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Mariah Wallace
Eastern Illinois University

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The Generals: An Examination

Mariah Wallace

Since World War II there has been a noticeable decline in the success of the United States military. In his new book, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, Thomas Ricks argues that this decline is the result of a change in the management of top-ranked Army officials. Several other journal articles on the subject support Ricks' assessment, and provide more in-depth examinations of related issues Ricks' does not address. In this paper, I will examine these points made by both Ricks and the journal articles, such as attitudes relating to the military, internal army relations, the civil-military gap, and the current hesitation to relieve upper-level military officers from duty. Overall, they display an interesting image of the current status of the United States military—specifically the Army—and its standing in relation to the United States population.

Attitudes Relating to the Military

The first important issue addressed in both sources were attitudes relating to the military. Various journal articles—including the articles authored by Leal and Nichols (2013) and Kelty and Bierman (2013)—discussed different facets of this issue, such as the public's attitudes towards military intervention, military families' attitudes towards political leaders, and service member's attitudes towards private contractors used by the military. Both of these articles contained fascinating information and helped explain public reactions towards certain events. Some events discussed in the articles included the Iraq War and the Bush administration. Leal and Nichols' (2013) focused on military families' attitudes towards political leaders finding that during the Bush administration, most families supported the political leader that their military

family member supported (p. 55). Kelty and Bierman (2013) focused on service member's attitudes towards private contractors used by the military and found that most military service members viewed the private contractors used during the Iraq War with distrust and contempt (p.10). In Ricks' novel, these facets were not precisely examined, but rather tangentially addressed. Although he discussed the same events—the Iraq War and the Bush administration—he does not specifically focus on the attitudes of service members' or their families during these events.

One attitude relating to the military that Ricks did focus on was the public's attitude towards the use of force. This was also Eichenburg's focus (2005). Eichenburg found that the public favors most uses of force, but especially uses of force that are successful (2005, p. 174). One such example of this is General Douglas MacArthur, who was examined in Ricks' book. MacArthur was a general during the 1950's who favored a pro-force approach to the Korean War, and insisted it was necessary for America to go to war with China to have a chance at success in Korea. After publicly criticizing the Truman administration for not following his advice, he was relieved from duty. However, on his return home he received "the welcome of a conquering hero" (Ricks 2012, p.196). Analyzing the two sources, one can infer that the public supported MacArthur so strongly because of his pro-force attitude towards the war.

Internal Military Relations

The second important issue discussed was internal military relations. One distinct and concerning facet of this issue was the lack of trust throughout the military. Allen (2011) focused on this heavily in his article. He found that there is a widespread lack of trust between service members and their commanding officers, as well as between service members and civilian leaders (Allen 2011, p. 81). For example, when asked, "when an Army Senior Leader says something, you can believe it is true," 20% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with

this statement (Allen 2011, p.81). When asked about civilian officials, 38% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would “trust[ing] elected and appointed civilian officials to do what is best for the Army” (Allen 2011, p.81). Ricks also addressed this issue of trust. For example, in chapter eighteen, Ricks addressed the extreme trust issue between President Johnson and his military advisors (2012, p. 252-259). Johnson distrusted his military advisors, viewing them more as a political hurdle to be overcome rather than valuable assets. In some cases, he even resorted to deception to outmaneuver his military advisors. During that time, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor “actually worked to reduce communication between civilian and military officials” (Ricks 2012, p. 254-255). With Johnson’s support and encouragement, McNamara and Taylor gave misleading answers, suppressed information, and knowingly deceived Johnson’s senior military advisors.

Another facet concerning internal military relations is gender stereotypes. This topic is addressed by Archer (2013), who focuses on gender stereotypes within the Marines. In her article, Archer found that there is a distinct difference drawn between men and women (p.367). The stereotypes affecting female Marines have a significant impact on the perception of their abilities, mentorship opportunities, and leads to drastically different relationships with fellow Marines. Although one can infer there must be a gender stereotype in the military, due to the scarcity of top-ranked female military officers, Ricks never directly discusses the topic. When he does discuss upper level female officers, he examines how they are treated similarly to male officers. For example, Ricks discussed the incident at the Abu Gharaib prison (2012, p.414-415).

Thousands of innocent Iraqis were imprisoned, and the Army Reserve troops in charge of managing the prison brutally tortured them. Ricks—as well as other scholars—found that the tragedies which occurred at Abu Ghraib were not only the fault of the American soldiers stationed there, but also a lack of training and management. Their commanding officer was a

woman—General Janis Karpinski. Ricks focused on this story because it supports his main point; although Karpinski had failed as a leader, she was not relieved of duty because she was due to rotate out and return home in less than two months. She was treated like many other male generals of the time, who are not relieved of duty even in cases of leadership failure.

