



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

By Thomas E. Ricks

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Reviewed by

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Tom Ricks is no stranger to criticizing the modern crop of generals. A fellow at the Center for New American Security, Ricks decisively established his national reputation with *Making the Corps*, followed by two successful analyses of the Iraq War, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* and *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008*. Along the way, Ricks became a cynic, relentlessly critiquing the decision to go to war in Iraq, the conduct of the conflict, particularly the generalships of Tommy Franks and Ricardo Sanchez, the utter dysfunction of the strategic decisionmaking and interagency processes required to make America's modern conflicts successful, and, most saliently, the failures of the conflict's most senior military leadership. Ricks weaves critiques of Army leadership, in particular, into a fluid, meticulously researched tapestry, but leaves room for debate about his ultimate conclusions. Ricks's focus on the technical and strategic prowess of generals causes him to gloss over the moral and ethical components of leadership that have eviscerated the legacies of a number of senior generals. Even so, failing to consider and evaluate the themes that Ricks identifies risks maturing a crop of generals for whom the professional

end simply is wearing stars, not leading the military properly into the next century and candidly rendering their best military advice to our nation's civilian leaders.

Ricks convincingly traces modern failures of generalship to their origins in the interwar period, through World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Operations *Desert Storm*, *Iraqi Freedom*, and *Enduring Freedom*. He juxtaposes successful Army and Marine generals through their histories with the characteristics of history's failed generals. Ricks draws specific, substantiated conclusions about generalship, Army culture, civil-military relations, and the way the Army has elected to organize, train, and equip itself in ways that ultimately suboptimized Service performance. Specifically identifying the Army's modern-era reluctance to effect senior leader reliefs as a departure from the pattern of history, Ricks paints an image of the ultimate country club, self-righteously convinced of its own infallibility—an Army for the sake of The Army, rather than for the sake of the Nation. The result is an outline of what ails the modern Army, with lessons to be considered not only for that Service to correct itself, but also for all the Armed Forces and their civilian leaders. Convincingly, Ricks identifies history's A-list of generals—George C. Marshall, George S. Patton, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Matthew Ridgway, O.P. Smith, Creighton Abrams, William E. DuPuy, and David Petraeus, among others. Not surprisingly, on his B-list of general officer failures, Ricks singles out Douglas MacArthur, William Westmoreland, Norman Schwarzkopf, Franks, and Sanchez, suggesting strongly that their failures in generalship have amounted not only to massive strategic failures, but also to unnecessary loss of American lives, from Korea through Afghanistan.

Ricks works to identify tangible, quantifiable historical trends and specific strategic, operational, personnel, and program decisions that yielded undesirable short- and long-term effects. He bemoans the Army's gravitation away from the concept of meaningful relief (performance-based firing, as opposed to mere conduct-based) as a leadership-shaping mechanism. Once upon a time, senior leaders fired generals because they believed line Soldiers deserved to be well led and not to have their lives squandered. Now, suggests Ricks, the needs

of the institution and concerns over the senior leader's career compete for consideration in the decision space. In an effort to demonstrate an example of "doing it right" in the modern era, Ricks reaches deep below the senior-leader level to examine the relief of Colonel Joe Dowdy, USMC, the commander of First Marine Regiment in the march to Baghdad. Dowdy's (not uncontroversial) relief demonstrates that there is no indispensable man, and if a commander loses confidence in a subordinate, the subordinate must go. In Ricks's view, if it is a close call, senior leaders should err on the side of relief: the human and strategic costs of getting that call wrong are virtually unconscionable. Ricks rightly concludes that too much emphasis has been placed on the "career consequence" of relief for individual officers. For leaders who ascend to flag rank, the Armed Forces must rewrite the "promotion contract" with an unspoken clause: if you accept this position, and things go wrong on your watch, you will be sacrificed on the altar of generalship, regardless of whether it was your "fault." This clause is not unfamiliar; our senior leaders talk about it a lot, but enforce it very little. Wanat springs to mind.¹

If Ricks comes up short anywhere in this tome, it could be that he attempted to write a neutral and unbiased analysis on a topic that he feels so strongly about. It is no secret that Ricks has taken his disdain for the professional failures of Franks, Sanchez, and their cohorts and elevated them to a level of malice that approaches a personal grudge. Ricks's writing on Franks and Sanchez is a bit like trying to take seriously a critique of Red Sox pitching written by Don Zimmer. Moreover, while Ricks's book was complete and published prior to Petraeus's spectacular fall from grace, Ricks's loving treatment of Petraeus suggests that he views generalship more like being an accountant—a brilliant technical specialist—than being a priest, whose principal currency of authority is moral. Ricks underestimates the moral component necessary to maintain the respect of privates, sergeants, captains, and colonels, a shortfall roundly and regularly on display on the front pages of the *Washington Post*. True generalship is an ability to borrow elements of Patton's technical military competence and the moral pureness of Ghandi, mixed with Bill Clinton's artful communication,