

**THE GENERALS: AMERICAN MILITARY COMMAND FROM
WORLD WAR II TO TODAY¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JAMES G. ARGENTINA JR. *

*War is . . . an act of violence to compel our enemy to do
our will. The political object is the goal, war is the
means of reaching it, and means can never be
considered in isolation from their purpose.²*

Post-World War II U.S. Army generals lack strategic vision because senior generals and civilian leaders were reluctant to remove ineffective generals from command. This fostered a culture of mediocrity among career-oriented officers in the U.S. Army. In *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, Thomas Ricks argues that the U.S. Army's personnel-management policy for promotion and command selection since World War II lacks the quick hook, based on personal accountability, that General George C. Marshall used to shape the general officer ranks during World War II.³

Ricks begins *The Generals* by introducing the central figure of the book, General Marshall, through his interaction with General John "Black-jack" Pershing in World War I.⁴ General Pershing had a policy of swift relief of command for misconduct, which was well within the American military tradition dating back to the Revolutionary War.⁵ Ricks believes that producing innovative, strategic-minded, and

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¹ THOMAS E. RICKS, *THE GENERALS: AMERICAN MILITARY COMMAND FROM WORLD WAR II TO TODAY* (2012). Since 1982 Ricks has covered U.S. military activities in Somalia, Haiti, Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq. Thomas E. Ricks, WASH. POST, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/linkset/2006/07/06/LI2006070600612.html> (last visited Oct. 28, 2014). He was a beat reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, where he was a beat reporter for seventeen years, and then wrote for the *Washington Post*, where he is now a special military correspondent. *Id.* While at the *Washington Post*, he was a part of the team that won the 2002 Pulitzer prize for their coverage of the U.S. counteroffensive against terrorism. *Id.* In addition, Ricks has authored several books about the U.S. military, including, *FIASCO: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. *Id.*

² CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, *ON WAR* 75, 82 (Michael Howard ed., Peter Paret trans., 2d ed. 1984).

³ See RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 11, 451–53.

⁴ *Id.* at 20–24.

⁵ *Id.* at 22.

visionary generals in the Army requires a “Marshallian” approach⁶ to personnel management. Scouting for young, talented officers,⁷ promoting officers based on results and ahead of peers and superiors if necessary,⁸ and firing officers and generals who fail to produce results⁹ were the hallmarks of General Marshall’s system of personnel management. This system rewarded aggressive, adaptable, and capable team players.¹⁰

Moving from merely covering military actions, Ricks has ventured into analyzing its leadership and the management of its force. *The Generals* takes the reader on a historical journey from the point of view of the generals and the civilian leaders running the wars. Ricks provides a critical look at leadership, personnel management, generalship, civil-military relations, and strategy in the U.S. military. He spent four years researching American generalship from World War II to the present, which culminated in this book.¹¹ Mr. Ricks uses anecdotes, battle studies, and quotes he gathered from oral histories, historical military documents, books, articles, operations plans, and journals, just to name a few sources, to pepper the reader with examples of what he believes works and does not work when it comes to effective military generalship.

Robert H. Scales, a retired U.S. Army Major General and former Commandant of the U.S. Army War College, agrees with Ricks’s “basic observation about the current lack of strategic generalship”¹² in his review of *The Generals*. He also believes Ricks starts a useful discussion “about what constitutes great military leadership in today’s world and how the armed services can foster it.”¹³ However, General Scales is quite critical of the way Ricks relays this point and does not agree that firing generals is the reason why the U.S. military has been successful.¹⁴

⁶ *Id.* at 11.

⁷ *See id.* at 24.

⁸ *See id.* at 35.

⁹ *See id.* at 18.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 11, 451–53.

¹¹ *Id.* at 8.

¹² Robert H. Scales, *The Quality of Command: The Wrong Way and the Right Way to Make Better Generals*, 91 FOREIGN AFF. 137, 143 (2012).

¹³ *Id.* at 141.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 137–38.

