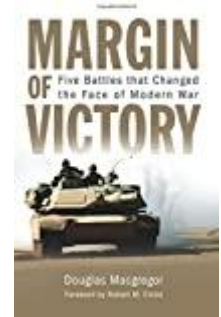


Douglas Macgregor. *Margin of Victory: Five Battles That Changed the Face of Modern War.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016. Maps, figures, tables. xvi + 268 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-996-8.



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While retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor sees this work as an essay on behalf of military preparedness, many readers will see it as two slightly different books within the same cover. The first offers straightforward, relatively brief accounts of five twentieth-century battles that many readers will know little about; the final chapter, on the other hand, is a critique of contemporary American defense policy and an argument for preparing for the next big war. Macgregor's theme appears early. He writes that "this book argues that the United States ... does not have to march into hell, as many of the great powers whose stories are recounted in this book did." He tells readers that "each chapter is a clarion call for the United States to recognize that wars are decided in the decades before they begin" (p. 1). He also notes, quite correctly, that "strategy, technology, and military organization continually interact ... in the broader context of national culture, history, and human capital to produce success or failure" (p. 4). These topics undoubtedly deserve our careful considera-

tion, but they constitute a large agenda for a relatively thin volume.

The word "eccentric" best describes the longest portion of the book. The subtitle tells us that Macgregor is going to explore "five battles that changed the face of modern war"; Robert Citino of the Army War College reinforces this in the foreword, noting that each battle "was a turning point in the history of the twentieth century" (p. xi). Such characterizations are hard to justify. The Battle of Mons, for instance, brought the defeat of a few thousand British regulars engaged against the Germans for a few hours in August 1914—it presented no real innovations and certainly was not a turning point in the Great War. The Battle of Shanghai in 1937 and the defeat of Germany's Army Group Center in 1944 did not change the course of World War II. The Yom Kippur War in 1973, perhaps better known than the first three, did not resolve the Arab-Israeli confrontation. Finally, we are presented with the tale of a single American regiment in the First Gulf War; this seems odd in the context, until we real-

ize that the author participated in it. All five stories possess intrinsic interest; each is effectively told. However, they do not match the book's big claims; none of these battles was game-changing. Readers wanting an introduction to truly decisive twentieth-century battles should look to Drew Middleton's *Crossroads of Modern Warfare: Sixteen Twentieth-Century Battles That Shaped Contemporary History* (1973). Middleton presents sixteen truly key engagements: here is the Battle of the Marne rather than Mons, Midway, Stalingrad, and later Dien Bien Phu and Tet. These have a far better claim to the term "decisive." And Middleton writes with verve.

The larger analysis of social and political settings is cursory, limited by space and by sources. For instance, we learn that Sir Richard Haldane, British secretary of state for war prior to 1914, had made efforts prior to World War I to convert the army to "a more lethal professional military establishment" influenced less by an officer class of "gifted amateurs," but the book tells us little about what was actually done, nor does it plumb the larger sociocultural question we are expecting (pp. 9, 11). Oddly, at the outbreak of the war, many of Haldane's plans were jettisoned. The same pattern of limited discussion and limited analysis appears in all five battle stories; there are some interesting details (the German reliance on horses even in 1944?) but hardly deep, detailed cultural analysis. Two additional sources might have improved this situation. It is surprising that Alan Millett and Williamson Murray's three-volume *Military Effectiveness* (2010) is not in the bibliography, since the essays look at many relevant issues, including the question of national political effectiveness. The absence of Peter Paret's *The Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (1986) is similarly noteworthy.

The last chapter on the margin of victory brings the author's main concerns into focus. Macgregor is convinced that a nation-endangering "war of decision is coming" (pp. 3, 193). The task,

as he sees it, is to develop a "new margin of victory" (p. 194). However, there are many impediments to creating this "margin." He complains that the current officer corps is not up to the task; past errors, especially in the Middle East, have gone unacknowledged. In addition, American political and military leaders are "too confident of ... [their] military superiority and ... [too] contemptuous" of the military capabilities of other nations (p. 189). He argues that current defense policy is burdened by wasteful spending and "excessive redundancy in capability," both driven by intra-service competition (p. 192). The army, his own service, especially worries him. He states that we need "powerful forces in being," and this "ground maneuver force" must have a "mix of capabilities" and must have the ability to be "deploy[ed] quickly and be strategically decisive in joint operations" (pp. 179, 185). "Light" marine forces cannot fulfill this mission (pp. 190-91). Thus, what he takes to be the current policy of "shrinking the ... mobile armored force" and reducing the capability of "expeditionary" forces is deeply problematic (pp. 191, 180). So is our propensity to deploy troops in "purely local conflicts" or on ideological crusades; instead, the one truly critical mission is to prevent "any bloc or empire from dominating the great Eur-Asian land-mass" (pp. 177-78). Russia and China are the existential threats and should be the focus of our concerns.

Interestingly, Macgregor says little about the potential impact of newer technologies on this future battlefield. Could precision weapons and artificial intelligence make "expeditionary forces" and "armored forces" helpless and useless? Could the decisive encounter be over in minutes, when our power grid and financial system are shut down—simultaneously? The most curious feature of his final chapter—and its most problematic quality—is the underlying conviction that the next war will duplicate World War II: masses of men and machines maneuvering, on the steppes of western Russia. This scenario may entertain digital war gamers, but it smacks of that oldest of military fal-

lacies: preparing intellectually and materially to refight the last war. Or, perhaps in this case, his last battle: Desert Storm.

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