

Commentaries and Replies

On "American Landpower and Modern US Generalship"

Thomas E. Ricks

This commentary is in reply to David G. Fivecoat's article "American Landpower and Modern US Generalship" published in the Winter-Spring 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 42, no. 4/vol 43, no. 1).

Thank you for running Lieutenant Colonel David G. Fivecoat's essay on "American Landpower and Modern US Generalship" (Winter-Spring 2013). I don't agree with everything he writes, but nonetheless am pleased to see Fivecoat's article because it is exactly the type of work I hoped my book *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* would provoke. I had thought that General Brown's articles in ARMY magazine might launch such a discussion, but that magazine shied away from engaging, without explaining why, as if discussing the quality of leadership in today's Army somehow was impolite.

Most of all, I am fascinated by Fivecoat's finding (page 74) that leading a division in combat in Iraq seems to have hurt an officer's chances of promotion. That worries me. What does it mean? That discovery of his indicates that the Army of the Iraq-Afghanistan era is out of step from the historical tradition that for an officer, time in combat is the royal road to advancement. I cannot think of other wars in which service in combat hurt an officer's chance of promotion. It is, as Fivecoat almost (but not quite) says, worrisome evidence that the Army for close to a decade persisted in using a peacetime promotion system in wartime.

In addition to breaking new ground intellectually, Fivecoat's article is also courageous. It is one thing for me, a civilian author, to question the quality of American generalship in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is quite another thing for an active duty lieutenant colonel to do so, especially since the Army's official histories have tiptoed around the issue of the failings of senior leadership in our recent wars.

Two final observations:

- I think Lieutenant Colonel Fivecoat lets today's Army off too easily on its lack of transparency. To me this reflects a bit of drift in the service, a loss of the sense of being answerable to the nation and the people. Being close-mouthed about its leadership problems gives the impression that the Army's leaders care more about the feelings of generals than the support of the American people.
- Finally, I have to question Fivecoat's assertion that minimizing disruption optimizes performance. It wasn't the case in World War II. Why would it be the case in Afghanistan or Iraq? It may be—but it remains an unproven assumption, and to my mind, a questionable one. The opportunity cost of averting disruption can be large, because such passivity (or "subtlety," as he terms it) results in the apparent rewarding of risk-averse or mediocre commanders. What would Matthew

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Ridgway say about such a policy of minimizing disruption?

Thank you again for running such an illuminating and thought-provoking article.

The Author Replies

David G. Fivecoat

Mr. Thomas Ricks's book *The Generals* did a superb job at generating discussion across the military on the merits of American generalship since World War II. My article, "American Landpower and Modern US Generalship" in the Winter-Spring 2013 edition of *Parameters*, was my attempt to add depth to the dialogue about the major generals who led division-sized formations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11.

To be sure, the article is not all encompassing. Although the post-9/11 group of major generals is a small data set, it is almost one-third the size of the World War II cohort and will continue to grow while the United States military assists the Afghanistan government's counterinsurgency operations for the next several years. Strictly speaking, it might not be significant by the mathematical definition; but the division commanders of Iraq and Afghanistan are a notable group in the historical sense. While I concede the mathematical limitations of the evidence presented in the article, there is enough hard evidence to allow us to move beyond questions of correlation and to discuss the matter of causation, which, in the end, is far more important.

I acknowledge Mr. Ricks's questioning whether military organizations should place a premium on reducing disruption. In forming my thoughts on the adverse outcomes of firings, intellectually I drew upon literature studying similar experiences in business and professional sports. During a year as a battalion commander in Afghanistan, I (and I'm sure my higher headquarters) wrestled with how to improve the performance of subordinate units in an extremely ambiguous environment. Reliefs rarely seemed the best way forward for my unit or our counterinsurgency campaign. There is a finer line to be drawn on this measure than Ricks concedes.

Thanks again for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. I hope others are able to expand on and contribute to the conversation.