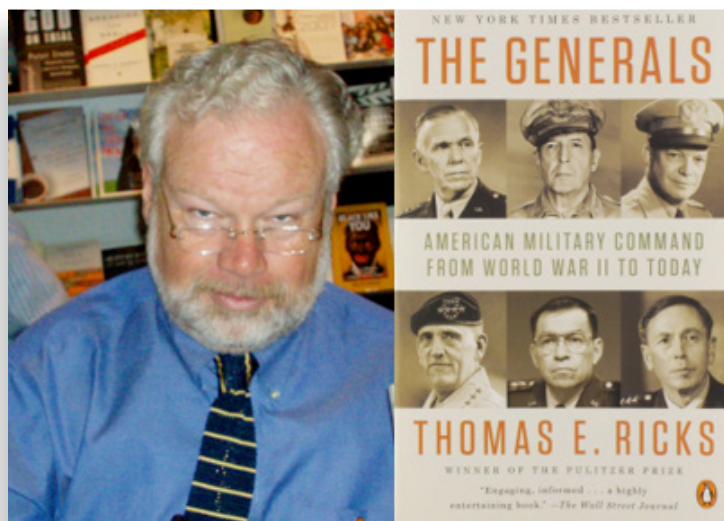


THOMAS EDWIN RICKS

*The Generals:
American military command from World War II to today,*

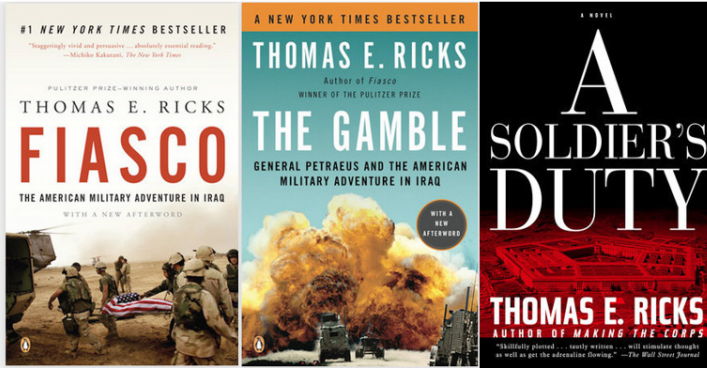
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Thomas Edwin Ricks is a former *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* journalist specialized in military and national security issues. He is a prolific author, famous for his bestseller *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006) and its follow-up *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008*.

In *Fiasco*, Ricks analyzes the military's performance in Iraq, harshly criticizing not the troops, who fought bravely, but the generals. He accuses Army generals Franks, Odierno, Myers, and Sanchez of not having been able to grasp the nature of counterinsurgency warfare. In the follow-on to *Fiasco*, *The Gamble*, Ricks explains how David Petraeus struggled to change strategy in Iraq and adopt a new approach to the campaign, with uncertain success.

In *The Generals*, this time, Ricks deals with the past. Having harshly criticized the Army generals who led US troops in Iraq, he now tries to explain the or-



igin of their inadequacy. In this book, Ricks analyzes the performance of generals and the civilian leaders who oversaw them from the outbreak of World War II to Iraq and Afghanistan.

He argues that since the end of World War II, Army generals have experienced a sharp decline in leadership skills. This decline, in his view, has one main reason: Army officers have stopped relieving their subordinates for their performance. This is Ricks' main argument through the whole narration. *The Generals*, as the author bluntly says at the outset of the book, should be seen as a tentative to answer the following questions: "How and why did we (the Americans) lose the long-standing practice of relieving generals for failure? Why has accountability declined? And is it connected to the decline in the operational competence of American generals?"

Ricks argues that what he calls "the Marshallian approach to leadership" has faded away after World War II. Marshall was a great leader who can be considered the founding father of the modern US Armed forces. He expected only success from his subordinates, that is why he was so ruthless in relieving every officer who didn't measure up to his standards. He is famous for having dismissed at least 600 officers under his command from 1939 to 1941. During the war, sixteen Army division commanders were relieved out of a total of 155 officers who commanded Army divisions in combat. At least five corps commanders were also relieved. In Marshall's eye, as Ricks says, "being willing to remove an officer signaled to the American people that the Army's leaders cared more about the hordes of enlisted soldiers than about the relatively small officer corps". That is exactly what changed after WWII, starting from Korea.

