

Review - The Generals

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - The Generals

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/11/review-the-generals/>

HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 11 2013

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

By: Thomas Ricks

New York: Penguin Press, 2012

The American military fights a lot, but wins less frequently. In fact, its major engagements since World War II- the Korean, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars- have all been frustrating, casualty laden, and politically destructive experiences. Thomas Ricks, a leading American military journalist, in a provocative examination of this experience, blames the generals. The key failure, in his view, is the unwillingness of senior commanders to fire other generals.

Rick's ideal is General George C. Marshall, the Chief of Staff of the US Army and the senior Army officer in World War II and later, as Secretary of State, the author of the famous Marshall Plan, which to Americans at least, saved Western Europe from Communism by stimulating its economic recovery. Marshall had been an effective operational planner for American forces in France under General Pershing during World War I. As he endured the much reduced interwar US Army, Marshall kept track of officers he encountered, noting the best and worse among them. Selected to head the Army just as World War II started in Europe, Marshall fired hundreds of subordinates he considered incompetent or too decrepit to command in war. It was in this vacancy chain that Dwight Eisenhower found his path

Review - The Generals

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

to command Allied forces in Europe from his prewar lieutenant colonelcy. As American forces moved into combat, Marshall encouraged his field commanders, Eisenhower and the others, to fire subordinate commanders who were hesitant, pessimistic, and ineffective. Dozens of division and corps commanders were sent home. Very few were given second chance combat commands even though the Army vastly expanded as it rolled to victory.

Marshall's operating guide according to Ricks was to match organizational success with personal responsibility and integrity. He sought to reward officers for their determination to meet their assigned missions. Officers didn't have to be tactically brilliant or economic in their use of resources, but they had to fight their forces effectively. There was not much interest in excuses. Failure would likely earn a commander's quick replacement, fairly judged or not. War was a team effort with soldiers' lives at stake, but senior leaders were to pay the price of their team's failure with their careers. Officers were to pride themselves in being above politics, organizational or partisan. It was battlefield results that he wanted to matter, not sponsors.

The long slide for the US Army from its World War II greatness begins for Ricks in Korea where American forces were initially routed by the North Koreans, rallied, and then were routed again, this time by the Chinese. The irascible, arrogant, and increasingly insubordinate General Douglas MacArthur was in charge in the Far East, having escaped Marshall's control during World War II because of his political prominence. MacArthur ignored intelligence warnings and explicit direction from Washington in his charge into North Korea after his brilliant landings at Inchon, prompting Chinese intervention and near disaster for US forces in epic battles at the Chosin Reservoir. President Truman did finally relieve MacArthur who unbelievably returned home to a hero's welcome. The day was saved by General Mathew Ridgway, one of Marshall's men, who waged a successful defensive war against the Chinese and gained stalemate near the 38th Parallel which had been the original dividing line between the North and the South. Sixty years later there is still no peace on the Korea Peninsula, but no raging war either.

The Vietnam story is even worse for the US Army. Pushed aside by President Eisenhower's decision to follow a nuclear retaliation strategy which favored the Air Force and Navy, the Army was basically rootless in the mid to late 1950s. It found its doctrinal home in the flexible response strategy advocated by General Maxwell Taylor and adopted by John F. Kennedy in his presidential campaign. Taylor was a very un-Marshall general in that he sought political involvement for the Army. With the Army carrying the flexible response banner, Taylor essentially married the Army to the Democrat Party and paved the way for America's involvement in Vietnam. Already retired by the 1960 elections, Taylor became President Kennedy's personal military advisor and then his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was on his watch as Chairman and later US Ambassador that America sank deep into the Vietnamese muck. General William Westmoreland came to lead the campaign which he foolishly shaped into a war of attrition with a foe much more willing than the Americans to sacrifice its young men for the cause. The awful political dynamics that developed around the war back in the US made it drag on for years, shredding many lives in the process. Westmoreland was replaced after the 1968 Tet Offensive by the much more sensible General Creighton Abrams. In this war as in all others, Ricks sees the Marine Corps as the strategically wiser, more effective force, revealing a persistent bias that likely stems from his defining work, *Making the Corps*, an ode to its tough and value laden basic training. But big wars are always an Army show, and the US Army, General Abrams notwithstanding, was hell bent on driving itself into the ground, as witnessed by the My Lai massacre cover up attempts.

The Army began a transformation after Vietnam. It pivoted to the Soviet threat at the Fulda Gap, designed and bought new equipment, and honed a volunteer force that was both professional and well-trained. It became the Army that none other wants to fight straight up. But its transformation doesn't satisfy Ricks. He sees the Army as tactically focused and strategically blind. It doesn't lose battles, but it doesn't win wars either. It is an Army Ricks believes that is dominated by its own bureaucracy and lead by unimaginative generals who are too politically oriented. It doesn't fire the incompetent, but rather assures them good careers.

Ricks finds few heroes in the post Cold War US Army. The Army in the Gulf War did drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait but gained no victory because of the inability of Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf, then respectively Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Commander of US Central Command, to provide strategic direction for the forces in the field. The Global War on Terrorism starts no better under the leadership of General Tommy R. Franks, who Ricks calls a two time loser for his management of initial operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Another failure in Ricks

Review - The Generals

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

view is the much abused Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez who takes over for the occupation of Iraq and allows the insurgency to boil and the abuses at Abu Ghraib to occur. It is an Army that can barely punish its most criminal enlisted soldiers, let alone an incompetent general. General David Petraeus, his disciples, and the Marines, of course, are the exceptions. Petraeus is the educated maverick who sees the big picture and fights successfully both the insurgents and the ever-dumb Army hierarchy. And the Marines, they know small wars and can still fire regimental commanders who hesitate when they should be leaning forward.

