

You Can Make This Stuff Up

Vince Flynn writes of a world in which terrorists are always at the door. Unfortunately, official Washington hasn't realized he's a novelist.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

THE BUSH AIDE who claimed "We create our own reality" could have added that novelist Vince Flynn would be a consultant. Flynn's books have been discussed by cabinet members and intelligence-agency heads. He claims his potboilers are the bedtime reading of Presidents Clinton and Bush. Last month, he landed at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list with *Extreme Measures*. And after signing a lucrative deal with CBS Films, he is sending the protagonist of his novels, CIA super-killer Mitch Rapp, to a multiplex near you. It's Vince Flynn's world—we in the reality-based community have to get used to it.

What Tom Clancy did for the Cold War, Flynn is doing for the war on terror. His ten books have made him the darling of talk-radio and media hawks. Laura Ingraham had him on her show to discuss geopolitics. Bill O'Reilly said of Flynn's *Memorial Day*, "Every American should read this book." The *Washington Times* considers Rapp "A Rambo perfectly suited to the war on terror."

Flynn is no litterateur. His Mitch Rapp is a comic-book character trapped in a series of novels. Like Batman, Rapp is summoned to perform dark deeds on behalf of a cowardly political establishment. Sometimes that means sharpshooting a few jihadis, often it involves torturing them for information. Rapp has three emotional settings. At the offices at Langley, he is brooding. In the field or in the interrogation room, he is

enraged, either at the terrorists or at the State Department for questioning his methods. At funerals, he is enraged but also sad.

The prose is as thudding and one dimensional as Rapp. Every chest-pounding cliché about "what it takes" to combat terror is followed by actual chest-pounding. From Flynn's latest bestseller: "Eventually someone had to reach out and wrap their hands around the throat of the enemy and pick apart their network. At the moment, Rapp was trying to do just that. With his left hand he tightened his grip around Haggani's larynx and forced his head back." It's as if Flynn conjures a hackneyed phrase like "tear the heart out of a terrorist cell" and thinks to himself, "literally!"

The plots are improbable. In *Transfer of Power*, a group of terrorists seizes the White House until Rapp uncovers them. In another, Rapp is sent to destroy Saddam's nuclear arsenal. Yet even after he foils all these terrorist plots, politicians still get in his way.

Flynn, like many airport-book authors, relies on stereotyping to do the work of characterization he can't do himself. A dastardly German loves to admire his car's engineering while cruising on the Autobahn; Rapp's wife, a television journalist, likes to shop and drinks chardonnay; the Saudi villain of *Consent to Kill* has a camel-shaped swimming pool.

But the worst stereotypes are reserved for Americans. Consider the

assumptions behind a key moment in *Memorial Day*: Al-Adel, a Saudi terrorist who works in shipping, tries to co-operate with an FBI probe, but "after many months his Arabic pride emboldened him. He's lived in America just long enough to understand what to do. The idea came to him while watching TV one night." He hires a civil-rights attorney he sees on cable news. If he can distract Americans long enough by appealing to their native tolerance, he can deliver a nuclear warhead to the White House. Luckily, Mitch Rapp isn't a softie for political correctness.

Because Flynn's novels have one thing to say—terrorists are irrational radicals enabled by America's squeamish establishment—he is considered something of an expert by conservatives. At book readings, fans ask him what America's policy toward Iran should be. He discusses the finer points of Islamic theology on morning zoo shows. On a recent Rush Limbaugh program, a caller declared, "I used to live in the Middle East, and it just amazes me how right on [Flynn] is over there, it just amazes me. I mean, it's just like he's lived over there forever." Rush added, "He may have."

