

Stephen R. Taaffe. *MacArthur's Korean War Generals*. Lincoln: University Press of Kansas, 2016. 278 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2221-4.

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Published on H-FedHist (August, 2017)

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Well-regarded military historian Stephen R. Taaffe, author of *Marshall and his Generals: U.S. Army Commanders in World War II* (2011), continues his analysis of top US combat officers in this excellent study examining the performance of the field army, corps, and division commanders who served under generals Douglas MacArthur and Matthew B. Ridgway during the first year of the Korean War. T. R. Fehrenbach subtitled his 1963 history of the conflict *A Study in Unpreparedness*. Taaffe shows that this characterization “was especially true of [US] senior combat leadership” (p. 204), explaining how few of these generals had led large units in combat and most had received appointment to inflate their records before retirement. His detailed coverage of battlefield events demonstrates that “the Eighth Army’s leadership ran the gamut from impressive to lackluster” (p. 4). This did not bother MacArthur, who “paid less attention to his division and regimental commanders and was content to accept the ones the army sent him” (p. 13). Taaffe’s main thesis holds that while the Eighth Army was not totally unprepared, two factors led to substandard performance. First, MacArthur’s manipulation of his generals and pitting them against each other discouraged teamwork. Second, Taaffe blames “a leadership dilemma that had plagued all armed forces since time immemorial: those leaders who

excel in peacetime do not always possess the necessary attributes to deliver victory on the battlefield in wartime” (p. 4).

In his opening chapter, Taaffe describes the “deplorable shape” (p. 15) of the Eighth Army in Japan when the Korean War began. His next three assess the performance of US commanders during the first six months of the conflict. Taaffe’s treatment of MacArthur covers familiar ground, but nicely traces how his twisting of orders led to triumph at Inchon and tragedy against the Chinese. Like other scholars, he assigns Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, the Eighth Army commander, good grades for defending the Pusan Perimeter, but poor ones in combating the North Korean and later Chinese offensives. Because MacArthur did not have confidence in Walker, Taaffe argues, his failure to relieve him “did a disservice to himself, Walker, and the war effort” (p. 55). But he also condemns Walker for not “honestly voicing his opinions to MacArthur” because he feared being fired, embracing “Kabuki tactics” that “put his career above the welfare of the army in his charge” (p. 209). As for Walker’s subordinates, Major General William Dean, the 24th Division commander, “never controlled and maneuvered his units the way a successful officer should” (p. 24), and his replacement after capture at Taejon, Brigadier General John H. Church, was old and arthritic. Major

General William Kean, commander of the 25th Division, “never shook the aura of a staff officer” (p. 31), but regimental colonels Henry Fisher and “hard-driving” (p. 41) John “Mike” Michaelis made him effective.

Stopping North Korea’s offensive required deployment of two more US divisions with similarly flawed leaders. Major General Hobart “Hap” Gay, commander of the First Cavalry, “performed credibly enough” (p. 33), while Major General Laurence “Dutch” Keiser, “an unlikely choice” (p. 47) to lead the Second Division, presided over a near disaster at the Naktong Bulge. In his glowing description of the Inchon-Seoul campaign, Taaffe reiterates prior negative descriptions of Major General Edward “Ned” Almond, head of the X Corps, and positive assessments of Major General Oliver P. Smith, the First Marine Division commander. Meanwhile, division of Walker’s command had brought Major General Frank “Shrimp” Milburn to Korea. The new First Corps commander “lacked that little extra centimeter of gray matter, that little extra spark, that separated competent generals from the great ones” (p. 82), while John B. Coulter, head of the Ninth, lacked the “operational awareness and sure-footedness ... to control events” (p. 141). Taaffe targets two generals for his harshest criticism. Failing to understand the magnitude of China’s entry, Keiser invited the demolition of the Second Division in the west and, in the east, a shocked Major General David G. “Barr felt helpless, bitter, exhausted, and distraught” (p. 220) while watching as the Chinese battered his Seventh Division. Taaffe, in his summary judgment, concludes that most of the US field army, corps, and division commanders “fought competently enough under trying and confusing circumstances” (p. 144).

