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Special Commentary

American Landpower and Modern US Generalship

David G. Fivecoat

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Like his earlier works, Tom Ricks's *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, is entertaining and provocative, and has deservedly been the topic of numerous reviews, blog posts, and discussions around the military. His central thesis is that, since the Korean War, the United States Army has failed to produce general officers who could link strategy with tactics. Ricks argues that one remedy for this deficiency is for the Army to resume publicly firing division commanders for operational shortcomings as a means to increase accountability, like it did under General George C. Marshall in World War II. Ricks is on solid evidentiary ground while documenting the patterns of relief for World War II division commanders, supplementing stories with data. But in his discussion of the leaders of every war afterwards, Ricks switches to anecdotes and assertions to make his case. He also shifts his reference group from division commanders to theater commanders. Much has changed in seventy years, but then, as now, there are significant differences between two and four star generals. Thus, his argument is on less-than-solid ground as he compares World War II “two-star apples” to modern “four-star oranges.”

A better framework to understand modern generalship must be constructed upon an examination of the quantitative data on the forty-one major generals who have led divisions in combat since 9/11.¹ Building on that information, it is relatively easy to see the apples-to-apples comparison between the eras. Remarkably, statistics show that since 9/11 combat division commanders were promoted at a significantly lower rate than their peers. Contrary to Ricks's assertion, there has been a subtle form of accountability as combat division commanders have been quietly asked to retire, or assigned to positions with little future, at a slightly lower rate than their World War II predecessors were relieved. Like the old barracks ballad quoted by General Douglas MacArthur, underperforming division commanders were quietly asked to “fade away.”²

Historical Background—World War II and Vietnam Division Commanders

US Army divisions have marched off to fight every major conflict since World War I. As weapons, tactics, and enemies changed, so did the division structure from the Great War's square, to World War II's triangular, to the 1950's pentomic, and to the 1980's Army

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1 Data for the post-9/11 Division Commanders was obtained from the US Army General Officer Management Office (GOMO) web page <https://www.gomo.army.mil> and the Iraq and Afghanistan Order of Battles compiled by Wesley Morgan at <http://www.understandingwar.org> and <http://www.understandingwar.org>. It is as accurate as I could make it, as of 1 March 2013.

2 Anonymous, “Old Soldiers Never Die,” <http://www.soldierssongs.com>.

of Excellence.³ Though not so important as in the days before the brigade-centric “Modular Army,” the division headquarters is still a crucial echelon of command. It is the largest fixed organization and the lowest level of general officer command, placing it at the vital nexus of cohesion, combat effectiveness, and flag-rank responsibility. Typically commanded by a major general, a division contains between 17,000 and 21,000 soldiers organized in several subordinate brigades. The modern division works at the operational level of war, which, according to current doctrine, “[links] tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives . . .”⁴ For example, in Iraq in 2005, Multi-National Division-Baghdad (built around the headquarters of the 3rd Infantry Division commanded by Major General William Webster) planned, coordinated, and synchronized the actions of over a dozen US and Iraqi brigades in its counterinsurgency efforts across a city of over 5,000,000 people. Simply put, division headquarters—and their commanders—matter.

Measures of success for a combat division changed with each conflict. In a conventional campaign such as World War II, the success or failure of a division was easily measured through statistics such as terrain seized, casualties inflicted, casualties suffered, prisoners captured, and missions accomplished. In a counterinsurgency campaign, such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the performance of a division has been more difficult to measure—metrics such as terrain seized, body counts, public opinion, casualties suffered, money spent, intelligence tips received, taxes collected, and violence levels are still important; however, they tell only part of the story. Consequently, clear battlefield failure is tougher to discern. Personnel management systems were different as well: World War II used an individual replacement system, Vietnam was fought using an individual rotation system, and Afghanistan and Iraq employed a unit rotation system. While the size and organization of the US Army and the processes by which it managed its division commanders have changed over time, there still is utility in comparing and contrasting each period, but only as long as we acknowledge the differences between then and now.

During World War II, 155 different general officers commanded the 87 US Army divisions engaged in combat.⁵ This equates to roughly two commanding generals per division (some had a single commander; others had several). With an average combat command of 10 months, division commanders served until promoted, selected for corps command, fired, or were injured. This system forced Army leaders to make difficult decisions about division commanders. With such a large number of commanders, some who rapidly achieved their rank as the Army Ground Forces expanded from 800,000 to 2.7 million soldiers, sixteen division commanders, or only 10 percent, were not capable and were relieved of command. Ricks touts these public firings as an

3 For more about the evolution of the division, see John B. Wilson, *Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, US Army, 1998), 413-419.

