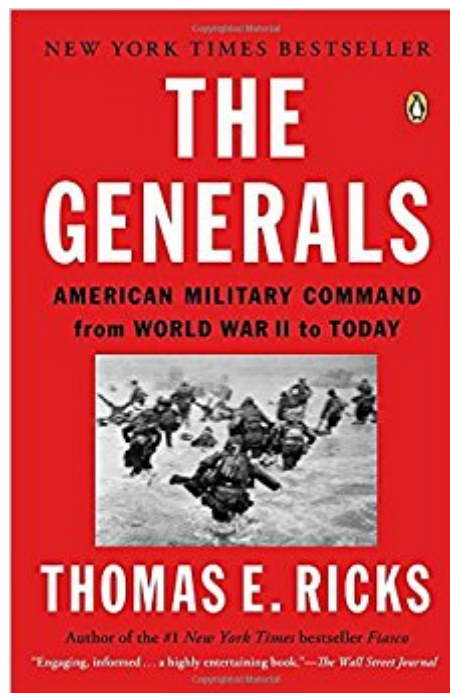




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# The Generals: American Military Command From World War II To Today



## Synopsis

An epic history of the decline of American military leadership — from the #1 bestselling author of *Fiasco* While history has been kind to the American generals of World War II — Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, and Bradley — it has been less kind to the generals of the wars that followed, such as Koster, Franks, Sanchez, and Petraeus. In *The Generals*, Thomas E. Ricks sets out to explain why that is. In chronicling the widening gulf between performance and accountability among the top brass of the U.S. military, Ricks tells the stories of great leaders and suspect ones, generals who rose to the occasion and generals who failed themselves and their soldiers. In Ricks's hands, this story resounds with larger meaning: about the transmission of values, about strategic thinking, and about the difference between an organization that learns and one that fails.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When George Marshall headed the U.S. Army in WWII, generals were frequently fired. They haven't much been since, writes Ricks, a phenomenon he connects to the strategically unsatisfactory conclusions to subsequent wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Ricks was a military-affairs journalist, and his criticism of the Iraq invasion (*Fiasco*, 2006) echoes in this survey of the army's top echelons since WWII. He diagnoses the top brass's problem as being good at organizing combat operations but terrible at converting tactical victories into war-winning success. He points to several causes of the situation. One has been the slowness of generals trained in set-piece battles to adapt to insurgency warfare. Another has been, Ricks

argues, the sidelining of nonconformist officers, outliers in personal habits or in their unorthodox positions in the army—its internal debates about strategic doctrine. Individual cases, such as those of Maxwell Taylor and William Westmoreland, stoke his negative appraisal of the army's leadership, which he unifies by urging as a remedy a revival of Marshall's methods of promoting and dismissing generals. Ricks's prominence plus the publisher's promotion should equal a high-profile title. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

"Engaging, informed . . . a highly entertaining book." *—The Wall Street Journal* "A masterful and critical study of the art of generalship from World War II through Iraq and Afghanistan by one of the smartest military experts out there." *—The New York Times* "[An important and timely book . . . trenchant, straightforward." *—The Washington Post* "Impressive . . . Stark, fact-based, and strongly argued." *—Chicago Tribune* "Ricks shines, blending an impressive level of research with expert storytelling." *—The Weekly Standard* "[A] savvy study of leadership. Combining lucid historical analysis, acid-etched portraits of generals from 'troublesome blowhard' Douglas MacArthur to 'two-time loser' Tommy Franks, and shrewd postmortems of military failures and pointless slaughters such as My Lai, the author demonstrates how everything from strategic doctrine to personnel policies create a mediocre, rigid, morally derelict army leadership... Ricks presents an incisive, hard-hitting corrective to unthinking veneration of American military prowess." *—Publisher's Weekly (Starred Review)* "Informed readers, especially military buffs, will appreciate this provocative, blistering critique of a system where accountability appears to have gone missing - like the author's 2006 bestseller, *Fiasco*, this book is bound to cause heartburn in the Pentagon." *—Kirkus* "Entertaining, provocative and important." *—The Wilson Quarterly* "This is a brilliant book—deeply researched, very well-written and outspoken. Ricks pulls no punches in naming names as he cites serious failures of leadership, even as we were winning World War II, and failures that led to serious problems in later wars. And he calls for rethinking the concept of generalship in the Army of the future." *—William J. Perry, 19th U.S. Secretary of Defense* "Thomas E. Ricks has written a definitive and comprehensive story of American generalship from the battlefields of World War II to the recent war in Iraq. *The Generals* candidly reveals their triumphs and failures, and offers a prognosis of what can be done to ensure success by our future leaders in the volatile world of the twenty-first century." *—Carlo D'Este, author of Patton: A Genius for War* "Tom Ricks has written another provocative and superbly researched book that

