

Book Reviews

The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today

By Thomas Ricks

Reviewed by Group Captain Clive Blount

Introduction

Thomas E. Ricks is a Senior Fellow at the Washington think-tank *The Center for a New American Security* and has written widely on military issues; his Iraq books "*Fiasco*" and "*The Gamble*" were particularly well received. He is an extremely experienced journalist, with some 17 years on *The Wall Street Journal* and 9 years with *The Washington Post*, and has been part of two Pulitzer prize-winning teams. Currently, Ricks writes an often controversial online blog for *ForeignPolicy.com* called, '*The Best Defense*', and serves as a contributing editor for *Foreign Policy*. Ricks' latest controversy involved getting cut off during a *Fox News* interview about the Benghazi incident after accusing the channel of right-wing bias.*

The Generals is the result of four years of detailed study of American generalship since the Second World War, with chapters being devoted to the key figures in US Army leadership since George C Marshall. Ricks' particular focus is on army generals whom he considers were failures in combat. In essence, his central argument is that the combat performance of the U.S. Army has been less than exceptional because strategic army leaders have refused to sack failing subordinate generals. Ricks makes the assertion that fear of being sacked from wartime command would encourage innovation, daring, and professional competence and suggests that George Marshall's strict policy of 'hire and fire' meant that good officers were given the opportunity to become great and that bad or weak officers

* For those familiar with Fox News this will come as no surprise!

would be purged. He also suggests that when fear of dismissal is not present, and with it the encouragement to stand out and innovate, a cult of mediocrity takes over. Ricks believes that this has been increasingly the case in the US Army since Korea and has led both to organizational quagmire within the army and failure for the United States on the battlefield.

The Generals is an ambitious project that attempts to answer some highly pertinent strategic questions for the American military. In doing so, it provides some insightful ideas, contains some very thought-provoking leadership case studies and concludes with an attempt to provide some suggestions as to how the modern US military may improve its generalship. However, it is a far from convincing book, with Ricks taking an extremely partisan approach to history with little consideration of anything other than the facts that support his assertions. He exhibits a fair amount of service bias with an obvious affection for the US Marine Corps, for instance dwelling in detail on atrocities committed by the US Army, such as Mai Lai and its subsequent cover-up, which he attributes to poor leadership, whilst skimming over such Marines' black history as the murders at Haditha. He also seems to be unsure of what his key message actually is... whilst advocating the public firing of generals as a mark of leadership that raises morale and fighting efficiency, he then suggests that individuals should be given a second chance... in essence the opportunity to fail without consequence. As failure on the battlefield is measured in the deaths of American soldiers and large amounts of the nation's treasure, it is difficult to find sympathy with this view. However, as Ricks clearly demonstrates, 'time-serving', automatic promotion and an assured career for generals are also reprehensible, so this is a difficult area which requires a depth of thought to resolve; analysis that is lacking in this book. The book also sidetracks the reader with Ricks' attempt to entertain with historical anecdotes – thus detracting significantly from any serious analysis of his thesis. Perseverance, with careful thought, by the reader, identifies a serious challenge for today's military, but firing generals is not the solution to this problem, nor was it in the past described by Ricks. The challenge for today is to recruit, retain, educate and nurture talent to fill the strategic roles of tomorrow. Generals are to a certain extent made; they are a product of their education and experience. Wartime command is too late to realize that selection was a mistake.

Notwithstanding the above criticism of Ricks' central thesis, *The Generals* provides much food for thought on many aspects of strategic military leadership: Marshall's problem of turning an army of just 197,000 personnel into a world class force that peaked at 8.3 million in 1945 was unprecedented, and identifying leaders for that force was particularly acute - requiring firm leadership and moral courage. Human factors are a recurring theme, as evinced by the eternal battle between charismatic personality and hubris - in such individuals as Patton and MacArthur - and the tension between the good, solid, administrators required for such a massive army, and the inspirational flair and courage needed in modern, mobile warfare. Throughout the book we see in the background the eternal tension in the United States between professional military leadership and their civilian masters... civil-military relations remain problematic and controversial today.

The Generals provides much food for thought for professional military officers, regardless of service. It is an enjoyable read with an easy, journalistic style ; the leadership dilemmas faced by the subjects of the book are varied and complex, and clearly have parallels with today. A critical reading of the book is well worthwhile. With so much to offer, it is a little disappointing that the book's central message is less than convincing and, given the current emphasis on strategic realignment with the draw down from Afghanistan, it would be a shame if it was to influence the current strategic leadership of Western armies with flawed ideas. That said, Ricks' assertion that there is a lack of strategic leadership in the US military is borne out by experience; if *The Generals* forces the debate into the open it will have done great service.

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