

2014

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

Williamson Murray

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Murray, Williamson (2014) "The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 67 : No. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol67/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

IS PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION NECESSARY?

Ricks, Thomas E. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. New York: Penguin, 2012. 576pp. \$32.95

Tom Ricks has earned over the past two decades a justified reputation as a thorough and knowledgeable military correspondent. His latest work addresses the decline in the competence of generals in the U.S. Army, which he regards as a major and timely issue. As is to be expected from such a thoughtful journalist, Ricks has produced an important book that should spark debate and discussion not only among the Army's leaders but also among those of the other services. *The Generals* is well written and at times insightful. Indeed, it makes a plausible case that there is something flawed in the choice and education of Army leaders. For that reason alone it deserves close attention from those responsible for the shaping and course of service personnel policies that guide the preparation and promotion of America's future military leaders. Nevertheless, there are serious weaknesses in Ricks's examination. Admittedly, he has provided an excellent catalogue of the symptoms that indicate the decline in quality of Army generals from George Marshall to Tommy

Franks. However, in the end, Ricks's account fails to address systemic factors that lie behind that decline. Thus at few points does he draw out the underlying landscape of causality and accident, the impact of chance on events, the other possibilities open to Army leaders of the past, or the impact of trends and political choices on the Army's leadership. Moreover, he fails to address the elusive but essential problem of changes in the Army's culture over time, or how and why those changes came about. Yet from this military historian's point of view, that last issue represents the crucial element in the effectiveness of military institutions.

What this review aims to suggest is some of the larger areas that do not form a part of Ricks's account, such as the problem of unexpected changes in the underlying culture of the Army; the problem of unintended effects in personnel decisions and overall policy; the often baleful choices that political leaders have imposed on the Army; the importance of understanding the continuity of events in examining the leaders

who reach the senior levels; and above all, the intellectual framework within which that leadership has developed.

The difficulty with developing military leaders to which Ricks alludes is that the military profession demands two different attributes in its leaders, attributes that flow from the very nature of the profession. As Michael Howard so brilliantly suggested in an address at the Royal United Services Institute in the early 1970s, the military represents a profession that, fortunately, rarely gets to practice the fundamental reason for its existence—namely, the conduct of wars. That reality in turn makes the leadership of military forces not only the most physically demanding of all the professions but the most demanding intellectually. The mere running of military forces in peacetime, particularly after the Second World War, has become such a complex task that its leaders can all too easily lose sight of the reason why their organizations exist. Moreover, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries military institutions have confronted the considerable problems that rapid changes in technology bring in their wake. How then are military leaders to address a world in constant flux, with its massive social and technological changes? Most importantly, they cannot replicate the horrors and complexities of the battlefield on which their soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen will fight. That conundrum represents the heart of peacetime innovation, on which the combat effectiveness of military institutions depends.

Let us begin with George C. Marshall, whom Ricks has quite rightly selected as the paradigm by which those who aspire to high command should model their careers (but more often do not).

The problem with selecting Marshall, however, is that he was an anomaly in the officer corps. Significantly, and reflective of the weaknesses in his analysis, Ricks omits to discuss Marshall's seminal role as the deputy commandant of the Army's Infantry School, at Fort Benning, in the 1930s. In that post the Army's future chief of staff emphasized the education of the faculty as well as of the students. If he kept a "black book" in which he recorded the most outstanding, as well as the least capable, of the officers with whom he came in contact, it was at Fort Benning. There he could, and undoubtedly did, observe a considerable number of officers who passed through that institution as either faculty members or students and who would eventually lead the U.S. Army in World War II.

