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## STRATEGY, OPERATIONS, AND THE MARGIN OF VICTORY

*Dov S. Zakheim*

*Margin of Victory: Five Battles That Changed the Face of Modern War*, by Douglas Macgregor. Foreword by Robert M. Citrino. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016. 288 pages. \$34.95.

Douglas Macgregor, a decorated Army tank commander who has gone on to become a leading iconoclastic—and prescient—military intellectual, has produced an ambitious evaluation of five key twentieth-century battles and the strategic and operational assumptions that led up to them. *Margin of Victory* examines in great yet readable detail the strategic 1914 battle of Mons and the strategic withdrawal that followed it; the 1937 Japanese battle for Shanghai; the 1944 Soviet destruction of the Wehrmacht's Army Group Center in and around the Belorussian swamps; the Israeli counterattack across the Suez in the 1973 Yom Kippur War; and the crushing American defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces in the 1991 battle of 73 Easting. Taken together, Macgregor argues, these battles have much to offer those who formulate contemporary American strategy and plan its military operations. Indeed, he goes further: those who ignore the lessons of these battles do so at their peril. As he states in his introductory paragraph, "Hell . . . can be defined in three words: defeat in war. *Margin of Victory* is about avoiding hell."

Macgregor devotes a chapter to each of the five major battles he has chosen as object lessons for current civilian and military policy makers. His account of the battle of Mons is actually a panegyric to Richard Haldane, Britain's secretary of state for war from 1905 to 1912. Facing unstinting opposition from a hidebound officer corps wedded to operational concepts that had failed miserably in the Boer War and confronting budget constraints that prioritized the modernization of the Royal Navy, Haldane nevertheless managed to create a general staff, transform the army into a capable expeditionary force, organize a trained reserve, emphasize realistic training, and inaugurate a regimen of professional military education. His reforms, Macgregor states, would be called today "disruptive innovation." As a result, the seriously outnumbered British Expeditionary Force was able both to force the invading

German forces to alter their plans for the attack on Paris and to slow them sufficiently to enable the Allies to mount the defenses that stopped the attackers at the battle of the Marne, thereby preventing an attack on the French capital. As Macgregor concludes, "by the standards of the early twentieth

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century, Haldane's reforms achieved miracles." They also prevented what otherwise might have been a quick German victory in what became known as World War I.

Macgregor's account of the battle of Shanghai is essentially a discussion of what happens when a modernizer's efforts are ignored or overridden. General Kazushige Ugaki, Japanese minister of war from 1924 to 1927 and 1929 to 1931, identified the Soviet Union as Japan's primary potential adversary and recognized that, as Macgregor puts it, "in the future the IJA [Imperial Japanese Army] would need the mobility and firepower to conduct sweeping flank attacks, enveloping or encircling the Russian enemy."

Ugaki also challenged the prevailing Japanese view that budgetary priority should be assigned to naval force modernization and expansion. Few of his reforms to realize his objectives outlasted his terms in office, however. As a result, Japan conducted a bloody and far too costly campaign to seize Shanghai from Chiang Kai-shek's more numerous but vastly outgunned and poorly trained troops, only succeeding thanks to firepower support from Japanese naval and air forces. Japan then successfully conquered eastern and southern China, but, as Macgregor points out, "Japan's war with China not only delayed and disrupted the IJA's modernization; it also fatally crippled Japan's northern strategy to defeat the Soviet Union, while putting Japan on a collision course with Britain and the United States. Thus, where Haldane succeeded, at least in part, to the benefit of his country's forces, Ugaki failed completely, to the costly detriment of Imperial Japan."

Ugaki's failures pale by comparison with the mad strategy that propelled Hitler into invading the Soviet Union and then refusing to implement a planned withdrawal that could have saved huge numbers of his troops. It was true that during the 1930s the Germans had increased their tactical fighting power by focusing on attacks at the point of impact. Nevertheless, the Soviet military, recovering from Stalin's purges, centrally driven from the top, with unity of command, and indifferent to massive personnel losses, successfully focused on "integrating and concentrating combat power on the operational level for strategic effect." The results of Hitler's mistakes and the Soviet transformation played out in 1944, when the Red Army was able to destroy the German Army Group Center. Until it was clear all was about to be lost, Hitler vehemently opposed any withdrawal in the face of the advancing Soviet troops, insisting that his soldiers "fight to the last man." His generals, many of whom were nonprofessional party hacks, were unable or unwilling to challenge his decision. Even when he finally consented to an organized withdrawal to more-defensible positions, Hitler insisted that forces remain behind to defend the various towns from which they had operated. As a result, the Soviets were able to bypass what Hitler termed "fortified places," encircle and destroy the retreating army group, and take the towns as well. In Macgregor's

words, the Soviet transformation, encompassing changes in “command structure, organization for combat, and supporting doctrine for the application of military power in the form of strike—artillery, rockets, and airpower—with operationally agile maneuver forces created a margin of victory that changed the course of European and world history.”