4 US Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, Army Field Manual 1-02 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, September 2004), 1-164.

5 The data for the World War II division commanders was compiled from Gary Wade, *CSI Report No. 7: World War II Division Commanders* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army, 1983), 1-3 and Tom Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 7 and 37.

effective management tool, particularly when Marshall allowed at least five of those relieved a second opportunity to command elsewhere.⁶ Of course, only a small number of commanders were fired; indeed, twenty-four were promoted to command a corps, a selection rate of 15 percent. By using a crude comparison of promotions versus reliefs, the carrot was wielded slightly more often than the stick.

The Vietnam War's protracted counterinsurgency provides some additional context.⁷ During that war, forty-six different commanders led the eight divisions that fought in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, as the war was winding down in 1969, two generals, Major Generals Albert Milloy and Harris Hollis, commanded a division for several months until it cased its colors (1st Infantry Division and 9th Infantry Division, respectively) and then took command of a second division in combat (the Americal Division and 25th Infantry Division, respectively). This was not a second chance like some commanders received in World War II; rather, it was an example of the Army ensuring its best commanders continued to lead soldiers in combat. The average division commander led his division for 9 months in combat, only a month less than their World War II predecessors. Among the forty-six, two retired as brigadier generals (4 percent), eighteen retired as major generals (39 percent), twenty retired as lieutenant generals (20 percent), and six retired as generals (13 percent). Overall, twenty-six were promoted, which was a 56 percent selection rate. Two were admonished (4 percent): one general was demoted to brigadier general for his role in the cover-up of the My Lai massacre, and one was relieved for his lack of leadership during the defense of Firebase Mary Ann. Two were killed in action. On the positive side, ten division commanders were selected for higher combat commands, a 22 percent promotion rate, slightly higher than their World War II predecessors. To continue the crude comparison, the carrot was used about five times more often than the stick.

Post 9/11 Division Commanders⁸

Although there are a variety of two-star commands, the US Army's eleven (the 7th Infantry Division was activated in 2012) active duty and eight National Guard divisions are widely considered the most prestigious of the commands at that rank. Additionally, two other organizations commanded by major generals, the Southern European Task Force, or SETAF, and Task Force Olympia performed division-like roles in combat, and will be considered divisions for this article. Of these divisions and commands, fourteen have served in Afghanistan or Iraq; three—3rd Infantry Division, 10th Mountain Division, and the

6 Ricks, *The Generals*, 37. At least five received second chances—Generals Orlando Ward, Terry Allen, Leroy Watson, Albert Brown, and Frederick Irving.

7 Data for the division commanders in Vietnam was obtained from Shelby Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003) 62-86; Julian M. Olejniczak, ed., *The Register of Graduates of the United States Military Academy, 2006* (West Point, NY: Association of Graduates, 2006), 1-4-3-192; and numerous obituaries.

8 The data set used for this analysis began with eighty individuals—all active duty division commanders since 9/11 (seventy-seven) and the three National Guard division commanders who led their divisions in combat. The current group of twelve serving division commanders (ten noncombat and two combat) were excluded from the analysis since they have not had the opportunity to be promoted.

82nd Airborne Division—have deployed five times each.⁹ After 9/11, the Army's unit rotational system called for division commanders to train their formation for a year, deploy the unit, conduct combat operations, redeploy, and then move on to a different assignment. Even with the rotations, the average combat command was 12.3 months, several months longer than those of their World War II or Vietnam predecessors. At the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the theater commander was a general while operational command was exercised by a lieutenant general. These higher commanders also rotated on different cycles increasing the challenge of evaluating, promoting, and removing subordinate division commanders.¹⁰ The Army's decision to allow underperforming division commanders to complete their deployment, rather than firing them midtour, minimized disruptions to divisions fighting complex insurgencies at the "graduate level of war."¹¹ It was a decision to create the best environment for success in a long, irregular war, rather than achieve a slight, temporary improvement. As Ricks rightly concludes, today's rotational system decreased the impetus for the US Army to relieve division commanders.¹² However, underachieving division commanders in the modern era did not get a second chance to command; indeed, some retired, others were never promoted, and others were promoted but not given the plum jobs. Thus, the combination of ambiguous metrics for success—longer commands, and no second chances—makes the modern era a more difficult environment than World War II in which to lead 20,000 soldiers.

9 Forty-three separate commanders led these division headquarters. Two are currently deployed to Afghanistan—1st Infantry Division and 3rd Infantry Division. They have been excluded from the data set, resulting in forty-one.

