

BREAKING THE PHALANX:**A NEW DESIGN FOR LANDPOWER IN THE 21ST CENTURY¹**REVIEWED BY MAJOR JAMES R. AGAR, II²

Few soldiers could accomplish the feats of Colonel Douglas Macgregor. During the Persian Gulf War, he directed a battle against Iraq's elite Republican Guard with only ten tanks and thirteen Bradley fighting vehicles at his disposal. After just twenty-three minutes, the Battle of 73 Easting was over with Iraqi losses of nearly seventy armored vehicles. Macgregor's troop suffered no casualties. Two years later at the U.S. Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, Macgregor again proved indomitable. "In a series of five battles, most units typically lose four, draw one; Macgregor won three, lost one, drew one—still the best showing since the Persian Gulf War."³

Colonel Macgregor then turned his attention to perhaps the most daunting task of his career: the reformation of the U.S. Army. In *Breaking the Phalanx*,⁴ Macgregor advocates a smaller, more concentrated, and lethal Army. He takes the title of his book from ancient military history when the Roman Legions first engaged the Macedonian Phalanx around 200 BC. While the Romans were outnumbered, their smaller and more agile Legions were able to flank the Macedonians and "break" the Phalanx. They defeated the Macedonians, not with an army that was superior in numbers, but superior in organization.⁵ Macgregor believes the fate suffered by the once impregnable Macedonian Phalanx may be a prologue for today's Army.

Macgregor sees land armies as the primary means for achieving and maintaining strategic global dominance. Using historical examples of every conflict from this century, he outlines how America habitually

1. DOUGLAS A. MACGREGOR, *BREAKING THE PHALANX: A NEW DESIGN FOR LANDPOWER IN THE 21ST CENTURY* (1997).

2. United States Army. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. Richard J. Newman, *Renegades Finish Last*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., July 28, 1997, at 35.

4. MACGREGOR, *supra* note 1, at 285.

5. *Id.* at 1-2.

neglects its defense needs, particularly the Army. It is this weakness, he argues, that then entices our enemies to strike. While the Air Force and Navy play significant roles in the game of strategic dominance, none of the major conflicts in this century were ended until the United States committed the Army to battle.⁶ Meanwhile, American ground forces in Europe and the Korean peninsula have successfully deterred communist aggression for fifty years.

But America's lynchpin of strategic dominance may have seen its zenith. Macgregor identifies two problems with today's Army: first, it is much smaller than anytime since 1948;⁷ and second, it's organized the same way it was during World War II.

Throughout the book, Macgregor appeals to the reader to resist further reductions in the troop strength or budget of the Army, even to the point of cannibalizing the budgets of the sister services. The wisdom of this is debatable, but Macgregor believes he has a plan to take the same numbers of soldiers in today's Army and organize them into a more effective fighting force.

According to Macgregor, the issue is one of information. Today's Army fights with far more information than it did decades ago. Commanders now possess a wealth of information from a variety of sources: satellites, computer networks, radar, and unmanned aerial reconnaissance. Weapons systems can reach from one continent to the next. Brigades of troops can deploy in hours instead of weeks or months. All this creates a situation where commanders receive a plethora of information in a compressed battlespace where the deep, close, and rear battles become one. Complicating matters, commanders also face a compressed decision/analysis timeframe in which they must act.⁸ In short, more is happening to today's Army in an expanded arena with too much information and much less time to decide what to do.

Macgregor argues that the organization of today's Army is too inflexible and sluggish for such an environment. He holds up the incredibly successful Microsoft Corporation as a model of how the Army might consider changing its organization. He points to Microsoft's "flattened organization,"⁹ which reduces the amount of intermediate management. He also

6. *Id.* at 11-21.

7. *Id.* at 15.

8. *Id.* at 50.

embraces the minimal top-down coordination used by the computer software pioneer. These modifications allowed Microsoft to be more agile than its traditionally organized corporate competitors and react swiftly to changes in the market, because it could use and disseminate information quickly through the organization. Today's Army was conceived in the heyday of the industrial age when attrition warfare was the sole means to defeat the enemy. But in the information age this no longer holds true. Our current organization of the Army cannot fully exploit the advantage conferred on it by the wealth of information technology.

In contrast, smaller "all arms" units can be far more lethal than their bigger counterparts, according to Macgregor. They can deploy faster, need fewer command and control elements, can disperse over a wide area to make them less attractive targets, maneuver swiftly and (if armed with the right information) attack their opponent's weak spots without engaging in a head-to-head fight. This agility is crucial to success with today's maneuver warfare because it enables the commander to manipulate the battle to a time and place of his choosing. Like Microsoft, the Army which can better control and manage information on the battlefield will dominate its opponents. Therefore, information and organization become the combat multipliers of the twenty-first century.

Macgregor envisions a radically different Army to exploit the changes in maneuver warfare. For starters, he would do away with all ten of the Army's divisions and replace them with twenty-six much smaller "groups."¹⁰ The groups resemble a regimental or brigade combat team, but are organized according to task and assigned to a joint task force (JTF) command, which would support and control the groups under its command.¹¹ Corps headquarters and their support elements would become JTF commands in the process. This structure eliminates the intermediate division command and staff, thus "flattening" the organization. The groups can be assigned to individual JTF commands on an "as needed" basis as each mission dictates.

Macgregor's critical thinking does not stop there. He decries the continual pursuit of "magic bullet" technologies, which sap precious defense funds and leave us with nothing but a false sense of security. He cites the

9. *Id.* at 34.

