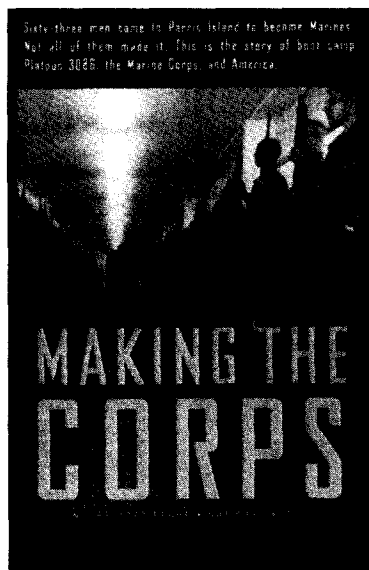


The Heart of the Matter: Fundamental Questions About Who We Are

reviewed by Williamson Murray

MAKING THE CORPS. By Thomas E. Ricks. Scribner's, New York, 1997, 324 pp., \$24.00. (Member \$21.60)



Thomas E. Ricks, the military correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal*, has written an extraordinary book that gets to the heart of what separates the U.S. Marine Corps from its sister Services and American society. What makes *Making the Corps* so important is the fact that it is much more than it appears to be at first glance, consequently, it should be of exceptional value in thinking through many of the fundamental issues that will confront the U.S. military in coming decades.

Ostensibly, *Making the Corps* is an account of Recruit Platoon 3086 and the young men who journeyed from the broken streets of America's cities, towns, and farms to Parris Island in March 1995 and the extraordinary process of boot camp that turned most into Marines. That story is, of course, familiar to virtually every reader of the *Gazette* (except for those few

readers like this author who served in other Services). Yet, Ricks has managed to turn his story into an examination of fundamental questions: What is it that has made the Marine Corps one of the premier military institutions of the 20th century? How did it survive the trauma of Vietnam and rebuild itself into a first class combat force? How extensive is the rift between U.S. civilian society and the values the Marine Corps espouses? What are those qualities that make Marines so different from their enlisted and officer contemporaries in other Services?

Ricks provides few answers to these questions, but in raising them he should make even Marine readers think long and hard about who they are and where they are going in an uncertain and complex world. Not surprisingly, a number of the issues that *Making the Corps* raises are disturbing. Perhaps the most important has to do with the growing rift between the U.S. military and the society that it defends. That rift has become a chasm between the military and the American governing elite, particularly those in government, the universities, and the media. And it is only growing worse. Where two-thirds of the House of Representatives and Senate had military experience in the early 1960s,

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that fraction has since dropped to one-third. In the 1996 election for the House in the State of Ohio, out of 37 individuals running, only 4 had military experience of a minimal order. I would venture that less than 15 individuals enter the combat arms of the U.S. Armed Services from the 8 Ivy League universities each year.

Ricks emphasizes the political nature of the divide—an officer corps that almost exclusively identifies itself with the Republican Party and an elite that has chosen to identify with a liberal democratic perspective. And yet, it is worth noting what Ricks does not: The divide even between the Republicans and the military is growing. It was a Republican Congress that attempted to scale back retirement benefits 2 years ago—a move that would have particularly hurt enlisted retirees. And one should not forget that it was the Young Americans for Freedom who in 1966 passed a resolution expressing complete support for the Vietnam War, but in the last pages of that resolution suggested that draft deferments should be kept for university students (namely themselves) because their lives were too valuable to be expended on the battlefields of a foreign war. With the coming budget crash early in the next century, the military cannot count on the Republicans to stand up for the Services. Nor are they likely to be any more knowledgeable on the realities of military forces. Thus, we may well confront an even more dangerous situation than Ricks suggests, where the military becomes entirely separated from both political parties.

Ricks also tackles the question of Marine culture: What is it that leads Marines almost always to identify themselves as Marines rather than as infantrymen, artillerymen, pilots, or logisticians? There are a number of possibilities. Partly, the Marine culture is a result of historical values; the Marines, more so than any other Service, have given the instilling of core values in both the enlisted force and among officers higher priority than the other Services. Moreover, Marine officers and noncommissioned offi-

cers (NCOs) have traditionally considered that they are members of a serious profession—the profession of arms. Consequently, Marines of every rank have taken the study of that profession, including the study of military history, more seriously.