Macgregor’s fourth case study, that of the Israeli counterattack across the Suez Canal, is meant to demonstrate how a culture that fosters flexibility and independent initiative and leadership enabled the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to offset intelligence misreadings of Egyptian preparations to cross the canal. He also points to Israel’s merit-based promotion system and the IDF’s recognition that “one size does not fit all”—in other words, its diversity of capacity. Macgregor allows that Ariel Sharon went beyond mere initiative and flagrantly disobeyed orders. But Macgregor also notes that Sharon’s admittedly costly efforts to surprise, and contribute to the encirclement of, Egypt’s Third Army were a major factor in the success of the Israeli counterattack. Macgregor credits Anwar Sadat with the foresight to recognize that only by redeeming Egypt’s honor, which had been crushed in the Six-Day War, could Cairo finally achieve peace with Israel, one that has stood the test of the region’s endless crises and wars for the better part of four decades.

Macgregor led a tank battalion in the battle of 73 Easting, a major American triumph in the 1991 war with Saddam Hussein and another source of lessons for achieving a “margin of victory.” Macgregor has written about this battle before: in 2009 he devoted an entire volume, entitled *Warrior’s Rage: The Great Tank Battle of 73 Easting*, to the events of 26–27 February 1991. The book offers an account of the actions of the 2nd Squadron of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (“Cougar Squadron”), which surprised and crushed an Iraqi Republican Guard armored brigade by charging out of a sandstorm during Operation DESERT STORM in what became the U.S. Army’s largest tank battle since World War II. Macgregor’s purpose in repeating the tale is to argue that President George H. W. Bush ordered a cease-fire prematurely, while Norman Schwarzkopf, who commanded Operation DESERT STORM, essentially let fifty thousand Republican Guards escape virtually unscathed, only to be rearmed by Saddam to fight another day. Macgregor is also bitterly critical of the American military’s failure truly to integrate its forces, so that the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines continue to seek service self-sufficiency, at a cost to overall operational effectiveness.

Macgregor’s description of each of the foregoing battles is gripping and fast paced. It is unfortunate that the maps that accompany his prose often do not include the towns, and at times the rivers, to which he refers, so the reader loses track of the tactical ebb and flow of battle. Macgregor’s editors also should have ensured a consistent approach to the spelling of towns and other locales whose names are central to the battles. For example, at times the book simply misspells

names, as in Chongming Island (which Macgregor spells *Changming*). Macgregor also is not consistent in his use of romanized forms of the place-names he cites: Chinese place-names employ pinyin, the system introduced by the Communists in 1949, although he is writing about battles that took place when the Wade-Giles system was still in use. On the other hand, he mentions Cheju-do Island, spelled as it was in 1937; the current Korean spelling is Jeju-do.

One might quibble with other elements of Macgregor's history. He writes of Field Marshal French's argument with Lord Kitchener in Paris without explaining when French got there, since French last had been mentioned in the context of the battle of Le Cateau. At one point Macgregor erroneously calls Shanghai the capital of Nationalist China. He does not mention that Germany was able to provision the Wehrmacht with considerable matériel thanks to Jewish, Polish, and other slave labor. Nor does he mention the diversion of resources from Wehrmacht fighting power owing to Hitler's mad preoccupation with the extermination of Jews, even as the fortunes of war turned against his forces. And Macgregor does not note that the fact that Sadat ordered his forces to cross the canal on Yom Kippur, when Israelis were preoccupied with the holiest day on their religious calendar, certainly contributed to the Egyptians achieving strategic and operational surprise.

All told, however, Macgregor has written another powerful critique of the American way of planning and developing strategy for war. His lesson for policy makers and strategists alike is that "whenever new military concepts and technologies appear, the complex interaction of national culture, bureaucratic interests, and economic power does not automatically work to support them. . . . [W]hen conditions change and the margin of victory suddenly narrows, frailties and vulnerabilities concealed from view inside the armed forces . . . suddenly produce catastrophic failure." He asserts that Washington needs to focus on its long-standing and still primary strategic concern, namely, prevention of a hostile power from dominating the Eurasian lands. He argues that the American military must increase its force levels, notably those of the Army. And he advocates for the creation of what he terms a "national defense staff" (in other words, a general staff) "to guide the application of American military power," encompassing integrated capabilities across service lines.

Not everyone will agree with Macgregor's prescriptions. Often he has been a lonely voice in the wilderness. Yet as America transitions to a new administration, it would do well at a minimum to pay close attention to what Macgregor has to say. Because one thing is certain: America's next war certainly will not be like those it is fighting today, and those who make the all-too-frequent error of fighting tomorrow's war with today's assumptions and experience surely will regret doing so, as Macgregor has demonstrated so ably yet again in his latest volume.