

## Foreword

There is nothing readers seem to like more than a book that discusses great battles, major campaigns, or turning points, but a number of factors set *Margin of Victory* apart from the pack. That's what makes Douglas Macgregor's book a great read.

First, we have the battles themselves, each one a turning point in the history of the twentieth century. We have the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) desperately holding the line at Mons; the Imperial Japanese Army grinding it out at Shanghai against an outclassed but numerically superior Chinese army; the Red Army smashing an entire German army group in a rapid and seemingly effortless blow; the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) getting surprised early by an Egyptian thrust across the Suez Canal in 1973; and, finally, an irresistible U.S. armored juggernaut tearing through Saddam Hussein's Republican Guards in 1991 as if they were not even there.

Beyond serving as a tour d'horizon for twentieth-century operational level warfare, however, *Margin of Victory* does something all too rare in the world of "great battle books"—it actually manages to link its battles thematically. If one thread ties together all of these fights, it is Macgregor's warning that change is constant, but it is the reaction to change that really matters.

The British, for example, would not have had a BEF deployed at Mons at all if a few clear heads (above all that of Secretary of State for War Sir Richard Haldane) had not recognized the changed realities of industrial-age warfare and carried out a series of far-reaching reforms from 1906 to 1912, including the establishment of a general staff, the formation of an elite strike force backed by a large trained reserve, and an emphasis on soldier education. Haldane's pre-war military reform prepared Britain (just barely) to fight and win the war. If the BEF had not been at Mons to hold up the Germans for a crucial few days, the German 1st Army of General Alexander von Kluck might have had an open shot into the left and rear of the entire French battle array—with incalculable consequences.

The Japanese, by contrast, failed to change enough. Well into the 1930s, they were still clinging to phalanx-like "square divisions" (four regiments) that might have been ideal for the attritional nature of trench warfare but were far too unwieldy for swift maneuver. In a broader sense, they continued to rely on massed manpower when they might have downsized the force and used the savings to invest in higher-tech weapons such as tanks and aircraft.

The result was, as Macgregor recounts in some detail, a bloodbath, a struggle of attrition at Shanghai and the "grinding mill of flesh and blood" at Luodian. As they bogged down well short of their objective, the Japanese did have to introduce tanks and aircraft—pretty much their entire arsenal at the time—in order to grind forward and drive the Chinese defenders out of Shanghai. The lesson of the criticality of mobile armored firepower and its integration with the striking power of the air force and navy went

unlearned, however, and it was a relatively unreconstructed Japanese army that took on even more powerful adversaries in 1941, sacrificing wave after wave of brave but undersupplied infantry against superior Western matériel.

The destruction of Army Group Center (Operation Bagration), by contrast, is a tale of two reforms: the Germans dramatically increasing their tactical fighting power at the point of impact and the Soviets deepening the process on the operational and strategic levels—and 1944 would demonstrate dramatically which side had become more effective. From the reading here, it is almost possible to drum up sympathy for the Wehrmacht—relatively demotorized, undersupplied, indifferently led (at least on the army group level), sitting in that vast, vulnerable bulge east of Minsk, waiting to be destroyed. The Germans learned the meaning of “full-spectrum dominance” in a way they never imagined.

Likewise, 1973 is a complex story of military reform on the Egyptian side prior to Operation Badr, and on the Israeli side in the midst of the fighting, when it looked like all was lost. The Egyptians had spent a great deal of time contemplating the debacle of the physical and moral collapse of a vast mechanized army in matter of days in 1967, and they had drawn up a careful, cautious operational plan based as much on their weaknesses at maneuver warfare as on any particular set of strengths.

The Israelis, meanwhile, had not given much thought to the Egyptians at all. Why bother? They were hardly going to do anything rash like start a war. The IDF high command kept thinking that—right until those high-powered water cannon blasted a series of holes in the high earthen berm on the Israeli side of the Suez Canal and enemy infantry and tanks began pouring into the Sinai. It was a shock that still reverberates across the Middle East. Macgregor analyzes the IDF's pain but also takes the reader carefully through the process by which the Israelis recovered their equilibrium. They reformed themselves on the fly, using infantry to dig the Egyptians out of the irrigation ditches of the Chinese Farm, for example, and then launched their armored counterstroke. A canal is a two-way crossing, after all!

Finally, there is the victory at 73 Easting, the signal moment of the coalition triumph in Operation Desert Storm. The outcome of thoroughgoing (and expensive) military reform during the Ronald Reagan presidency, Macgregor argues, was nearly thrown away before it happened (by timid leadership in the field) and then squandered altogether (by equally timid leadership in Washington). The result was the need for an encore, a repeat performance, as it were, in 2003: Operation Iraqi Freedom. Macgregor knows something about this battle: he was an officer of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment and played a key role in the fighting, an action recounted in depth in his 2009 book *Warrior's Rage: The Great Tank Battle of 73 Easting*.

While *Margin of Victory* might have stopped there, it is the concluding chapter that truly sets this book apart from so many others on the scene. Here Macgregor transitions from a mere campaign history to a fervent policy recommendation for military reform. I can say with confidence that there are very few authors in the world who write as

*Margin of Victory*

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effectively or knowledgeably on this topic as he does. In previous books such as *Breaking the Phalanx* (1997) and *Transformation under Fire* (2003), he warned that an industrial-age military relying upon size and brute force needs to slim down and become leaner, more agile, and more scalable. Increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and strike capabilities are here to stay, he has been arguing, and have changed warfare dramatically and fundamentally. Yet our armed forces and defense establishment still organize themselves very much like the year is 1945 rather than 2016. Read what he has to say here and see if you agree.

In the end, of course, Carl von Clausewitz was right. "In war," the Prussian sage once wrote, "everything is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult." All the more reason, then, for Americans to read this thought-provoking book. The "margin of victory" is always slim, and the walk from the victory lane to the losers' club is all too short.

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