Pentagon contracts.

She obviously has no compunction about enriching herself off of taxpayer money, but what about her actual foreign policy positions? Given that her jobs in the Clinton and Obama administrations were behind-the-scenes strategy and policy positions, she is not widely blamed for specific military disasters.

But the articles, papers and reports that Flournoy and CNAS have published for two decades reveal that she suffers from the same chronic malady as the rest of the Washington foreign policy "blob." She pays lip service to diplomacy and multilateralism, but when she has to recommend a policy for a specific problem, she consistently supports the uses of military force that she set out to politically legitimize in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). When the chips are down, she is one more military-industrial hammer-banger to whom every problem looks like a nail waiting to be whacked by a trillion-dollar, high-tech hammer.

In June 2002, as Bush and his gang threatened aggression against Iraq, Flournoy told the Washington Post that the United States would “need to strike preemptively before a crisis erupts to destroy an adversary’s weapons stockpile” before it “could erect defenses to protect those weapons, or simply disperse them.” When Bush unveiled his official “doctrine of preemption” a few months later, Senator Edward Kennedy wisely condemned it as “unilateralism run amok” and “a call for 21st century American imperialism that no other country can or should accept.”

In 2003, as the ugly reality of “preemptive war” plunged Iraq into intractable violence and chaos, Flournoy and a team of Democratic hawks co-authored a paper titled “Progressive Internationalism” to define a “smarter and better” brand of militarism for the Democratic Party for the 2004 election. While portrayed as a path between the neo-imperial right and the non-interventionist left, it asserted that “Democrats will maintain the world’s most capable and technologically advanced military, and we will not flinch from using it to defend our interests anywhere in the world.”

In January 2005, as the violence and chaos of the hostile military occupation of Iraq spun farther out of control, Flournoy signed onto a letter from the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) asking Congress to “increase substantially the size of the active duty Army and Marine Corps (by) at least 25,000 troops each year over the next several years.” In 2007, Flournoy supported keeping a “residual force” of 60,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and in 2008, she co-authored a paper proposing a policy of “Conditional Engagement” in Iraq, which Brian Katulis at the Center for American Progress dubbed “an excuse to stay in Iraq” that “poses as an exit strategy.”

As Obama’s Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, she was a hawkish voice for escalation in Afghanistan and war on Libya. She resigned in February 2012, leaving others to clean up the mess. In February 2013, when Obama brought in Chuck Hagel as a relatively dovish reformer to replace Leon Panetta as Defense Secretary, right-wing figures opposed to his planned reforms, including Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol, backed Flournoy as a hawkish alternative.

In 2016, Flournoy was tipped as Hillary Clinton’s choice for Secretary of Defense, and she co-authored a CNAS report titled “Expanding American Power” with a team of hawks that included former Cheney aide Eric Edelman, PNAC co-founder Robert Kagan and Bush’s National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. The report was seen as a view of how Clinton’s foreign policy would differ from Obama’s, with calls for higher military spending, arms shipments to Ukraine, renewed military threats against Iran, more aggressive military action in Syria and Iraq, and further increases to domestic oil and gas production—all of which Trump has adopted.

In 2019, four years into the catastrophic war in Yemen when Congress was trying to stop US participation and halt weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, Flournoy argued against a weapons ban.

Flournoy’s hawkish views are particularly worrisome when it comes to China. In June 2020, she wrote an article in Foreign Affairs in which she spun an absurd argument that an even more aggressive U.S. military presence in the seas and skies around China would make war less rather than more likely by intimidating China into limiting its military presence in its own backyard. Her article simply recycles the tired old device of framing every U.S. military action as “deterrence” and every enemy action as “aggression.”

Flournoy claims that “Washington has not delivered on its promised ‘pivot’ to Asia,” and that U.S. troop levels in the region remain similar to what they were a decade ago. But this obscures the fact that U.S. troops in East Asia have increased by 9,600 since 2010, from 96,000 to 105,600. Total U.S. troop deployments abroad have shrunk from 450,000 to 224,000 during this time, so the proportion of U.S. overseas forces allocated to East Asia has in fact increased from 21% to 47%.

Flournoy also neglects to mention that Trump has already increased the number of U.S. troops in East Asia by over 23,000 since 2016. So, just as she did in 2004, 2008 and 2016, Flournoy is simply repackaging neoconservative and Republican policies to sell to the Democrats, to ensure that a new Democratic president keeps the United States wedded to war, militarism and endless profits for the military-industrial complex.

So it is no surprise that Flournoy’s solution to what she presents as a growing threat from China is to invest in a new generation of weapons, including hypersonic and long-range precision missiles and more high-tech unmanned systems. She even suggests that the U.S. goal in this budget-busting arms race could be to invent, produce and deploy currently non-existent weapons to sink China’s entire navy and civilian merchant fleet (a flagrant war crime) in the first 72 hours of a war.

This is only one part of Flournoy’s larger plan for transforming the U.S. military through trillion-dollar long-term investments in new weapons technology, building on Trump’s already huge increase in Pentagon R & D spending.

In a September 10th interview with the Stars and Stripes military website, Joe Biden appeared to have already swallowed heavy doses of Flournoy’s Kool-Aid to wash down Trump’s Cold War. Biden said he does not foresee major reductions in the military budget “as the military refocuses its attention to potential threats from ‘near-peer’ powers such as China and Russia.”

Biden added, “I’ve met with a number of my advisors and some have suggested in certain areas the (military) budget is going to have to be increased.” We would remind Biden that he hired these unnamed advisors to advise him, not to predetermine the decisions of a candidate who still has to convince the American public he is the leader we need at this difficult time in our history.

Picking Michelle Flournoy to lead the Pentagon would be a tragic indication that Biden is truly hell-bent on squandering America’s future on a debilitating arms race with China and Russia and a futile, potentially catastrophic bid to resurrect America’s declining imperial power.

With our economy—and our lives—devastated by a pandemic, with climate chaos and nuclear war threatening the future of human life on this planet, we are in desperate need of real leaders to navigate and guide America through a difficult transition to a peaceful, prosperous post-imperial future. Michele Flournoy is not one of them.

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Featured image: Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele A. Flournoy. DoD photo by Gregory Jones, U.S. Army. (Released)

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