Provocative but unpersuasive is how to rate Ricks' thesis. There are a lot of good stories in this history of a hard-fighting Army, but Ricks knows that its frustrations since World War II are really not the fault of its senior leaders. It is apples and oranges that are being compared. War has changed for America and so has the US Army. Ah, the simplicity of World War II. The objectives were clear and stark—crush the Axis and liberate our conquered friends. A division commander in combat was there to kill German or Japanese soldiers and take territory. There wasn't much else for generals to worry about. And if civilians were killed it was regrettable but of no great consequence. Fifty thousand French civilians were killed by the Allies in the process of liberating France. There were lots of friendly fire deaths and many incidents where prisoners were killed during World War II. And officers who failed the task of pushing ahead at nearly all costs could be relieved of their commands without causing trouble back home.

Our wars since then are different. We don't fight for our survival or the total surrender of the enemy. Our objectives are often vague and changing. The impact of the fighting on civilians matters. Our allies are often as suspect as are our enemies. And firing a general in the field is seen as an indication of a failing war policy with political consequences for the administration incumbent in Washington. We thought Korea initially was a diversion for a main front that would open with a Soviet attack in Europe. Our best forces and leaders were held back for the European fight. With the Chinese intervention the objective became to hold onto as much as possible of the South and avoid having too many of our forces killed or captured. No one wanted to press that fight to victory. In Vietnam there was always the fear of Chinese intervention and of starting the really big war with the Soviets. We wanted the South to do its own fighting, but found that its forces never quite got there. We ended up doing way too much of the fighting for way too long. Counter-insurgencies are never pretty and appear even less so when shown nightly on television to potential draftees and their parents. The politicians, much more than the generals, ran the war. It was lost not in Vietnam, but on the streets and in the living rooms of America. It is pointless to blame division commanders, even the bad ones, for the outcome. And Afghanistan and Iraq are just much more of the same. What exactly is the objective in Afghanistan, one must ask, and how do you measure progress toward it? Casualties of all kinds count now politically. Lawyers must be consulted in planning attacks. Soldier misbehavior of any sort becomes an issue. Soldiers are certainly not allowed to rape and pillage, to collect battlefield souvenirs, or even to urinate on the dead bodies of enemy fighters. In so many dimensions war is not war as it was in World War II, or anything even close to it for our side.

The US Army is also different. Prior to World War II, the Army was a relatively small organization in which it was possible for officers to know one another. It grew huge in the war but was lead by its small pre-war officer corps. The Chief of Staff had then the power to fire division and corps commanders as he had a direct role in managing combat operations. It is all changed. The operating forces are now under joint commands that can be lead by admirals as well as generals, and that report to the President through the Secretary of Defense and not the Joint Chiefs. The chief of staffs of the services train and equip a force that they do not lead. The Army is indeed a big bureaucracy that must worry about the management of contracts, the careers of its soldiers, and the welfare of their dependents. Winning wars strangely enough is not its task.

It is hard to hold generals and brigade commanders much responsible for the wars they fight these days. They are on a very short leash. Communications with Washington and their regional combatant commanders is quick and frequent. The restrictions on whom and how they can attack are many. Generals and other officers are indeed relieved of their commands, but more often for saying too much to the embedded media or for having improper relations with female subordinates than for mismanaging their part of the war. Wars are the responsibility of officials, not general officers, and these officials are in fact held to account. Presidents Truman (Korea) and Johnson (Vietnam) did not run for reelection because of the failures of their wars, and their party lost the next two elections as further punishment. George W. Bush was ineligible to run again, but his party too suffered two subsequent defeats

Review - The Generals

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

because his wars (Iraq and Afghanistan). Politically, he is essentially under house arrest as he has no place in our national or international politics and is not able to appear in public. Robert McNamara, Johnson's Secretary of Defense, lost his post and reputation because of Vietnam, and the same happened to Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's Secretary of Defense. The responsible do pay for bad wars, though perhaps not enough.

Ricks knows all of this and backs away from his case as much as he does defend it by the book's end. What he should have pushed was his analysis of the rotational policies the US Army has decreed for its wars. It is temptingly mentioned at several points in the book. The Army's Vietnam War policy of individual replacements, yearlong tours for soldiers, and six month commands for officers was apparently totally destructive of good military performance. Soldiers spent much of their time counting the days until they were to come home and officers in trying to learn their new jobs in a continuous cycle while fighting against a seasoned enemy. For the Global War on Terror the Army switched to a unit rotation policy that had 12-15 month tours, and at least expressed some concern about transitional transfers of ground knowledge and developing lessons learned for incoming units. How much better the results were would be interesting to know. Ricks doesn't say. I hope the effects of rotational policies will be Ricks' next book. There is much to admire in his writing style and ability to dig out the organizational truth.

—

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus at MIT and was until recently the Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. Read more from Harvey M. Sapolsky in his e-IR blog: *The High Ground: Observing International Security*.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.