



MacArthur's Korean War Generals by Stephen R. Taaffe.

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How does one assess the military effectiveness of an army? That seemingly straightforward question has elicited countless answers from military historians and others. In the manner of Douglas Southall Freeman and Russell F. Weigley,¹ historian Stephen R. Taaffe² (Stephen F. Austin State Univ.) has opted to analyze the leadership of the US Eighth Army during the first year of the Korean War (1950–51), specifically, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander of UN forces, and some of his key subordinate officers. His verdict is that

In the end, the army succeeded in appointing men to its important combat posts mostly, though not always, on the basis of their perceived combat skills. This does not mean that they always lived up to their billing, but enough of them did to enable the Eighth Army to defeat the Chinese and North Koreans until the Truman administration called a halt to its active large-scale offensive operations in the summer of 1951. (4)

The book comprises a brief introduction, five chronologically oriented chapters, and a detailed conclusion. The author begins with a discussion of the period immediately prior to the outbreak of the war in order to identify the problems of command and organization facing the US Army in an era of budget cuts and demobilization. Employing excellent biographical synopses, Taaffe then describes key personalities, such as Lt. Gen. Walton Walker, who was head of the Eighth Army in Korea until his death in a traffic accident (23 Dec. 1950). Taaffe's succinct accounts of the lives and careers of his selected commanders offer keen insights into the shortcomings and potentials each man brought to his task. Of Walker, a gruff, hard-bitten leader, Taaffe writes that, during his Second World War service as a corps commander, "he tried to model himself after his mentor and hero, George Patton, but lacked the personality to pull it off" (28).

Next come the catastrophic reverses the Eighth Army suffered in July 1950, its entrapment in the Pusan Perimeter, its break-out at Inchon, and subsequent invasion of North Korea. Taaffe argues persuasively that the horrendous, chaotic situation of US forces was exacerbated by their limited prewar training, inadequate equipment, lack of numbers, and uncertain guidance from national political leaders down to military commanders in the war zone. The treatment extends down to include the travails even of some regimental commanders like Col. Paul Freeman (23rd Infantry).³

Taaffe's central premise is that the US Army somehow managed to persevere through to success despite its flawed leadership system. But this is too forgiving. We read of serious command mistakes, hesitation in the face of the enemy, overconfidence, extreme defeatism, and poorly fought battles that

1. In, respectively, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols. (NY: Scribners, 1946), and *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaigns of France and Germany, 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1981).

2. His earlier work includes *MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1998) and *Marshall and His Generals: U.S. Army Commanders in World War II* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2011).

3. The book's title is thus a bit misleading: though the analysis mostly remains at the corps or division levels, it often makes assessments of regimental commanders.

devastated the rank and file. The massive Chinese intervention of late 1950 exposed these deficiencies at a critical moment. The 8th Cavalry was nearly destroyed at the Battle of Unsan (98–102) and the 2nd Infantry Division essentially collapsed at the Battle of Kunu-ri (112–16), attesting to dire problems of leadership from the regiment level up to the theater commander.

The book concludes with a chapter entitled “Ridgway to the Rescue.” After General Walker’s death and on the heels of Chinese intervention, Gen. Matthew Ridgway almost singlehandedly stemmed the tide of defeat by supporting or selectively removing overmatched division and corps commanders. “One of Ridgway’s accomplishments was creating a battlefield environment in which officers such as [corps commander Frank “Shrimp”] Milburn could fulfill their missions” (218). By injecting an aggressive optimism into a shaky leadership group, he halted the enemy offensive that had taken the war back into South Korean territory. Ridgway also led the UN command northward virtually to the armistice line, where fighting continued for another two long years as a negotiated peace was hammered out. But all of this sounds more like a paean to Ridgway’s genius as a leader than a demonstration of newfound competence in his subordinates or praise for the promotion system that had put them in their commands.

The text sometimes descends into an excess of service parochialism: we read, for example, that “the army’s commanders on the peninsula initially left something to be desired.... As time went on, they became increasingly proficient and gradually achieved battlefield dominance over the Chinese and North Koreans.” Or “the army’s top generals in Washington, Tokyo, and Korea recognized the problem, identified solutions, and implemented them” (204).⁴

Taaffe does, however, roundly condemn incompetent officers’ poor battlefield performance. He even chides Walker and Ridgway for putting either their career or the army’s reputation above the need to remove ineffective leaders or to mold a cohort of commanders able to respond to the vicissitudes of war (e.g., 209).

Taaffe has done a service for students of the Korean War and of US Army institutional history. His generally direct, clearly written evaluations of the performance of men like MacArthur, Ridgway, and the troublesome X Corps commander Ned Almond are judicious and carefully reasoned. They clarify how and why the Eighth Army struggled under the divisive and manipulative MacArthur, but became an effective fighting force under Ridgway. “MacArthur failed in the Korean War.... He made one poor decision after another that contributed greatly to the Eighth Army’s woes” (215). On the other hand, it was “rare in modern warfare for one man to almost single-handedly transform military fortunes, but Ridgway did so” (216). These paired statements go far to explain the pernicious yet unavoidable tension contained within: it took a singular genius to transform what were often mediocre or ineffective commanders into viable leadership components of an effective fighting force.

In *MacArthur’s Korean War Generals*, Stephen Taaffe has produced a compelling, instructive account of this transition that merits the careful reflection of both lay readers and specialists.

4. So, too, he writes that the US Army was “the greatest military force that had ever existed” (15) after the Second World War, that it had cemented a complete victory in the First World War (203), and that, as long as the American people had the will, there were no enemies this force could not defeat (26). He also tellingly explains away some of the atrocities committed by all sides, especially in the first year of the Korean War, with the banal “war is hell” platitude (38, my wording).