addresses a critical issue, generalship. After each period of conflict in our history, the quality and performance of our senior military leaders comes under serious scrutiny. The *Generals* will be a definitive and controversial work that will spark the debate, once again, regarding how we make and choose our top military leaders.

•Anthony C. Zinni, General USMC (Ret.)

“The *Generals* is insightful, well written and thought-provoking. Using General George C. Marshall as the gold standard, it is replete with examples of good and bad generalship in the postwar years. Too often a bureaucratic culture in those years failed to connect performance with consequences. This gave rise to many mediocre and poor senior leaders. Seldom have any of them ever been held accountable for their failures. This book justifiably calls for a return to the strict, demanding and successful Marshall prescription for generalship. It is a reminder that the lives of soldiers are more important than the careers of officers and that winning wars is more important than either.

•Bernard E. Trainor, Lt. Gen. USMC (Ret.); author of *The*

*Generals at War* “The *Generals* rips up the definition of professionalism in which the US Army has clothed itself. Tom Ricks shows that it has lost the habit of sacking those who cannot meet the challenge of war, leaving it to Presidents to do so. His devastating analysis explains much that is wrong in US civil-military relations. America’s allies, who have looked to emulate too slavishly the world’s pre-eminent military power, should also take heed.

•Hew Strachan, Chichele Professor of the History of War, University of Oxford

Exactly what you would expect from Thomas Ricks. Easy to read. Hard to put down. This book is essentially about two branches of the US Army, infantry and armor, and how those branches in conjunction with the overall Army failed to produce strategic leaders. Much of the book focuses on negative aspects of generalship but Ricks tries to pull out positive points and does a good job of citing both sides of the arguments. While he touches on the personnel system that makes these officers he doesn’t talk about race at all. If race makes a difference and if it does what to do about it. While Ricks talks about Army schooling in the creation of strategic leaders his primary targets are the Command and General Staff College and the School of Advanced Military Studies. The Army War College makes appearances as well. The Army’s Professional Military Education is a huge system that isn’t reflected well in this book probably due in large part to its scope. A great read for anyone in the service that is used to seeing their chain of command on a pedestal.

Thomas Ricks presents an excellent analysis of the problems with flag and general officers in the U.S. military today. While individuals who wear the stars in our military ranks need to be accorded

tremendous respect, they should not be treated as demi-gods immune from criticism or dismissal. While the U.S. military does a pretty good job of holding enlisted and junior officers accountable for their actions, our military has lost a sense of accountability amongst its highest ranking officers. Ricks argues that becoming a general (or admiral) in America today has become akin to getting voted into to an exclusive country-club. That is, you may have to work really hard and make clear sacrifices to gain admission, but once admitted, you can do no wrong and are never turned out. This has turned the leadership of the U.S. military upside down. Further, Ricks asserts that America's civilian elected officials must share some of the blame in their timidity to hold the general officers accountable for clear failures. This book is worth reading for anyone interested in what is going wrong in the Defense Department today and where it can get fixed.