10 The generals commanded longer than 12 months, while the lieutenant generals deployed for one year.

11 US Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Army Field Manual 3-24 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 2006), 1-1.

12 Ricks, *The Generals*, 277-278.

Division	Afghanistan	Iraq	Total
1st ID	1	2	3
1st AD	0	3	3
1st CAV	1	3	4
3rd ID	1	4	5
4th ID	0	4	4
10th MTN DIV	4	1	5
25th ID	1	3	4
82nd ABN DIV	4	1	5
101st ABN DIV	2	2	4
TF Olympia	0	2	2
SETAF	1	0	1
34th ID (NG)	0	1	1
36th ID (NG)	0	1	1
42nd ID (NG)	0	1	1
Total	15	28	43

Divisions in Combat Since 9/11¹³

The current system of general officer management is complex and opaque. While the promotion to major general is a permanent action following selection by a promotion board, the promotion to lieutenant general is a temporary one, following selection by the Army and Department of Defense leadership for a 3-star billet. To move ahead after division command, a major general must be recommended by the Chief of Staff of the Army to the Secretary of Defense, who, in turn, recommends him to the President to serve in one of the approximately forty positions designated for a lieutenant general. The President then nominates the officer for appointment to both the rank and the position. Before the major general can assume the new rank and position though, the officer must be confirmed by the Senate. Most officers typically serve three years or longer at the new rank. With over 300 total general officers in the US Army and 100 major generals, division commanders have traditionally been seen as the US Army's best major generals and those destined for the highest levels of responsibility.¹⁴ Promotion rates reflect this fact—division commanders have been selected for advancement to lieutenant general at a rate of more than 80 percent for the past twenty-five years.¹⁵

Since 2001, however, this trend has changed, with combat division commanders experiencing a markedly lower rate of promotion than their garrison, or noncombat, colleagues. Excluding current division commanders, there have been sixty-eight division commanders since 9/11—among them, sixteen remained as major generals (24 percent) after completing division command, thirty-six were promoted to lieutenant general (52 percent), and sixteen were selected to be generals (24

13 The data for the table was compiled from a variety of sources, especially US Army GOMO web page <https://www.gomo.army.mil> and the Iraq and Afghanistan Order of Battles by Wesley Morgan from the Institute for the Study of War.

14 Priscilla Offenhour, *General and Flag Officer Authorizations for the Active and Reserve Components: A Comparative and Historical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress), 16.

15 US Army General Officer Management Office, e-mail message to author, 10 January 2013.

percent).¹⁶ Overall, this is a 76 percent promotion rate. Interestingly, there is quite a difference in promotion rates among the three subsets: garrison, or noncombat, commanders enjoyed an 82 percent promotion rate, Afghanistan veterans had a 77 percent rate, and Iraq veterans had a 71 percent rate. Clearly, the combat veterans' performance was evaluated differently than their garrison peers.

Since 9/11, as one would expect, most division commanders have deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq. Only twenty-seven division commanders, or 40 percent, did not. The bulk of these nondeploying commanders served prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, after the 2011 end of mission in Iraq, or as the commander of the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. Quite unexpectedly, leading a division that did *not* deploy to combat was the surest path to promotion, with a promotion rate of 82 percent. Obviously, the promotion system created in a peacetime Army continued to recognize peacetime performance. While less risky, however, the ultimate rewards for these commanders were not as substantial as were those who commanded in combat; the commanders who never deployed generally did not ultimately end up in the top jobs in the military, although three did lead Combatant Commands and one was selected to lead the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, but was later relieved.¹⁷

The forty-one major generals who have led divisions in combat since 9/11 are an impressive group of officers. Most had experienced combat before taking command, with Lieutenant General James Huggins taking command with six prior combat deployments. Then Major General Martin Dempsey led the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad for seventeen months from 2003 to 2004, almost double the average of the Vietnam cohort. None came close to the twenty-seven months of division command amassed by then Major General David Rodriguez who first led Task Force Olympia in Iraq and then the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan. It should be noted that Rodriguez' second command was not a second chance following a relief, as was the case for some World War II commanders, but again a deliberate decision to give one of the Army's best two opportunities to lead soldiers in combat. Thirty members of the group were selected for promotion while eleven went on to wear four stars.¹⁸ Overall, this represents a 73 percent promotion rate for former combat division commanders, which is well below the historic promotion rate for former division commanders but about fifteen percent higher than the Vietnam cohort's rate of 56 percent.¹⁹ While the risk was greater for these commanders, the rewards were, too: this

16 Four individuals commanded two divisions during the post-9/11 era—MG Carter Ham, who commanded TF Olympia in Iraq and 1st Infantry Division in the US; MG Thomas Turner, who commanded SETAF in Italy and the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq; MG Vince Brooks, who commanded 1st Cavalry Division in the US and 1st Infantry Division in Iraq; and MG David Rodriguez who commanded TF Olympia in Iraq and the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan. These individuals were used as data points for each division they commanded.