But Ricks' examination of the drill instructors (DIs) suggests another factor. In the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle, the Marines made a number of hard choices that the other Services avoided. The Marines really did return the NCO to his rightful place as a crucial player in the Corps. By rebuilding the NCO corps to a position of responsibility and respect, the Marine Corps was in a position to instill its culture and values at the lowest level.

Moreover, the Marine Corps, again in contrast to the other Services, has been willing to send its best NCOs and officers to recruiting duty and its training organizations during their careers—a decision that the Corps has stuck with over the past three decades. This was certainly clear to me during my teaching career at Ohio State; the Marine officers working within Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps units were a cut above the officers assigned to such duty by the other Services. It certainly shows in Ricks' book. To the other Services the attitude seems to be that they cannot afford to send their best officers and NCOs to training and recruiting billets; the Marine attitude on the other hand appears to be that the Corps cannot afford *not* to send its best to such billets.

Thus, we have Sgt Darren Carey, a force recon Marine, as the "heavy" among the DIs; one wonders how many green berets and ranger NCOs the Army is willing to devote to its basic training establishments. The events at Aberdeen this last year certainly suggest not enough. But there is an added benefit to the Marine Corps; by putting its best NCOs into the training establishment across career fields, the Marine Corps achieves a cross-fertilization of values and a reintroduction of the support structure to the Corps' core values as a combat organization—a factor immeasurable to the green eyeshade crowd running the personnel systems of the other Services.

There is another side to the coin that Ricks does not address—namely the fact that the Marines are willing to

devote a similar portion of their very best officers to the job of training and educating the next generation of Marines. When one considers this factor, then the success of the Marine Corps—with considerably less than 10 percent of the officers serving in the U.S. military—in gaining 37.5 percent of the unified command positions becomes clear. Here we are dealing with a two-way street. Having the best officers serve at one time or other in teaching and training positions provides two advantages. First, those on the receiving end have underlined for them the importance of the subject matter. But equally important are the gains that the officer instructors receive by having their ideas challenged; and as Ricks underlines, Marine officers consistently are willing to challenge the ideas of their superiors. The result of the Marine Corps' willingness to push its best officers into instructor positions at The Basic School, Infantry Officers Course, Amphibious Warfare School, and the Command and Staff College is a senior officer corps both comfortable with its ability to express its ideas and open to ideas from below.

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Ricks brings out a worrisome comparison between the Marine Corps' approach to training Marines and the Army's approach to recruit training. Compared to Marine boot camp, Army basic training is a relative picnic—no yelling, relatively little pressure, no harassment, and coed platoons. Once through this postmacho introduction to Army life, those who are going on into the combat arms receive a rigorous and intense exposure to the business of soldiering. That process is clearly capable of turning out first-class soldiers in the combat arms—as the Gulf War underlined in

spades.

But still, there is a problem here that Ricks does not bring out. All Marines, whether infantry, artillery, supply specialists, or technicians, have received the basic knowledge so that they can defend themselves as part of a military unit. They are given the glue and self-confidence so that in certain situations when things are falling apart, as so often happens in war, they can fit themselves into a functioning combat force. For the Army, the situation may be quite different. When the 2d Infantry Division collapsed in Korea in 1950, it collapsed as much because of weaknesses within its support structure as because of difficulties on the firing line. In Somalia Marines were astonished to receive a request from Army ordnance specialists for protective infantry, because the soldiers had not been trained to fight and did not have sufficient weapons. In most situations the Army will not pay a price for its willingness to scale down the pressures of basic training to achieve lower washout rates; but the price Army units could pay in the desperate situations that arise in war could be all too high.

In the end, Ricks has written a book that tells much more about the Marine Corps than one might expect about a book dealing with the experiences of a single recruit training platoon.

Perhaps the most disturbing element in his report card is not the gulf between the Marine Corps and civil society, but rather the gap between the Marine Corps and the other Services. The Marine Corps may well be able to survive its considerable differences with American society as long as it performs in a fashion that Americans have come to expect, but how long can it survive living in isolation even within the U.S. military?

This is a book that every Marine (and many others) will find of value. It suggests much about what the Marine Corps is and how it has survived into the postmodern era. It should be of worth to every Marine willing to invest a small amount of money and time.

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