A clear-eyed, sobering look at the decline of a critically important part of the U.S. Army, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* by Thomas E. Ricks pulls no punches. Names are named and costly mistakes by both those wearing the suits of politicians and uniforms of high rank are pulled under the bright light for thorough examination as Ricks attempts to identify how the world's most powerful military in 1945 became "hollow" less than thirty years later and technically without peer but strategically shortsighted another thirty years after that. Perhaps because I was career military myself, I place a very high value on a willingness to "speak truth to power" -- that is, a subordinate having the moral courage to say what needs to be said instead of what their boss wants to hear. Much as he did in his examination of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, *Fiasco* (read my review [here](#)), in *The Generals* Mr. Ricks "speaks truth" and gives the reader an unvarnished look at Army leadership that is quite often at odds with what the public has been told or believes to be true. Walking the reader forward from the Army's high-water mark -- General George C. Marshall's service as Army Chief of Staff during World War II -- to the utter failure of top-level leadership and performance as Iraq fell apart in 2004, Mr. Ricks takes us on a sobering journey that includes stops in Korea and Vietnam before the Army bottomed out and began a resurgence that is only partially complete to this day, despite picture-pretty but misleading successes such as Desert Storm. Deeply researched, the book is highly readable and written with straight-forward and -- a potential pitfall deftly avoided -- unemotional prose. There is no table-thumping here, nor is it needed: the facts speak for themselves and the conclusions drawn by the author are therefore compelling. One of those conclusions, which based on comments I've read appears to be a lightning rod, is the belief that the Army has suffered because its leaders have abandoned the practice of firing generals for failure to perform. "During World War II, senior American commanders generally

were given a few months in which to succeed, be killed or wounded, or be replaced. Sixteen Army division commanders were relieved for cause, out of a total of 155 officers who commanded Army divisions in combat during the war. At least five corps commanders also were removed for cause." -- Ricks, Thomas E. (2012-10-30). *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (p. 7). Penguin Press HC, The. Kindle Edition. Contrast that with the modern military where the only sure path to relief of a general involves criminal charges or moral laxness. Cases in point: Chosin Reservoir, Firebase Mary Ann, Abu Ghraib, Tora Bora and Phase IV in Iraq, none of which involved what would be considered "relief for cause." It is important to note, too, that those reliefs during WWII were conducted from within; the Army did its own dirty work. As Mr. Ricks points out, since WWII the vast majority of the few officers to lose their jobs were ousted by the military's civilian overseers, not their own service branch. Also, being relieved during WWII was not the career ender it is today; many of those relieved continued to contribute to the war effort in other positions, and a few like hard-drinking General Terry de la Mesa Allen returned to combat command at a later date. Mr. Ricks suggests that each branch of the U.S. military would benefit from a return to kinder/gentler and more commonplace relief; I do not disagree with the theory, however given the active-duty officer culture I remember, enacting that as policy would be contentious and very difficult. Another theme which runs throughout *The Generals* is the decline in the ability of Army to produce leaders capable of developing comprehensive war strategies supple enough to react to the inevitable changes brought on in warfare, either from political pressures or events on the battlefield. Marshall and his protégé Dwight D. Eisenhower certainly did in WWII but Norman Schwarzkopf and Tommy Franks were not only clueless and tone-deaf to the need, but worse yet did not believe it was their responsibility. Finally, I would add that although the book focuses nearly exclusively on the Army, the concerns cited are not limited to that branch of the military. There is much for everyone to learn here, and I highly recommend *The Generals*. It is a thought-provoking, insightful study of Army leadership that should generate serious debate and discussion among our military and political leaders.

Ricks really captured the essence of command failure since WWII: Careerism, institutionalism, and political correctness. The modern Army officer has limited time to understand the world in which he lives. He is micromanaged and has little or no room to experiment (and thus to fail) with the principles of leadership. He is much more a manager than a leader and has relinquished the role of leader to his senior non-commissioned officers who have even less training in leadership than he. This book is a must-read for anyone who loves the Army and for those who would sharpen its

present and shape its future.

A very compelling read into the history of military leadership of the U.S. Army command structure from WW II forward. My father attended General Command and Staff during WWII as well AGS in the Army Air Corps before going to France D+3 at Normandy. I served in Vietnam Nam in 1970 at MACV HQ under Abrams. Body count list by Corps were posted outside the basement PX. What a joke.

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