17 This is about 15 percent of the garrison commanders.

18 Two division commanders currently serving in Afghanistan were removed from the data set because they have not had the opportunity to be promoted.

19 No division commander was relieved of command in Iraq or Afghanistan. Nineteen divisions out of the eighty-seven World War II divisions were also National Guard divisions. No National Guard divisions served in Vietnam or Afghanistan.

group was picked for the best jobs with five later serving as combatant commanders and five serving as theater commanders.²⁰

	World War II	Vietnam		Post 9/11 Combat	
Years	4	7		11	
Divisions	87	8		14	
Division Commanders	155	46		41	
Months in CBT	10.1	9.1		12.3	
Results		#	%	#	%
Admonished	16	2	4	0	0
Brigadier General	UNK	2	4	0	0
Major General	UNK	18	39	11	27
Lieutenant Gen.	UNK	20	20	19	46
General	UNK	6	13	11	27
Higher CBT CMD	24/15%	10	22	11	27

Comparison of Division Commanders between the Eras²¹

Afghanistan is sometimes referred to as the graveyard of empires; however, it was not the graveyard of many division commanders' careers. Only three out of thirteen major generals who led divisions in the Hindu Kush were not selected for promotion. Overall, the promotion rate for the Afghanistan veterans was 77 percent, higher than those who fought in Iraq, but still surprisingly lower than their noncombat peers. This raises the question: Has the change in emphasis between the theaters had an effect upon the division commanders? Breaking Operation Enduring Freedom into two phases—the 2001-2008, or the “forgotten war,” to the 2009-2013, or “the Afghanistan Surge and later,”—reveals an interesting shift. Division commanders from the later phase have been promoted at a higher rate than their predecessors: 71 percent of the division commanders were promoted in the early phase (five out of seven), while 83 percent of the commanders were promoted in the later phase (five out of six).²² Still, Afghanistan division commanders were selected at a lower rate than their noncombat peers.

Those who commanded in Iraq have fared worse in terms of promotion—only twenty out of twenty-eight, or 71 percent, of division commanders were selected. This is the lowest promotion rate of the three subsets. There are obviously many differences between Afghanistan and

20 This is about 24 percent of the former combat commanders. The five Combatant Commanders were General Ham, AFRICOM; General Rodriguez, AFRICOM; General Austin, CENTCOM; General Petraeus, CENTCOM; and General Dempsey, CENTCOM. The theater commanders were General Petraeus, MNF-I and ISAF; General Thurman, USFK; General Odierno, MNF-I; and General Austin, USF-I.

21 The data for the table was compiled from a variety of sources. For WW II, Wade, *World War II Division Commanders*, 1-3 and Ricks, *The Generals*, 7 and 37. For Vietnam, Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, 62-86; Olejniczak, ed., *The Register of Graduates, USMA, 2006*, 1-4-3-192; and numerous obituaries. For Post-9/11, US Army GOMO web page <https://www.gomo.army.mil> and the Iraq and Afghanistan Order of Battles by Wesley Morgan from the Institute for the Study of War.

22 The phasing construct is mine. It does not correspond to the five phases of the Afghanistan Campaign used by the US military.

Iraq, but the combination of two insurgencies, a higher level of violence, ethnic cleansing, a nascent civil war, and the presence of multiple divisions in-country, made Iraq the more challenging theater. To analyze the division commanders among the three phases of the war—the 2003 invasion, the 2004-06 “struggle,” and the 2007-11 “surge success and aftermath”—it would be expected that promotion rates would be higher for both the successful invasion and the surge and its aftermath.²³ The 2003 commanders were promoted at a 66 percent rate (three out of five), the 2004-06 commanders were promoted at an 82 percent rate (nine out of eleven), and the 2007-11 group was promoted at a 67 percent rate (eight out of twelve). Remarkably, the commanders during the surge and afterwards, when the United States arguably achieved its greatest success in Iraq, were recognized for their contributions at a lower rate than those who led formations during the portion of the war when we were assessed to be losing! Ultimately, the crucible of combat in Iraq resulted in less division commanders selected for promotion than their peers.

