

Fabius Maximus website

Reigniting the spirit of a nation grown cold.

Menu

The core competence of America's generals

Larry Kummer, Editor 3 August 2019

Summary: After 18 years of war, let's ask what went wrong. The answer point to the core strength of our senior generals. Unfortunately, it isn't winning wars. It is time to hold them accountable. (This is a revision and update of a post from 2008.)

“A core competence is a combination of complementary skills and knowledge bases embedded in a group or team that results in the ability to execute one or more critical processes to a world class standard.”

— From *“Is your core competence A MIRAGE?”* by Kevin P. Coyne et al. in *the McKinsey Quarterly, Issue 1 (1997)*



Our generals have years of experience and many degrees, yet ...

We have military leaders that cannot fight and win the most common wars of our era. We fight poorly trained foes, spending hundreds or thousands of times more than them – yet our post-WWII military performance has ranged from poor to horrible.

Our senior generals have displayed some amazing incompetence during our wars since 9/11. Fortunately for them, their skill PR officers and supportive journalists make them look good. But not everybody is fooled. Some knew them well even before 9/11. Such as the late David H. Hackworth (Colonel, US Army), as he explained in “[It only takes the right leader](#)“, 1 July 2001.

“What ratchets up the risk is that there are no more George Washington’s, U.S. Grant’s, John Pershings, George Marshalls, Matthew Ridgways, [James Hollingsworths](#) or Norman Schwarzkopfs in soldier suits. I can’t name a single serving Army, Navy or Air Force senior officer with even a fraction of the true-grit leadership of any of the above men. Our senior military leadership, less the Marine Corps, is bankrupt, kaput, fini. There are no more steel-jawed watchdogs, only slick, sweet-smelling lapdogs.

“Our current crop of star-wearers are mostly corporate CEO types, Perfumed Princes who got to the top by a sick system that’s become increasingly entrenched since the Korean War. Too many are mirror images of Gen. Wesley Clark, who strutted his stuff during the recent Serbian disaster. Clark’s now keeping busy blaming that pathetic showing on his former pals in the Pentagon, conveniently forgetting that as the commander in chief of the NATO forces, he had the option of resigning if not allowed to run his war his way.

“A George Marshall or Matthew Ridgway could turn our very sick military around before you can say: **our kinder gentler military will lose the next war.**”

How does that analysis look now, after 18 years of war?



ID 46822273 © Wisconsinart | Dreamstime.

The American Way of War

“My, my, my! Such a lot of guns around town and so few brains.”
— Private Investigator Philip Marlowe (Bogie) in *The Big Sleep* (1946).

We saw our generals at work in after the fall of Iraq’s capital. US forces again proved invincible on the battlefield. They rolled up to Baghdad, occupied it, and waited for orders. While they waited, Iraq’s capital – and our opportunity for victory – went up in flames. That resulted from an astonishing oversight. The best-educated generals ever to lead an Army failed to prepare for one of history’s most common scenarios. Occupied cities almost always experience looting, raping, and burning. Immediate martial law, with a display of massive force, is the only way to prevent this. Perhaps before our *next* war, generals’ briefing books should include DVD’s of *War & Peace* and *Gone with the Wind*. Watching the burning of Moscow and Atlanta might remind them to plan for this contingency.

We did not wait long for a second example of military incompetence, as an insurgency erupted against Iraq’s infidel occupiers. Our generals not only did not prepare for this, they refused to see or act during its early stages. How do these mistakes happen? [Bruce Hoffman](#) explained in RAND’s “[Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq](#)” (2004).

“While it can be argued that U.S. military planners could not have been expected to anticipate the emergence of an insurgency any more than they could have foreseen the widespread disorders, looting, and random violence that followed the fall of Baghdad, that is precisely the nub of the problem. The fact that military planners apparently didn’t consider the possibility that sustained and organized resistance could gather momentum and transform itself into an insurgency reflects a pathology that has long affected governments and militaries everywhere ...”

RAND’s sponsors likely appreciated the diplomatic phrasing “while it can be argued”, buffering the obvious conclusion.