In this relatively little and unpopular small war, removing senior officers became something politically difficult to prove. Ricks argues that "a wave of high-level reliefs early in the war provoked fear at the top of the Army that more such actions would lead Congress to ask uncomfortable questions". Too much emphasis was then placed on the career consequences of relief for individual officers. Instead of a sign that the system has worked as planned, relieving an

officer was now seen as a sign that the system somehow had failed. The Army became bureaucratic, with generals considered too important to be relieved before their normal rotation times. The practice of relieving officers because of their performance began to fade in Korea, with tremendous results, and was definitively abandoned in Vietnam.

Abandoning this practice had tremendous consequences on the Army top officers. Not having to face the judgment of the public, officers started to act like “keepers of a closed guild, answerable mainly to each other [...] Becoming a general was now akin to winning a tenured professorship, liable to be removed not for professional failure but only for embarrassing one’s institution with moral lapses”. Top officers, in fact, were indeed fired, though not from other officers, but by politicians. General MacArthur, a mediocre officer, was sacked by President Truman, as was general Harkins by President Johnson and general McKiernan by President Obama, only to cite a few.

However, very rarely Army officers were relieved by their superiors because of their performance, leading someone like Paul Yingling, lieutenant colonel in the Vietnam War, to state that “a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war”. The systems of generalship which established in the Army after Vietnam rewarded officers without character and promoted distrust between generals and those they led.

As Ricks put it, “when a general believe he cannot be removed, the quality of strategic discourse with his superiors tends to suffer”. The ability to strategic thinking started to erode after WWII. The Vietnam war was not a conventional one, like the one witnessed in WWII. It was a war that required flexibility of mind and strategic thinking. The end of this war, a war led by incompetent, following Rick’s argument, gave the Army the possibility to give birth to a process of restructuring. A deep and thorough analysis of the lessons learned in the war could have brought the Army generals to adapt to a new kind of officer. This process was led by general William DePuy, an intelligent man who proved really good in making the Army better at fighting tactically, against those, like general Cushman, who thought the Army was in need of officers who could think more broadly. The “dispute”, as Ricks calls it, between those who emphasized tactics and those who emphasized strategic thinking was won by the formers. “The result of this feud between generals was that the Army’s rejuvenation would be tactical, physical, and ethical but not particularly strategic or intellectual”, says Ricks.

Lyndon Johnson perfectly described the outcome of this phenomenon when he said: “I am suspicious of the military...they’re always so narrow in their appraisal of everything. They see everything in military terms”.

Civilian-military relations were damaged. Generals were encouraged to distrust the civilians to whom they reported. MacArthur gave birth to a tradition of officers who misunderstood the relation within their civilian overseers. Political leaders, following MacArthur reasoning, “should state their long-term goal and then get out of the way of the military professionals”. But MacArthur didn’t take account of the fact that if civilians do not intervene, they add inertia to a military incentive structure that already tends to reward inaction.

The post-Cold War era would demand a new flexibility in military leadership. Though, having transformed into a bureaucratic organization, rather than shift to what it needed to do, the Army continued to do what he knew. This would be evident in the following wars America waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1991, general Schwarzkopf, who was extremely talented in winning battles, led US forces against the Iraqi Army and crushed them in less than a week. But he failed to link the military outcome to the strategic and political objectives. Saddam survived and the war, which could have definitively ended, dragged on until 1999. In 2003, in Iraq, general Tommy Franks, who is described by Ricks as “strategically illiterate”, made the same mistake he made in Afghanistan two years earlier. “He refused to think seriously about what would happen after his forces attacked”. Army generals led swift attacks against enemy forces – indeed in a very effective way – but they did so without a notion of what to do the day after their initial victory. They believed that it was not their job to consider the question. As Westmoreland in Vietnam, Franks fundamentally misconceived his war in Iraq.

Ricks ends with some suggested reforms that, in his view, could help the Army deal with problematic commanders in the future. His first and foremost proposal is to reinstate Marshall’s policy of swift relief. These reforms are something very urgent, in his view. The inability of the Army officers to critical and strategic thinking is something very worrisome in these times. Ricks is rightly very worried. The US are living in an era of deep strategic uncertainty. The old adversaries have diminished, and new challenges has come, China above all. Terrorism is still here. The future of warfare requires officers with great flexibility of mind.

MATTEO MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO