

Book Review

The Worst Military Leaders in History

Edited by John M Jennings & Chuck Steele

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Cruelty, callousness, poor judgement, political ambition, impulsiveness, fear of failure – these and several other characteristics are identified and highlighted in the 15 military leaders discussed in *The Worst Military Leaders in History*.

The question pertaining to what it is that makes a good military leader has been discussed by academics and serving officers (as well as a few armchair warriors) for aeons. The answer is often as confusing and as complex as the difference between the terms “military leadership” and “military command”. However, the answer to the question is often less important than the discussion and awareness that it provokes. Military biography studies military leaders within a military-historical context in order to understand how and why leaders made decisions, how their characters and personalities, their backgrounds and training, and their socio-political contexts interacted on the battlefield to achieve specific results – sometimes successful, sometimes not. Traditionally, the focus of these studies is on successful military leaders in order to teach future military officers valuable lessons based on the successes of these historic figures. As valuable as this time-honoured approach is, it is also limited, as it only provides a one-sided view of military leadership and does not necessarily develop the critical evaluation skills of future officers.

Any nation needs military officers who are willing, empowered, and able to lead and command the security forces of their country. This necessity becomes more pressing as future battlespaces become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, requiring military officers to display strength of character, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills to deal with the demands of the modern battlespace. The dilemma faced by military academies and officer training institutions is often not only finding the right personnel but, more importantly, also ways to develop the right combination of skill sets effectively. One of the methodologies often used is to study the lives and careers of previous military commanders and leaders.

John M Jennings and Chuck Steele, two military instructors at the United States (US) Air Force Academy, decided that they needed a tool that would not only assist in the study of military leadership but which would also elicit critical discussions and develop critical thinking within their students. The authors were given the task to study and describe the

lives, careers, and impact of one military leader who, in the author's opinion, deserves the title of "worst military leader". The result was a book reporting on the lives and careers of 15 military leaders who could be classified as the "worst military leaders". The 15 leaders were grouped into five categories: criminals, frauds, the clueless, politicians, and bunglers – ranging from Roman Fedorovich von Urgern-Sternberg and Lewis Brereton to George A Custer and Lord Wolseley.

Although most military biographies focus on well-known military leaders, I found the discussions in this book fascinating and refreshing, mixing some of the lesser-known military leaders with more famous ones. Although some of the leaders discussed in the book seem – in my opinion – somewhat undeserving of the title "worst military leader" or rather that there are several military leaders more deserving of this title, it is certainly a thought-provoking book.⁵⁷⁹ When one keeps in mind that this book was primarily written as a developmental and educational tool that may be used to enhance critical thinking and develop future military officers, it certainly achieved its intended purpose. Every military leader discussed in this book would be a wonderful case study that could be used to elicit class discussions and foster awareness of the qualities that are unwanted in military leaders. The topic in general represents a refreshing approach and, if used effectively, would certainly contribute to the development of critical thinking and awareness amongst future military officers.

As a military psychologist, I tended to read the book from an applied psychology perspective and not from the historical perspective as it was intended. However, even from this perspective, the book emphasised not only the need for the selection and development of certain qualities in future officers but also what to avoid. As highlighted by the review of Robbins in the "Army Magazine" of September 2022, the book focuses on the characters of the individual leaders – something that is always of interest to psychologists.⁵⁸⁰ All the case studies emphasise the importance of personality, judgement, and ability at tactical, operational, and strategic levels for military commanders, and the fact that an individual might be exceedingly successful at tactical level as a military commander but he or she might not necessarily perform well at operational or strategic level where different skill sets are needed for successful leadership. In addition, the chaotic and ambiguous nature of war is emphasised, highlighting the need to prepare and empower future military leaders with the abilities, qualities, and attitudes required to deal with warfare. All in all, I would recommend this book to military historians but, more specifically, also to practitioners who can use it as a tool to illustrate the requirements for military leaders, and to develop critical thinking amongst students of military leadership.

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ENDNOTES

⁵⁷⁹ M Robbins, *Important Case Studies in Lousy Leadership*, Association of the United States Army, September Book Reviews. 2022. <<https://www.ausa.org/articles/september-2022-book-reviews>> [Accessed on 4 January 2023].

⁵⁸⁰ M Robbins, *Important Case Studies in Lousy Leadership*, Association of the United States Army, September Book Reviews. 2022. <<https://www.ausa.org/articles/september-2022-book-reviews>> [Accessed on 4 January 2023].