Flynn's path to the bestseller list isn't that exotic, but it is inspiring in its way. Before becoming a novelist, he had to overcome dyslexia. He forced himself to read every day. He picked up Tolkein, Hemingway, and Vidal. But the books he treasured most were the thrillers by

Robert Ludlum and Tom Clancy. The week before he was to enter Officer Candidate School, Flynn was medically disqualified from military service. He got a job as a sales rep for Kraft foods—"my training," he calls it today. "If I could sell a box of grape nuts, I could sell my own book," he tells *TAC*. After rejection letters piled up, Flynn self-published *Term Limits* in 1997. His hustling pushed up sales in his home state of Minnesota. Publishers noticed, and he signed his first book contract within months. A decade and ten million copies later, his name is printed larger than the title of the books. His jacket photo is so large that it could be worn as a mask.

Flynn works to keep up his expert status. He now takes trips to the Middle East to do research. He assures audiences he has "had to change some things in the books because my contacts have told me I'm too close to the truth." He tells me that a friend at the FBI once told him, "You've got the luxury of sitting down in a room for six hours a day for six months thinking about this stuff. We're lucky if we get one breakout session a month to sit down and brainstorm about plots. These books help raise our awareness. They help us think of stuff that we haven't thought of." Flynn can almost anticipate your disbelief: how does a former salesman outthink the FBI? He disarms doubt by sharing it: "I can't believe where these books have taken me."

Flynn's image as a self-trained student of world affairs mirrors his hero's narrative. In Flynn's novels, Mitch Rapp is the only one whose mind is free of bureaucratic concerns. He doesn't care to please his superiors. His success can't be attributed to formal education but to clarity of moral purpose.

"How do I write about Washington when I live in Minnesota?" Flynn asks rhetorically. "I think it's an advantage. I don't get sucked into Washington."

When Rapp rails against political correctness, it is Flynn speaking through him: "I've just realized this in the last few years. He is my voice."

That voice may be dull, with its boring action set pieces. It may be annoyingly repetitive, with its talk-radio style denunciations of American weakness. But like popcorn flicks and radio sloganeering, it is a profitable business.

And in many ways, Flynn is endearing. With his open collar and crew cut, he has the beefy charm of a high-school football coach. His admiration for the people who left their homes to work in foreign countries after 9/11 is boundless. His fascination with spycraft is almost childlike. When Flynn says he is afraid Hollywood will "wussify" Rapp, he sounds like he is talking about a beloved action figure. The unsettling part of the Vince Flynn phenomenon is the way people respond to his books.

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According to Flynn, after reading one of his novels, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, fearful that trade secrets were leaking, called up Mary Matalin, demanding, "How the hell do you know Vince Flynn?" White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin reportedly dumped copies of Flynn's book *Transfer of Power* onto the desk in the White House Situation Room shortly after 9/11, telling subordinates to figure out what happens "if the s---t really hits the fan." That's the novel where terrorists violently raid the White House and penetrate the West Wing itself. Flynn can rattle off a list: "Heads of foreign intelligence agencies read these books. The King of Bahrain, King Abdullah of

Jordan, and Prime Minister Brown. It floors me that all these people are reading them. They walk away saying 'Hmm, this guy knows a lot.'"

Flynn even fancies that his books have informed military operations: "[CIA Director Porter] Goss and [Joint Special Operations Commander] Stan McChrystal tried to put together a raid in Afghanistan, a very elaborate thing. And it's virtually right out of the beginning of *Memorial Day*. And I know both these guys read these books. They were literally an hour away from starting, and Rumsfeld pulled the plug. It is bizarre—just like in the book."

Flynn is proud that the characters in Washington act like the figures in his books. But the rest of us should be frightened that our leaders rave like Vince Flynn. Since 9/11, Americans seem to have lived through a Mitch Rapp novel. Our vice president talks

like a cartoon villain about his fondness for "the dark side" of intelligence work. Our nation spirits away terrorists to secret prisons. Condoleezza Rice warned Americans that Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear weapons. He was—in Flynn's *Executive Power*.