The final facet concerning internal military relations are the traits considered valuable for future leaders. Ricks discussed this topic in depth. He stated that, “the qualities...valued change” from leader to leader (2012, p.10). For example, when examining General George Marshall, Ricks goes so far as to list the qualities Marshall sought to find and encourage in potential leaders. This list includes “good common sense, have studied [their] profession, physically strong, cheerful and optimistic, display marked energy, extremely loyal, and determined” (Ricks 2012, p.25), as well as a focus on aggressiveness and cooperation (Ricks 2012, p.10). This issue is also discussed in great depth in Salmoni, et. al. (2010). Through interviews with current military leaders, they found that leaders now favor cognitive, interpersonal, and managerial skills, as well as several key life and educational experiences (2010, p. 73). Skills such as problem solving, relationship building, and language and foreign skills were considered by all interviewees to be incredibly important. Experiences such as civil and military educations, time spent abroad, strong mentorships, and experience in joint activities between special operations forces and general purpose forces were also considered vital to their success at senior level leadership positions.

The Civil-Military Gap

The final important issue addressed in both sources is the current and past civil-military gap. The civil-military gap is the lack of understanding and communication between military leaders and the civilian political leadership. Ricks addressed the gap throughout his book, noting its importance; he states, it is “essential to the conduct of war in the American system of

government” (2012, p.252). He also examines it in various sections to determine how it was affected by different military and political leaders. For example, in chapter twenty-eight, Ricks discusses the civil-military gap during the beginning of the Iraq War (2012, p.410-425). He examined the relationship between Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez and the Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Although the two were forced to work together, they did not see eye to eye. In the spring of 2004, relations between the two had deteriorated severely; when Armitage requested Sanchez brief him on the plan to attack Shiite militias, Sanchez refused (Ricks 2012, p.411). However, their relationship had been rocky from the start. Armitage reflected that after his first meeting with Sanchez, he “came away...saying this guy doesn’t get it” (Ricks 2012, p.411). Skelton (2012) made several points on the topic in his article, which may make the issue easier to understand. He stated that civilians and military service members have a vast “difference in values, knowledge, and experience” (2012, p.61). Although military service members are American citizens, they are a different “subset of society” than regular citizens (Skelton 2012, p.61). This makes it more difficult for each side to understand each other and work together.

Another change which may have affected the civil-military gap is the trend of military officers becoming politicians. Ricks gives an excellent example of this in chapter seven when discussing Douglas MacArthur (2012, p. 96-105). MacArthur, an Army general, began “considering himself presidential material” sometime during World War II (Ricks 2012, p.103). In letters from his subordinates, it is clear that he discussed this idea with them. Although MacArthur pursued his presidential aspirations, he lost the Republican nomination. He kept these aspirations alive for several more election periods, but was ultimately unsuccessful. However, this trend is unheard of today. As Meilinger (2010) states, transitioning between the military and politics was once seen as a “stepping-stone” (p.76). In American society today, though, this trend

is looked down upon. Military officers running for political offices are no longer encouraged or accepted; rather, they are seen as biased and unable to neutrally serve under political leaders of different ideologies.

The civil-military gap is only made worse when problems between the two groups are publically aired. Ricks also discussed this thoroughly with the example of Douglas MacArthur (2012, p.192-202). Throughout the Truman administration, MacArthur became increasingly opposed to policies and strategies that were being implemented. He soon began releasing independent policy statements, which criticized the decisions made by the Truman administration. The Truman administration was quick to fire back with an executive order that all policy statements had to be cleared by an officer's supervisors. However, this direct shot at MacArthur did not slow him down. He continued to speak with the press, release statements, and give speeches which conflicted with the plans and assessments made by the administration. On April 11, 1951, Truman released a "dramatic press conference at 1 A.M.," where the White House press secretary announced that MacArthur had been relieved of his duties (Ricks 2012, p. 196). Ulrich (2011) discusses this issue in her article as well, but with the example of General Stanley McChrystal. McChrystal was interviewed by *Rolling Stone* about the strategy of the Afghan war. In the interview, he and several of his staff members made inappropriate remarks about top-ranking political leaders, including the president himself. After some deliberation—similar to that of the MacArthur case—McChrystal was relieved of duty by the president. Ulrich ultimately found that this issue had been the result of a growth in the civil-military gap.

The Generals

The main focus of Ricks' book is that—unlike in the past—top-ranked Army officials are now less likely to relieve their upper level subordinates of duty, regardless of leadership problems or actions. These officers are instead allowed to maintain their positions and

responsibilities, a dangerous gamble that endangers our nation's objectives and the lives of our soldiers. However, when upper level officers are relieved of duty, it is normally because they have made some inappropriate remark or personal action, rather than failed at their job. For example, comments such as McChrystal's or an extramarital affair are more likely to cause a general to be removed from his post than losing a war. Ricks goes on to argue that this change has weakened the American military and made it less effective at winning wars. He states that overall, there has been a drastic "decline in the quality of the nation's military leadership" (2012, p. 298).

Thomas Ricks' book, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, coordinated well with the other journal articles I have examined. The various research articles support the claims that Ricks makes in his book. All discuss several issues, including attitudes relating to the military, internal army relations, and the civil-military gap. Ricks seemed to tangentially address attitudes relating to the military; however, he seemed to strongly support the findings from journal articles discussing internal army relations and the civil-military gap. All of these documents work together to display an interesting image of the current status of the United States military—specifically the Army—and how this system developed.

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