In the midst of the rush to mobilize a grossly unprepared institution to meet the desperate situation of 1940, Marshall's emphasis on education remained steadfast. Significantly, with the world going to hell in a handbasket in June 1940, two out of the six faculty members of the Army War College at Fort McNair were Colonel W. H. Simpson and Major J. Lawton Collins. In today's military an assignment as instructor to a war college during a major crisis is a sure sign of the end of a career. Not so in Marshall's army. Simpson would become a lieutenant general by 1944 and command the Ninth Army in the European Theater of Operations, while Collins would be a division commander by 1942 on Guadalcanal, a corps commander in Europe by 1944, later an army chief of staff, and in the postwar period the Army's chief of staff. Yet both remained in their faculty positions for the remainder of the 1940–41 academic year. That is perhaps where the greatest difference

lies between the culture of today's military and the attitude of Marshall.

Ricks is quite right to underline the ruthlessness with which Marshall and his senior subordinates fired those who failed to measure up to the demands of war. He is, however, on shakier ground in suggesting that they were willing to give those who failed a second chance. In fact, such cases were quite rare. Moreover, it is at the more junior levels (major and below) where one might consider a few second chances. In that respect, it is worth noting that Major Jack Galvin was one of the junior officers who felt General William DePuy's wrath during the Vietnam War and was fired. Nevertheless, in the Army of the 1970s, his career recovered, and he eventually reached the post of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. In terms of World War II, the generals, for the most part, who were removed from command disappeared into retirement or into commands stateside as colonels. Those who did not were the exceptions.

Marshall and his subordinates were able to purge those whom they believed incompetent because the United States faced a challenge to its existence. Confronting that reality as well, the media were hardly willing to complain about the firing of incompetent officers from senior command positions. Thus it may be a stretch to point to command policies in a time of national emergency as a pattern worth following in the present.

A great weakness in Ricks's account lies in his failure to address the importance of professional military education (PME) to create a culture that can innovate in peacetime and adapt to the unexpected conditions of combat. The historical record of the interwar period suggests that the schoolhouse provided

the basis for the strategic and operational framework within which America's military forces conducted and won the great campaigns of a two-front war, one that saw the projection of U.S. power across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. One of the possible explanations for the prewar emphasis on PME lies in the fact that without any significant resources in those years, the U.S. military had no choice but to devote much of its energy to serious study. On the other hand, it is also clear that many officers in that military believed that as members of a serious profession, they needed to study their profession just as lawyers and doctors do. On the Navy side of the house, it is significant that one of the most innovative CINCSUs (Commanders in Chief, United States), Admiral Joseph Reeves, spent a tour on the faculty at the Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island, while the future admiral Raymond Spruance, the great leader of the Central Pacific drive, spent two tours on its faculty.

At the end of World War II, many of the returning generals and admirals who had led U.S. forces identified the staff and war colleges as having played major roles in preparing them for the arduous tasks they had just confronted. Eisenhower, as the Army's chief of staff, went so far as to take a major part in the founding of the National War College. However, almost immediately the staff and war colleges declined in importance, until by the sixties they represented refuges in which both faculty and students could search for postretirement jobs or play golf. Thus the instruments for the study of the military profession never really recovered the influence they had possessed before the war.

There are a number of possible explanations. This reviewer favors two. First,

the pressures of the Cold War and the conduct of major wars in Korea and Vietnam led senior leaders to devalue education in favor of readiness. Second, but equally important, was the fact that the generation of leaders that assumed control of the American military in the early sixties had risen rapidly to command positions in the massive mobilization of World War II. Like Westmoreland—who refused a potential assignment to the Army War College with the comment that he was too advanced to be a student but was willing to serve as a faculty member—many officers dismissed the idea of serious study of their profession, having “learned” everything they needed to know about war and strategy from combat experience.

By skipping across a broad spectrum of the Army’s history, however, Ricks ignores two other factors in the decline in the Army’s generalship: the constraints that the post-World War II reforms in personnel policies created and still impose on the American military and the impact of the choices that political and military leaders inevitably make in the running of a complex organization. What was clear to those who had served in the interwar military was that the system of promotion then had not only been unfair but rewarded the slow, the plodding, and the stupid. Moreover, as Marshall’s firing of so many officers at the war’s outset underlined, the system had kept large numbers of officers on active duty who were too old or incompetent to serve in the harsh conditions of wartime.

The result was a major reform of the personnel system in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The “up or out” system, modeled on the industrial practices of the time, largely frames the present

practice. That system also aimed at keeping more officers at the middle levels than needed, to address the problems that a massive mobilization in a major world war with the Soviet Union would require. The up-or-out part of the equation aimed at ensuring that the system would prevent the stagnation that had marked the interwar Army and forced Marshall to fire so many superannuated officers. Moreover, the new personnel system, with its financial inducements encouraging majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels to retire in their middle and early forties, fit the health profiles of the time. This, after all, was a period when officers smoked like chimneys and drank like fish. It certainly fit the model that American businesses had established for their executives, a model that came close to destroying the competitiveness of American industry in the 1970s. Most American industries have changed their personnel systems, forcing out those who fail to comply. The American military has not.

The unintended consequences of this system now plague the U.S. military. Above all, the twenty-year up-or-out system has created minimal flexibility for the broader education of the officer corps. Moreover, it encourages significant numbers of outstanding officers to retire at precisely the point when they could offer much to their services. The retirement policies have resulted in a brain drain that encourages many of the brightest and most competent to leave as early as they can to begin their second careers. Simply put, no competent business would allow the loss of talent that now takes place every year, as exceptional officers retire in their midforties. The bottom line has been a culture of few risk takers and

too many conformists. Therefore, the future Petraeuses of the Army, who have pursued efforts to broaden their knowledge of military and strategic history, have found themselves regarded by many of their colleagues as outliers. They are to all intents and purposes the exceptions to the rule, while too many others like Tommy Franks and Ricardo Sanchez have followed the system of lockstep promotion and assignment.

The Army's present culture (much like that of the German army, which lost two world wars because the brilliance of its tactics could not overcome its contempt for strategy and politics) should have been the centerpiece on which Ricks hung his argument. In particular, the failure of Fort Leavenworth and Carlisle Barracks to provide the educational underpinnings of Army culture represents the heart of where it has gone wrong. Of all the military institutions, the Army most requires the steady hand of professional military education.

Unfortunately, since 1945 the Army has been the service least served by that crucial enabler of military culture. Even after the Vietnam War underlined the flaws in the PME system, education received too little attention from those in charge. At times their interference was pernicious, as Ricks quite correctly points out in his discussion of the conflict between Jack Cushman and William DePuy. The mantra of the Army War College (at least when this reviewer was familiar with it) was that the institution existed to give officers rests in their busy careers. A former dean of the college was even quoted as "preferring that his officers spend their time on the golf course rather than in the library." Most of the attending officers got the message, although a few, like the future Marine

general Paul Van Riper, simply went off to the Military History Institute and read books. Today, one of the great ironies in the Army's PME system is the fact that there is intense competition among the most outstanding Army officers to attend the junior or senior course at Newport and avoid Fort Leavenworth and Carlisle Barracks. Adding to the irony is that the Navy itself has over the past forty years made every effort to avoid sending its best officers to Newport, or to any other PME institution, despite the fact that the Naval War College has provided far and away the most intellectually challenging education in strategy.

In examining what has happened to the Army, it is not sufficient to hop, as Ricks does, from one decade to another to examine this or that general, who may or may not reflect the dominant cultural mores of a huge organization. Following Vietnam, the pressing problem was to reconstitute and reinvigorate a military organization that was on its last legs. It is not surprising, then, that the Army's leadership would concentrate on getting the tactics right; operations and strategy could come later. Here the two most important figures in rehabilitating the Army's leadership were Creighton Abrams and his successor, Frederick C. Weyand, who played crucial roles in pushing forward that extraordinary group of generals who emerged to put the Army right in the late 1970s and early 1980s. DePuy was only one of these generals, and while Ricks is right to credit him with considerable influence (good and bad) over the reborn Army of the 1980s, he virtually ignores other equally important figures. To understand the intellectual and cultural revolution of the 1970s at the Army's higher levels, we must look at the contributions of

generals like Don Starry, Paul Gorman, Glen Otis, and William Richardson.

Astonishingly, Ricks mentions General “Shy” Meyer, the brilliant Army chief of staff during the late seventies and early eighties, only in passing, quoting his famous comment about the “hollow army.” Yet Meyer, with the help of the likes of Starry, Richardson, and Otis, was clearly aiming at creating a fundamental shift in the Army’s culture. Asking why he failed and why General Al Gray of the Marine Corps succeeded would make for a fascinating examination of the difficulties and pitfalls involved in changing organizational culture. It also would have allowed Ricks to get at the heart of the problem.

Instead, Ricks jumps from his discussion of DePuy to a discussion of the generalship of Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell, omitting the important story of the intellectual retrenchment of the intervening years, when DePuy, Meyer, Starry, and Richardson disappeared, to be replaced by lesser figures. In that tale lies the real cause of whatever decline has taken place. As one senior officer commented to this reviewer, changing the culture of military organizations “is like attempting to turn an aircraft carrier or ocean liner.” But if professional military education is not going to determine a common culture of excellence, then individual choices are going to be the major determinants. Therefore, in understanding the Army’s story, one also must pay attention to the role that accident, chance, or miscalculation by its political masters has played in the evolution of what appears to be a decline in the effectiveness of its leadership.

Schwarzkopf was probably least typical of the Army generals of his generation. Rumors ran in Washington that

he had been shipped out to Central Command, at the time a relatively unimportant theater in the military pecking order, largely to move him out of the Army Staff, where his explosive personality had earned him a reputation for causing turmoil. In other words, it was chance and an underestimation of how rapidly the world was changing that led him to fame and fortune.

It was during the 1990s that flawed political choices had the greatest impact on the culture of the Army’s leadership. It is not that Tommy Franks appeared mysteriously or as the result of a straight-line collapse in the culture of the general-officer corps. In discussing the causes of the Vietnam disaster, Ricks rightly highlights the dysfunctional relationship between Lyndon Johnson and his military advisers—a flawed relationship exacerbated by the dishonesty of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor. In President William Clinton’s administration, civil-military relations were equally dysfunctional, and for similar reasons. Here the president, for reasons that remain opaque, appears to have aimed at appointing senior service commanders who were extraordinarily weak.

The Army got the worst of the deal. General Dennis Reimer may have been the weakest of Clinton’s appointments. Undoubtedly a well-meaning officer, Reimer nonetheless made decisions that now have, and will continue to have, a baleful impact on the Army’s culture. Simply put, he wrecked Fort Leavenworth by decreeing that all majors would attend the Command and Staff College, and that there would be no board selection for officers to attend the college. The result was a drastic downgrading

of quality of faculty, students, and instruction. Reimer then proceeded to appoint a family friend, General John Abrams, a skilled soldier with a dominating personality that brooked no argument, to the Army's intellectual heart, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). The other choice was Lieutenant General Don Holder, an intellectual soldier who would have been an ideal individual to hold that position, but Reimer had been an aide to Creighton Abrams and thus appointed his son to the critical TRADOC position. There the younger Abrams created an atmosphere of fear and distrust among his subordinates—hardly what the Army needed when preparing to address the challenges of the twenty-first century.

In his epilogue, Ricks provides some suggestions for fixing the Army's problems. Unfortunately, they have not been thought through and for the most part are not realistic or of much use in addressing systemic issues. At best they are pablum. After all, even if Army leaders were interested in change (and many are), what could they possibly do? Of what use are such statements as "In assessing the strategic situation today, Marshall might conclude that having adaptive, flexible military leaders who also are energetic, determined, cooperative, and trustworthy is probably more important now than at any time since he was chief of staff"? The devil is in the details, and Ricks has provided no solution as to how the Army might create general officers with those characteristics.

