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Book Review: *The Generals* by Thomas E. Ricks

By Bob Weaver

Author Thomas E. Ricks is a Fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

The Generals is a collection of biographical sketches of general-grade officers stretching from World War II to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His assessment of the general's performance is centered on how well the men have led their forces, and whether they won or lost battles. Ricks' theme is the development over time of the Army's attitude towards and approach to generalship. While the cowboy or maverick personality is praised in popular entertainment, the Army prefers leaders who are team players. The problem is that the 'team player' mentality can and does encourage cautious and career-protecting behavior; and the retention in command of those who objectively are not successful. This, Ricks argues, has a strong negative effect on a general's ability to accomplish the main objective which is to win battles. Ricks advocates a return to the Marshall-era practice of relief; removing officers from command when they can't get the job done. He cites the neglect of this practice as responsible for the overall poor performance of the Army leadership from the Vietnam era to the present day.