For example, General Scales takes exception with the way Ricks treats Army generals as compared to U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) generals in order to advance the theme of the book that the Army's leaders lack strategic vision due to a decline in the advancement of dynamic, cooperative, and creative leaders to the top posts in the Army.¹⁵ In particular, General Scales believes that Ricks has a service bias based on his choice to highlight both the Marine leader's success at Chosin Reservoir in Korea and the Army leader's failure.¹⁶

While his assessment about Ricks's service bias may be correct, General Scales misses the point and focus of this part of the book, which was to juxtapose General Douglas MacArthur's failures in leadership, poor generalship, abominable civil-military relations, and lack of strategic vision with General Marshall's successes in these areas. By treating USMC Major General O. P. Smith well by touting the Marine's triumph at the battle at the Chosin Reservoir, Ricks expertly illustrates the traits of what he considers to be a good general. In addition, he shows how the poor leadership of General MacArthur eroded the "Marshall approach to generalship," which trickled down through the Army ranks and cost needless lives.¹⁷ Ricks then devotes the next chapter to Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgeway's tour in Korea and hails him for turning the Korean War around.¹⁸

Ricks advances two important reasons for the turnaround in Korea. The first reason was that General Ridgeway understood and agreed with President Harry S. Truman's strategic plan for the war and dedicated himself to achieving this goal.¹⁹ On the other hand, General MacArthur did not agree with that strategic goal and instead of following orders, he decided to advance his own agenda in Korea.²⁰ The second reason was that General Ridgeway did all of the things a general should do in order to be successful. He visited the battle space, conducted face-to-face meetings with subordinate commanders to assess them and the situation, visited the South Korean president for political reasons, and relieved commanders who were not performing to standard.²¹ This again was in stark contrast to how General MacArthur was conducting himself.

¹⁵ *See id.* at 140.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 122, 175.

¹⁸ *See id.* at 176–91.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 180.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *See id.* at 179–89.

General MacArthur ran the Korean War from Japan, visiting Korea only occasionally,²² disobeying orders from the President,²³ and assigning those officers who were personally loyal to him to combatant commands.²⁴

This lack of generalship and dysfunction between military and civilian leadership would prove toxic in the post-Korean War Army, which was struggling to find its identity amid the backdrop of a nuclear era that saw the Air Force expand rapidly and the Navy unveil its first nuclear-powered submarine.²⁵ General Maxwell Taylor, the Army Chief of Staff in 1955, reorganized the Army into smaller “battle groups” with the idea that they would operate in a more dispersed environment and take the place of the USMC’s historical role of fighting the small wars.²⁶

Ricks points out that General Taylor later stepped down as the Army Chief of Staff, as he felt underappreciated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and he published a bitter critique of President Eisenhower’s defense policies.²⁷ General Taylor was the opposite of General Marshall, according to Ricks, in that he became a highly politicized officer and used his relationship with the President as his base of power.²⁸ This would personally serve General Taylor well because he eventually assumed the role of military advisor to President John F. Kennedy and then became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, and a consultant on the war to President Johnson.²⁹ General Taylor led the way on intervening in Vietnam and shaping the approach to the conflict, which was in tune with his vision for a new small-wars Army.³⁰

“In 1961, . . . Taylor’s misbegotten Pentomic concept was being hastily dropped by the Army”³¹ and the generals who would run the war in Vietnam—General William Westmoreland and General William DePuy. Taylor would revert to World War II tactics despite the

²² *Id.* at 127.

²³ *Id.* at 180.

²⁴ *Id.* at 127.

²⁵ *Id.* at 206–07, 215.

²⁶ *Id.* at 208–09.

²⁷ *Id.* at 219–20.

²⁸ *Id.* at 219.

²⁹ *Id.* at 220–21.

³⁰ *See id.* at 221–23, 228–29.

³¹ *Id.* at 219.

warnings that this environment required counterinsurgency operations.³² Although General Westmoreland and General DePuy were seen as opposites when it came to intelligence and tactical prowess,³³ they both lacked the strategic vision to fight the war in front of them. In 1989, General DePuy would confess that he was “deficient at the next level up” and that this failure came at a cost.³⁴ He would also note that in the Army of 1972, “the atmosphere was somewhat poisonous, characterized by vociferous loss of confidence in the Army leadership.”³⁵

Ricks later credits General DePuy for rebuilding the Army by “correctly read[ing] the trend in military operations towards more sophisticated weaponry, and the implications of that for raising and training a force.”³⁶ This led to the development of five new, revolutionary weapons systems within the Army, which was a part of the next generation of sophisticated weapons systems in the other services that led, in turn, to the swift tactical victory in the 1991 Gulf War although would not help to translate this victory into a long-term strategic success.³⁷

While General DePuy was rebuilding the Army’s firepower and doctrine on how to employ it,³⁸ Major General John Cushman was trying to rebuild the Army’s professional ethic and to teach the officers how to think.³⁹ General DePuy and General Cushman did not see eye-to-eye on the way forward for the Army.⁴⁰ “The result of this feud between generals was that the Army’s rejuvenation would be tactical, physical, and ethical, but not particularly strategic or intellectual.”⁴¹ This occurred because General DePuy cancelled the third Leavenworth symposium on ethics in April 1976 (General Cushman’s symposium) and General DePuy’s fingerprints were all over the 1976 edition of 100-5 while General Cushman’s were notably absent.⁴² Rick’s implies that both approaches were correct. General DePuy’s focus on tactics and

³² *Id.* at 224–27, 236–39, 241, 248, 267–74, 342.

³³ *Id.* at 241, 250.

³⁴ *Id.* at 250.

³⁵ *Id.* at 330.

³⁶ *Id.* at 339.

³⁷ *Id.* at 335, 339, 386–87.

³⁸ *Id.* at 342, 345.

³⁹ *Id.* at 341, 343, 347–48.

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 341–50.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 349.

⁴² *Id.* at 341, 347–48

firepower ideas were good for the short term, while General Cushman's direction in thinking and ethics would have been good for the long term strategic health of the Army.

This is where Ricks gets it wrong. As he points out, "the failure to consider the end of the [1991 Gulf War] . . . was a lack of guidance from Washington."⁴³ Ricks condemns those he would hold responsible. "Ultimately, this was a failure of civilian leadership . . ."⁴⁴ Ricks also casts blame for the problems at the beginning of the war in Afghanistan on General Tommy R. Franks and for the Iraq war in 2003 on both Generals Franks and Ricardo Sanchez and believes that it was a failure in accountability that allowed these generals to remain in charge.⁴⁵ However, he acknowledges that the civilian leadership erred in their thinking on Iraq and that the mission was never clearly defined because of the hasty decision to invade with false information.⁴⁶ He later quotes a military historian, Sir Michael Howard, who notes that most leaders get it wrong at the beginning of a war, but the advantage goes to those who can adjust and learn from their mistakes.⁴⁷

If war is waged by civilian leadership and the generals are the stewards of that political will,⁴⁸ how could the lack of a strategic goal and direction by civilian leaders be a fault in strategic thinking on the part of generals? "What Mr. Ricks doesn't explain . . . is how the Taliban and Saddam could have been overthrown and both countries pacified without the miscalculations and unexpected outcomes that plague even the best of military leaders in all wars."⁴⁹

Ricks makes a compelling argument throughout *The Generals* that the Army would be better served by reverting to General Marshall's system of ruthlessly weeding out those who fail to perform instead of continuing with the current model of firing only those who commit misconduct or personal indiscretions.⁵⁰ What he overlooks with this simple solution is

⁴³ *Id.* at 383.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 410–11.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 400–01, 450.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 450.

⁴⁸ See CLAUSEWITZ, *supra* note 2, at 605.

⁴⁹ Andrew Roberts, *A Few Good Leaders of Men: No Military Leader Can Be Expected to Win Without Bloodshed.*, WALL ST. J. (Oct. 28, 2012, 3:22 pm ET), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443675404578056953261004898.html>.

⁵⁰ RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 360.

that the authority for relieving senior generals has shifted from the chiefs of service to the civilian secretary of defense.⁵¹ In addition, he does not address whether the difference in a draft force versus a volunteer force plays a role in the competency level of generals and officers; Ricks misses an excellent opportunity to more fully analyze his premise that Army general leadership is lacking.

Ricks concludes *The Generals* with suggestions for changes to the Army through the lens of the Marshall system. He posits that the military should conduct a post-war assessment of its generals to learn the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq, similar to the study conducted after Vietnam.⁵² Ricks also suggests that the way the military trains officers and generals how to think should be examined and tailored to meet the strategic needs of the changing threat to America.⁵³ He challenges the military to adjust personnel policies to discourage the best and the brightest officers from leaving the service because of the perception that mediocre people stay in and advance, thereby denying better performers the ability to skyrocket to the top because they must wait their bureaucratic turn.⁵⁴

This thought-provoking and entertaining book about U.S. military generalship certainly raises questions worth reflecting on. What can the military learn from the personnel management of the past drawdowns? How can the military continue to adapt to a changing and more complex enemy in a dynamic political climate fueled by the instantaneous dissemination of information? By highlighting the failures in strategic thinking by top U.S. military commanders and their civilian overseers, Mr. Ricks starts a useful discussion about what direction the U.S. military should take to cure the lack of strategic thinking among generals and their civilian leadership while awaiting the next war. High-level military leaders would do well to add this to their professional reading lists; and the judge advocates advising leaders would be wise in picking up a copy themselves. After all, understanding commanders, the history of command, and past leadership failures serve to highlight where a judge advocate can be most helpful to a commander.

⁵¹ Scales, *supra* note 12, at 138.

⁵² RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 455.

⁵³ *Id.* at 459.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 450, 457.