

Critical writing: a failure in persuasion



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“ A Failure in Persuasion” In “ A Failure in Generalship”, LTC Paul Yingling assigns blame for the failure of the military in the Vietnam War and the dire and deteriorating situation in Iraq at the beginning of 2007, placing it on America’s generals, then and now. Though fearless in its attempt, the essay presents a weak academic argument to back up this claim due to a string of fallacies, statements and arguments based on false or invalid inference.

Most notable in his essay is “ hasty generalization”, “ missing the point”, and the “ false dichotomy”.

The initial fallacy that undermines the argument is that of “ hasty generalization”. A “ hasty generalization” is a broad sweeping statement placed on a group of people without a sufficient sample or support. The premise of LTC Yingling’s entire argument is that the “ debacles” in Vietnam and Iraq are a direct result of generals abdicating their responsibilities of assessing probabilities of success and advising policymakers accordingly. He cites GEN Shinseki as the one exception to this failure.

It is improbable that of out hundreds of active duty generals, LTC Yingling would have visibility into every assessment and every bit of advice given to policy makers. Moreover, every general does not have a direct line to the civilian leadership. Was he blaming just the three and four stars? Was he referring to the chiefs of staff? How about the combatant commanders? The failure to address these questions and lack of a defined and believable sample renders the argument implausible.

In “ A Failure in Generalship”, LTC Yingling spends much of his argument literally “ missing the point”. He provides multiple premises arguing criteria

for good generals and how to make their promotion system better. This in no way supports the argument that our generals have failed in their duty.

He states the imperatives of generals having second languages and educations in the humanities and with the statistics he provides, 25% each, he supports that claim. He argues that the promotion of generals should be performance based and be closely scrutinized by congress.

He defines the problem of the current system, most notably an absence of incentive to innovate and tells the reader how to fix it with peer and subordinate input, performance based criteria, and closer securitization by congress. These however do not address the two essential questions he must answer to support his argument. Which generals failed? How did they fail? Without answering these, they fall under the fallacy “ missing the point.” Much of LTC Yingling’s essay is based on a “ false dichotomy”.

It’s the generals’ responsibility to estimate strategic possibilities and explain them to civilian policy makers. Since those policymakers made decisions contrary to what LTC Yingling believes was the correct, the generals must have negated their responsibility. This assertion leaves no room for other possibilities. The generals could have briefed up the same conclusions as he, at which time the policymakers, unconvinced with the argument, made their decisions to the contrary. Some generals, based on the data available to them, may have made an honest estimate and advised accordingly.

To say however that such a complicated outcome is a result of an all or nothing set of conditions, lack of both intellectual and moral faculties in this a case, is a “ false dichotomy” and pins the author into an argument he can

never prove. Even the best arguments, detailed or not, true or not, can be ineffective if they are sloppy in their reasoning. “ A failure of generalship” falls into that trap with “ hasty generalization”, “ missing the point”, and “ false dichotomy”. By distracting the reader and improperly conditioning the argument’s premises, these fallacies undermine what may have been a potentially sound argument.