As for giving generals second and third chances, that suggestion would lead to even greater mediocrity. It would be anything other than the hard-charging and competent who would get the second

chances. As this reviewer's colleague and friend Colonel Richard Sinnreich has pointed out, "Could flag officer quality be improved by institutional changes? No doubt it could. But those changes would require more than just better PME. They would require a willingness to identify, select, and groom potential senior leaders in ways to which American society in general, and politicians in particular, have proved utterly hostile. Could we fire generals more readily? Sure, but that's a damn hard way to improve quality. Moreover, the Navy already is under growing fire for excessive command reliefs. The real challenge isn't to fire more [generals], as Ricks would have it, but rather promote fewer with much more discrimination. Thorough examinations, 360-degree efficiency ratings, graded exercise performance—there are a host of tools available to winnow future leaders. Firing generals is as much a confession of system failures as of individual failure, and even when necessary imposes huge costs."

In fact, real change would require systemic alteration in the Army's culture, which would then require breaking many rice bowls and discarding many pet rocks. It would aim at change over decades rather than over the short term. It would require massive changes in the educational approaches at Fort Leavenworth and Carlisle Barracks. In this regard, the current Army leadership is taking a step in the right direction by board-selecting officers to attend Fort Leavenworth. It would mean making intellectual performance at PME institutions play a major role in promotions and assignments. This means that those institutions would have to force their students to study the profession of arms and the crucial issues they will have to

deal with—war, strategy, and military operations. It would also make performance at staff and war colleges play a major role in selection for command positions. Above all, it would mean drastic changes in the Army's personnel system, and to the personnel systems of the other services as well. Had Ricks been willing to wrestle with these issues, he would have written a very different book.

Perhaps the most depressing aspect of the landscape of the current American military has been the return to a moral calculus that is nothing short of a return to the sexual standards of the Victorian age. Over the past several months we have seen the president of the United States remove a highly respected retired general, to whom the country owes much for his having turned around the situation in Iraq, from the directorship of the CIA for having an affair. At the same time the generals who botched up the war in Iraq were, as Ricks notes in a number of cases, not fired. Moreover, in one case, in a sad repetition of Westmoreland's promotion to become the Army's chief of staff after his disastrous tenure in Vietnam, a general whose performance was hardly more impressive was removed from command in Iraq and promoted to the position of the Army's chief of staff.

At present, it would seem that media and politicians would prefer standards for military leaders that emphasize "moral" behavior rather than competence in the profession—standards that few have followed. In a world where competence in any profession is an extraordinarily rare commodity, and especially competence in the military, this is indeed a dangerous precedent. The message emanating from Washington would appear to be that our leaders

prefer military leaders who are simon-pure (at least in their sexual mores) to competent generals and admirals. In the end, those at the sharp end will pay a terrible price for such imbecility.

WILLIAMSON MURRAY
Naval War College



Gaddis, John Lewis. *George F. Kennan: An American Life*. New York: Penguin, 2011. 784pp. \$39.95

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 2012, as well as a number of other awards, John Lewis Gaddis's study of George F. Kennan (1904–2005) has already firmly established itself as the fundamental scholarly biography for the Cold War period in American history. Gaddis began work on this biography in 1981, not long after he had spent a two-year period as visiting professor of strategy and policy at the Naval War College. At Newport in those days, he was already admired for his first book, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1972), and for the exemplary quality of his teaching, which won him a Department of the Navy Meritorious Civilian Service Award at the Naval War College.

It was his first book and subsequent articles that brought Gaddis to Kennan's attention and led him to choose Gaddis as his authorized biographer. In giving Gaddis unrestricted access to what would eventually become 330 boxes of Kennan's diaries and papers at Princeton University's Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, as well as giving him regular interviews, Kennan stipulated that the biography would not be published during his lifetime and so ensured that it would be a long-maturing project.