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American Generalship: Character is Everything The Art of Command

Edgar F. Puryear Jr.
Presidio Press
978-0-89141-658-6
(January 15, 2000)

This study of the characteristics of successful leadership in the U.S. military is the culmination and summation of Puryear's thirty-five years of research. He has also produced three other works, Stars in Flight, George S. Brown, and 19 Stars, the latter being a comparative work that focuses solely on who Puryear considered the four most outstanding generals of World War II: Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower and Patton.

Puryear's collection of hundreds of interviews with and letters from officers of high rank, in addition to his extensive research of diaries, autobiographies and biographies support his eleven chapter dissection of what comprises an effective and successful leader in the military sphere. Chapter headings include "Books: The Importance of Reading," "Aversion to 'Yes Men': Having the Character to Challenge," and "'Feel' or 'Sixth Sense' in Decision Making." Each chapter is a discussion of a particular characteristic or action that Puryear feels is vital to a general's ability to lead soldiers during wartime. He supports each assertion with evidence from military history, including anecdotes about the generals he has interviewed.

He also branches out of World War II and into other American conflicts, such as the Civil War. In chapter ten, he examines the prominent generals involved in the Civil War: their reputations, their skill in leadership and their rapport and ability to work with each other.

In the final chapter, “The Pattern,” Puryear examines what he considers to be the most important of a leader’s qualities: strength of character derived from amalgamation of all the other qualities. The “pattern” is the qualities that the generals shared and that “made them great.” They include, in brief: a desire to serve, accountability, sensitivity to a “hunch” or “sixth sense,” delegation and effective problem solving.

Puryear’s study is useful for the student of the military psyche and of U.S. military history, especially those interested in World War II generals. The book is rich with personal stories that prove these generals to be great leaders according to Puryear’s litmus test. The anecdotes also humanize men that are often portrayed as god-like in popular media. Also helpful, Puryear includes notes at the end of each chapter, citing both important works by and about the generals he mentions. The notes exhibit his impressive tally of interviews that spans the last thirty-five years and includes everyone from Eisenhower to Schwarzkopf.

Kristin Putchinksi