These novels would make fine escapism, if we could escape them. But a large conservative audience confuses fantasy with reality. This failure to distinguish between fiction and fact is no small thing—it made the Iraq War possible. And after seven years of imaginary threats and bravado about torture, you worry that some poor spook is wandering around Saudi Arabia looking for a camel-shaped swimming pool. ■

Enemy of Our Enemy

Secular Syria's struggle with radical Islam should make it our ally, not our antagonist.

By Neil Clark

IT'S A MIDDLE EASTERN country where Christian celebrations are official state holidays and civil servants are allowed to take Sunday morning off to go to church, even though Sunday is a working day. A place where women can smoke and wear make-up and are active in public life. A country implacably opposed to Islamic fundamentalism and al-Qaeda and whose security forces helped foil a terrorist attack on the U.S. embassy.

No, not Israel. Syria.

The list of the outgoing Bush administration's foreign-policy errors is long, but not least among them is the way in which it has treated Syria—in many ways a natural ally—as a pariah.

Despite having a secular government led by a London-trained ophthalmologist who has a British-born wife, Syria was added to the Axis of Evil by Undersecretary of State John Bolton in May 2002. In 2003, Washington passed the Syria Accountability Act, which imposed economic sanctions on Damascus. And according to President Bush, Syria poses “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy” of the United States.

Then to add injury—and death—to insult, in October American forces launched an attack from Iraq on the Syrian village of Al-Sukkiraya. Eight people were killed. The U.S. claimed to have been targeting the network of al-Qaeda-linked foreign fighters moving through Syria into Iraq, but the Syrian government denounced the strike as “criminal and terrorist aggression.”

How can we account for the United States's extraordinary hostility to a country that has never threatened it? The answer is the baleful influence of our old friends the neocons.

Nothing better illustrates the fundamental deceit that underpins neoconservatism. If defeating radical Islam really were the name of the game, as Podhoretz, Feith, Wolfowitz, and company insist, then the U.S. would surely have been building bridges with Damascus instead of treating it as an outcast. For Syria's problem with Islamic militancy predates America's.

Since the Ba'athist takeover in 1963, the Syrian regime has come under pressure from radical Islamists who dislike its socialistic, secularist policies, its empowerment of women, and the dominance of the Alawites, a group previously considered the underclass in the country. In 1973, there were violent demonstrations against planned changes in the constitution that proposed allowing non-Muslims to be head of state. Extremists assassinated prominent members of the regime and the Alawite sect.

Then in 1979 came the bloody massacre of 83 cadets at the military academy in Aleppo, followed by terrorist attacks in other Syrian cities. Three years later, there was a violent Islamic uprising in the town of Hama, in which Ba'athists were attacked and murdered. The government's response was brutal: up to 30,000 people were killed as the army, under President Hafez al-Assad's brother, attempted to restore order.

The threat that radical Islamists pose to the secular regime has receded since the early 1980s, but it has not gone away. The car bombing of a Shia shrine by jihadists in Damascus in September, which killed 17 people, was the third such attack this year.

I first visited Syria in 1999, during the last year of the 29-year rule of Assad *père*. With its state-owned self-service cafeterias, socialist-style public buildings, and East German-made trains, the country reminded me more of the communist states in Eastern Europe I had seen in the 1980s than a predominantly Islamic Middle Eastern state.

While the Syrians I met could not have been friendlier or more hospitable, there was no disguising the totalitarian nature of the regime. Pictures of Hafez al-Assad hung everywhere. An extraordinary number of people wore military uniforms, including in the universities I visited: a state of emergency has existed since the Ba'athists came to power.

If that all sounds pretty grim, there is, thankfully, another side to the story. The Ba'athists have undoubtedly brought stability to a country divided along religious and tribal lines, as well as considerable economic and social progress. In my travels in Syria, I did not see the abject poverty that exists in most other countries in the region. The government's secularism means that most members of religious minorities, such as the Alawites, Druze, Christians, and Isma'ilis, support the regime. “We support the government here because if it