10. A modern combat division has approximately 16,000 soldiers. The "groups" proposed by the author would contain about 4000-5000 troops each. *Id.* at 81.

11. *Id.* at 74-85.

expensive B-1 and B-2 bombers as examples, pointing out that neither have ever flown a combat mission. He is also highly critical of the number of aircraft carriers and their relatively high maintenance costs.¹² Macgregor uses these examples to point out the relatively low cost of maintaining a potent ground force. He reinforces this reasoning with charts showing the Army receiving only eight percent of the Department of Defense (DOD) budget for the top twenty weapons programs. Clearly, Macgregor believes the Army is the stepchild of the DOD when it comes to money.

The budgets and the current force structure are not the Army's only troubles, however. Macgregor attacks the Army's current system of managing and promoting officers as being too conformist and stifling both creativity and initiative. Perhaps Colonel Macgregor's experience at being passed-over for brigade command at least three times (a necessary step for promotion to brigadier general) colors his arguments in this area.

Macgregor also foresees big changes in doctrine and training for all the armed forces. He deftly points out that the services seldom conduct joint training on a large scale. He recognizes that the services have located their doctrine centers away from one another and rarely see substantial coordination. He strongly encourages joint operations as the blueprint for future success.

Colonel Macgregor writes with a sharp pen and a great intellect, yet he is no ordinary Army officer. Besides his accomplishments on the battlefield, he has a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Virginia.¹³ His sources and endnotes indicate tremendous research on this project and a grasp of matters far greater than just the Army force structure. Macgregor sprinkles the text with the ramifications for U.S. foreign policy if we should fail to make critical changes in the years ahead. While he sees where the Army and the rest of the DOD may go, Colonel Macgregor plots a tenuous course to get us there.

Macgregor claims the transition to the group-JTF force structure will not cost taxpayers anything. Yet, he can cite no empirical studies to support this assumption, nor has any reliable government agency (such as the

12. A modern carrier group costs \$10 billion annually to run. A combat division costs \$1 billion annually to operate. *Id.* at 208.

13. MACGREGOR, *supra* note 1, at 285

Congressional Budget Office or the General Accounting Office) verified his figures.

Macgregor also fails to account for the logistical and personnel implications of his model for change. By eliminating the division hierarchy, he dispenses with the forward and main support battalion that provide logistical support for the brigades (or in Macgregor's case, the "groups"). Yet he provides no surrogate to support his newly formed groups. Instead he relies on a fragile, "just-in-time" logistics system—courtesy of the corps Support Command (now part of the JTF)—which may leave U.S. forces without adequate supplies at the wrong time. He makes no mention of the assignment of the special staff relative to his new "groups," leaving open the question of where the division Staff Judge Advocate's office will go and what the role of the trial counsel will be. His proposals to eliminate dependent-accompanied overseas tours and rotate entire groups overseas for twelve months at a time would save DOD plenty of money, but the cost in morale cannot be measured. It is doubtful many married persons would remain in the Army if they knew they faced every other year apart for twenty years.

Despite all the brilliance with which Colonel Macgregor assembles his thesis, the reader cannot help noticing a tone of bitterness or envy in his writing. He seems bitter that he was not picked up for brigade command (a fact not disclosed by him in the book).¹⁴ He envies the way the Air Force and the Navy get far more defense-dollars than their Army counterparts. He is bitter that the Army has cut back one third of its strength to ten divisions and may be cutting even more. While diplomatic and politic in his critique of the Air Force and Navy, he clearly holds both in low regard.

Indeed, this bitterness clouds Macgregor's objectivity on more than one occasion. Early in the book, he discusses the critical need for close air support (CAS) from the Air Force and how it is a fundamental key to success on the modern battlefield. A few chapters later he suggests the Air Force cannot be relied upon to provide CAS, despite the history he has laid out to the contrary. It is odd to read his criticism of the sister services on one page and his emphasis on joint operations in yet another part of the book.

The greatest shortcoming of *Breaking the Phalanx* is that it defines a new force structure without identifying the threat that force structure will

14. Newman, *supra* note 3, at 35.

face. Macgregor describes a second version of the Persian Gulf War in which his “groups” would fight, but he cannot articulate any failure by the U.S. Army in the last half century which merits a wholesale change in the force structure. He poses no other hypothetical battles in which his force might prove superior to the current force structure. Macgregor may be attempting to fix something that isn’t broken. Today’s Army faces a myriad of different missions. Smart, capable leaders like Colonel Macgregor have learned to successfully modify and adapt our current force structure to most operations and threats faced by the Army. It is not a perfect organization, but Macgregor does not identify any tragic flaws which justify such dramatic change. Nor does he give the reader a more modern historical precedent than the Macedonian Phalanx.

The reformation of the force faces huge obstacles too. Closer integration of the sister services will likely encounter great resistance from all branches. Budgets may be the next battlegrounds for the four services. Even Macgregor acknowledges that the additional “jointness” required under his plan may not be possible and that his model requires additional study.¹⁵

Breaking the Phalanx is a remarkable book that every serious student of warfighting should read. Colonel Macgregor courageously challenges some of the most deeply held assumptions in the military and boldly proposes innovative and well thought out changes for the status quo. His book will stimulate a lot of ideas and controversy on how we can make this a better Army. In *Breaking the Phalanx*, Colonel Macgregor may not have all the answers, but he certainly asks the right questions.

15. MACGREGOR, *supra* note 1, at 96.