Taaffe’s fifth and last chapter fortifies the consensus opinion that credits Ridgway with averting a US defeat in Korea, relying on “his forcefulness, aggressiveness, and energy” (p. 147) to restore the Eighth Army’s fighting spirit. Taaffe emphasizes,

however, an overlooked reason for his success. Ridgway was disappointed with the commanders he inherited because they lacked aggressiveness and moved deliberately “to supplant them with tough, dynamic, energetic men” (p. 153). But he wisely followed the advice of US Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins, doing so gradually and in the context of a new rotation system that averted a loss of public confidence in the army. Ridgway chose “the dignified, imperturbable, and thoughtful” (p. 154) Major General Bryant Moore to replace Coulter, but kept the widely popular Milburn because relieving him would undermine already low morale. In addition to Almond, he retained Smith to preserve “interservice harmony at this crucial time” (p. 159) and Major General Robert “Shorty” Soule, head of the last-to-deploy Third Division that “had done yeoman’s service guarding the beachhead” (p. 136) at Hungnam. Brigadier generals Blackshear “Babe” Bryan, Claude “Buddy” Ferenbaugh, Charles “Charlie Dog” Palmer, and Joseph Sladen Bradley replaced Church, Barr, Gay, and Kean respectively. Major General Clark “Nick” Ruffner took over the Second Division from Major General Robert B. McClure, who had assumed command after Keiser’s firing, and transformed “an outfit full of dissension” (p. 168) into one able to fight.

Ridgway’s new generals were far more effective than MacArthur’s “second stringers” (p. 59) because they had the experience and mentality to execute his “meat-grinder strategy” (p. 164) focused on killing communist soldiers rather than seizing territory. When Ridgway replaced MacArthur, Collins already had selected Lieutenant James A. Van Fleet as his successor, who immediately won the respect of his subordinates with his “bluff, easygoing, and unpretentious manner” (p. 189). But Ridgway “did not have complete confidence in Van Fleet” and “meddled in Eighth Army operations in ways MacArthur never would have contemplated and that Ridgway himself would not have tolerated” (p. 188). However, the two collaborated well in provoking the Chi-

nese April-May offensives that created the opportunity for the Eighth Army to inflict enormous losses on the enemy. Taaffe labels as “debatable” Ridgway’s claim that his forces could have driven to the Yalu, yet contradicts himself when he asserts that “stopping the Eighth Army’s northward push cost the United States its most effective means of pressuring the enemy to bargain seriously” (p. 198). Ironically, Almond, he argues convincingly, after January 1951 emerged as the real star among US commanders, displaying the “energy, aggressiveness, and determination that Ridgway looked for in his combat leaders” (p. 200). Paralleling the analytically rich “Conclusions” sections ending each chapter, Taaffe’s conclusion to the study revisits his main arguments under three subheadings titled “Transforming the Eighth Army,” “Command Relationships,” and “Evaluating Commanders.”

A great strength of this study is extensive research at the National Archives, presidential libraries, and private manuscript collections, with references to information in oral history interviews, newspapers, journals, and numerous secondary sources. Taaffe writes with smoothness, clarity, and verve, using frequently vernacular phrases such as “on the fly” (p. 60), “counted noses” (p. 135), and “duke it out” (p. 191). Personal profiles extend beyond background and training to personality traits and idiosyncrasies, including thoughtful and balanced assessments of individual strengths and weaknesses. Taaffe skillfully uses anecdotes not only to evoke humor, but also poignancy, such as Ridgway taking care of personal effects before leaving for Korea. There are six good maps, one of Korea and the others zooming in on regional areas. Among new insights, Taaffe reports how US intelligence provided “Walker with astonishingly accurate information about North Korean intentions and movements through intercepted and decoded radio messages” (p. 38). During a meeting in Tokyo, he suggests, critics of the plan to land at Inchon “may have overplayed their hand” (p. 63). “It was the absence of refugees

that made the soldiers nervous” (p. 110) during the Eighth Army’s retreat from the Yalu. Walker’s death in a freak jeep accident, Taaffe notes perceptively, “seemed to epitomize the irony and frustration of the conflict” (p. 122). He also reminds readers that the US “military had waged so many low-intensity wars ... that it was actually the world wars that were incongruous” (p. 181).

A few simple factual errors diminish the quality of this study. Korea has a width not of “90 to 120 miles” (p. 5), but over 300 miles at its widest. The official name of North Korea is not the “Democratic Republic of Korea” (p. 5). Taaffe consistently misspells the city of Kunsan as “Kusan.” “For Truman,” he writes, “MacArthur’s letter to [Congressman Joseph] Martin was the final straw” (p. 183), when the president later specified the general’s issuance to the enemy of an unauthorized surrender ultimatum. Among his interpretive missteps, Taaffe wrongly claims that seeking Korea’s “unification came into the picture [for the Truman administration] only in the euphoric afterglow of Inchon” (p. 182), when in fact a month earlier it publicly stated its goal was to destroy North Korea and started planning to do so. He then contends that “the basic American objective [to save South Korea] remained remarkably consistent ... and from this perspective [the United States] ‘won’ the war” (p. 203). Taaffe comes closer to the truth when he concludes more modestly that improved leadership enabled the Eighth Army “to defeat the Chinese and North Koreans on the battlefield, thus laying the groundwork for a negotiated settlement that preserved South Korean independence” (p. 220).

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Citation: James Matray. Review of Taaffe, Stephen R. *MacArthur's Korean War Generals*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

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