A third example of our senior generals’ incompetence is their failure to adequately scale up the military’s health care system as the war continued. Congress could not have ignored a request for more funding – and that warning of the consequences if they failed to provide the necessary funds.

Moral cowardice, not moral courage

Some say that these are not examples of our senior generals’ incompetence, but of obedience to their civilian superiors’ orders. Skilled propaganda has convinced many Americans of the following script for the Iraq War ...

- Bush lied, people died.
- Our senior generals at the Pentagon (with a few exceptions) were bullied into the war, sending our troops to die against their better judgment, forced to prepare and sign plans that they knew would fail.

- Only after the disaster became obvious could retired senior generals tell us what we had already learned.

How sad that our highest ranking generals had to endure such treatment! Poor little puppies! Who could expect the Pentagon's senior generals to stand tall against such threats to ...their careers? These people defend our senior generals from charges of *incompetence* by accusing them of *moral cowardice* – putting their careers above the attainment of victory, and so squandering the lives of our troops.

The Core Competency of our senior military leaders

Public relations is their core competence. Our senior generals excel at producing excuses and shifting blame when their plans fail. They skillfully evade responsibility and prevent public awareness of their errors, things that might otherwise lead to reform – and their replacement.

How can we reform the military?

In America, the military services have a high degree of autonomy and respect. This puts great responsibility on our generals, who in return receive large rewards in prestige and income (especially after retirement). Nor is our civilian leadership at present set up for detailed supervision of the military. If our top generals are unable to lead the military – that is, execute core functions like planning wars and providing medical care – then we must consider alternatives.

Reforms come in two forms. First, we can change the key people. That is usually a necessary first step to deeper reform, and the easiest step (but not an easy step). Congress and the President could force replacement of senior generals. There are precedents, such as Lincoln during the Civil War and General Marshall in WWII. Our history shows that military success often requires firing underperforming generals and replacing them with our most successful field commanders.

Or the President might replace these generals with loyal lackeys. That would be change but not “reform.”

If the problem lies in the structure and organization of our military – not just the people in the big offices – then more radical measures are required. First, we could remove much of the military's autonomy. Civilians – both appointed officials and civil servants – could take on many of the administrative functions now in the hands of generals and admirals. Procurement, medical care, personnel – many responsibilities could be transferred.

Second, we could make our senior military leaders explicitly at-will political appointees. This would demystify their roles and allow greater civilian control over military policy. (For example, even with behavior as outrageous as that of General MacArthur, President Truman did not dare move until he had the approval of the Joint Chiefs). This

would allow responsibility to flow to the top, as it does in other governmental affairs. An unpleasant side effect of this, the odds would go to near-zero that the U.S. would ever again have a rational military strategy.

The common element in these reforms: none will be easy or fast. But these or more severe methods are needed to create a more effective military for America.

Experts' advice about military reform

1. [“It only takes the right leader”](#) by the late [David H. Hackworth](#) (Colonel, US Army), July 2001.
2. [“Fire the Generals!”](#) by [Douglas A. Macgregor](#) (Colonel, US Army, retired), April 2007.
3. [“A Failure in Generalship”](#) by Paul Yingling (Lieutenant Colonel, US Army) in the *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007.
4. [Overhauling The Officer Corps to build a military that can win wars](#) – by David Evans (Lieutenant Colonel, USMC, retired).
5. [Reforming the US Army: can be done, must be done](#) – by Don Vandergriff (Major, US Army, retired).
6. [Careerism and Psychopathy in the US Military](#) – by G. I. Wilson (Colonel, USMC, retired).
7. [How the US Army decayed. Does anyone want to fix it?](#) – by Douglas Macgregor.
8. [About the US Army's leadership problem](#) – by Don Vandergriff.
9. [“The Decline of Our Nation's Generals”](#) by [Andrew J. Bacevich](#) (Colonel, US Army, retired) at The American Conservative – “Once powerful titans of policy, today no one knows who they are. Given all the mistakes they've made, is it any wonder?”



For More Information

Ideas! For shopping ideas see my recommended books and films [at Amazon](#).