	Total Post									
	9/11		Total CBT		Afghanistan		Iraq		Garrison	
Years	11		11		11		9		11	
Divisions	14		14		15		28		N/A	
Division Commanders	68		41		13		28		27	
Months in CBT	12.3		12.3		11.5		12.4		N/A	
Results	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Admonished	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brigadier Gen.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Major Gen.	16	23	11	27	3	23	8	29	5	19
Lieutenant Gen	36	53	19	46	7	54	12	43	17	63
General	16	23	11	27	3	23	8	28	5	19
Higher CBT CMD	11	16	11	27	5	38	6	21	N/A	N/A

Post-9/11 Comparison Between Division Commander Subsets²⁴

Of course, even with this lower rate of promotion, many of the division commanders in Afghanistan and Iraq have been selected for promotion and command at even higher echelons in combat. Due to the operational and strategic skills they demonstrated as division commanders, eleven have gone on to command at least one higher-level combat command and four have commanded multiple higher headquarters. The modern selection rate of 27 percent for higher combat command is greater than the World War II selection rate of 15 percent and the Vietnam rate of 22 percent; however, that is understandable, with six higher combat commands between the military training and advising,

²³ The phasing construct is mine. It does not correspond to the seven phases of the Iraq Campaign used by the US military.

²⁴ The data for the table was compiled from a variety of sources, especially US Army GOMO webpage <https://www.gomo.army.mil> and the Iraq and Afghanistan Order of Battles by Wesley Morgan from the Institute for the Study of War.

operational, and theater commands in both theaters.²⁵ Returning to the crude analogy a final time, carrots have been used about four times more often than sticks.

It is difficult to imagine that throughout two protracted, complex, and often frustrating wars, at least a few of the forty-one division commanders were not up to the job. Yet the US Army has not formally relieved any two-star commanders in Afghanistan or Iraq. During World War II, Marshall relieved one in ten commanders, which if applied to the modern cohort, would have resulted in the relief of four combat division commanders for operational shortcomings.²⁶ Vietnam, a counterinsurgency with a rotational model, is perhaps a better comparison, but applying the rate from that war would mean that two of the modern commanders should have been removed.²⁷ Public firings seem to have disappeared from the modern US Army. Or did they evolve?

This brings us back to the surprisingly low promotion rate for combat division commanders when compared both to historic rates and to their contemporaries who did not command in combat. If the combat division commanders had been promoted at the same rate as their noncombat peers, thirty-three combat commanders should have been selected to be three- or four-star generals. Yet, only thirty were, leaving eleven to remain as major generals. There are many reasons why former division commanders remain at or retire at the rank of major general—poor performance, personal reasons, a media gaffe, reaching retirement age, or a realization that no other job will compare to their combat experience. For the sake of the argument though, let's assume that the eleven major generals desired to be promoted to lieutenant general. This suggests that three of the former combat division commanders were marginalized or given a soft relief after their command. Without further interviews and reviews of performance reports, it is pure speculation to discuss which of the eleven were marginalized. While not as public or dramatic as General Marshall's approach, the US Army subtly removed underperforming division commanders from the ranks at a slightly lower rate than it did during World War II.

Conclusion

The Generals is a provocative contribution to the discussion about the US Army's selection of senior leaders and it may help the Army improve its general officer management system. Based on my three-and-a-half years of combat experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, I agree with Mr. Ricks's assessment that there was plenty of good and bad generalship exhibited in both theaters. But, Ricks blames poor generalship in Afghanistan and Iraq on the absence of accountability among general officers. He assumes, however, that public firings are the only means of ensuring such accountability.

25 The Afghanistan higher commands are ISAF, Combined Joint Task Force-180 (CJTF-180), the ISAF Joint Command (IJC), and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A). The Iraq higher commands were Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7), Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I), and Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I).

26 If 10 percent of the forty-one combat division commanders had been relieved there would be an attrition of four commanders.

27 If 4 percent of the forty-one combat division commanders had been relieved there would be two commanders removed.

Understanding the empirical data on division commanders provides a richer context to Ricks's book and enables a better comparison between the eras. The Army has chosen to minimize disruption to divisions in combat while maximizing the opportunity for the unit to return to a higher level of performance prior to the next deployment. However, that has come at a cost of providing the stakeholder, the US Army and the American people, with visible signs of responsibility at the operational level. With public opinion so critical in long-term counterinsurgencies, it is understandable that the Army chooses optimum performance over transparency, though this subtle method is not the way Tom Ricks prefers.