

# Moment of Battle: The Twenty Clashes that Changed the World<sup>1</sup>

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*Battles that have piqued our interest are particularly those that still reverberate down through the ages. And that in turn has forced us to delve into the precarious game of counterfactual history. In other words, had the outcome been different, would it have turned the course of the future in substantially different directions?*<sup>2</sup>

## I. Introduction

Looking back at the events that shaped our world, it is easy to consider the “what ifs” of a particular situation. What if the Athenians, battered and weary from battle, did not complete the 26-mile trek from Marathon to Athens in time to deter the Persian Commander Datis from attacking the city?<sup>3</sup> What if Queen Elizabeth I’s messenger made it to Sir Francis Drake with her orders to call off the looming attack on the Spanish Armada before he departed to meet his formidable adversary at sea?<sup>4</sup> What if Britain lacked the leadership of Sir Winston Churchill during World War II because the car that hit him in 1931 left him dead, not injured?<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, the course of history is paved with chance moments but which of those moments actually “turned the course of the future in substantially different directions?”<sup>6</sup>

In *Moment of Battle: The Twenty Clashes that Changed the World*, authors James Lacey and Williamson Murray posit that the world today would be a considerably different place if the twenty battles featured in their book ended differently. Lacey and Murray follow the footsteps of revered historian Sir Edward Creasy in attempting to distinguish important battles that had a momentous impact on the development of the world, not just the development of military history.<sup>7</sup> While they present some battles that are well settled in the annals of history for their contributions to the future of civilization, Lacey and Murray argue that several lesser-known clashes played a role that time has proven to be just as important. Unfortunately, Lacey and Murray fall short in many of their selections by providing unnecessary and often minute details that lack relevance to

the thesis they seek to prove while simultaneously failing to provide adequate supporting facts and thoughtful analysis to establish their desired conclusions. Where the authors do succeed, however, is in the same details but for unsuspecting reasons. While the information presented does not always connect the dots to support the thesis of each selection, the level of detail provided gives the reader plenty of opportunities to find his own takeaway, often highlighting the decision-making process leading up to or during battle in addition to varied leadership responses in challenging situations. These authors succeed at regurgitating historical events but fall short of successfully arguing the impact of the battles they selected.

## II. Background

Dr. James Lacey retired from the U.S. Army after 24 years of combined active and reserve service.<sup>8</sup> He graduated from The Citadel with a Bachelor of Arts in History and later earned his Ph.D. in Military History from Leeds University in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Lacey’s opinion columns have appeared in publications including the New York Post and The Weekly Standard and he also served as an embedded journalist for Time Magazine during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>10</sup> His previous published works include *The First Clash: The Miraculous Greek Victory at Marathon and its Impact on Western Civilization*, *Pershing: A Biography*, and *Takedown: The 3rd Infantry Division’s Twenty-One Day Assault on Baghdad*.<sup>11</sup> Currently, Dr. Lacey serves as Director of the War Policy and Strategy Program at the Marine Corps War College in Quantico, Virginia.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Williamson Murray graduated from Yale University in 1963 with a degree in history before joining the U.S. Air

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<sup>1</sup> JAMES LACEY & WILLIAMSON MURRAY, *MOMENT OF BATTLE: THE TWENTY CLASHES THAT CHANGED THE WORLD* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 295.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at xiii.

<sup>7</sup> SIR EDWARD CREASY, *THE FIFTEEN DECISIVE BATTLES OF THE WORLD: FROM MARATHON TO WATERLOO* (Dover Publ’ns. Inc. 2001) (1851); LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at xii–xiii.

<sup>8</sup> See Biography of James Lacey, MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY, [https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Pages/faculty\\_pages/MCWAR/Dr.%20James%20Lacey.aspx](https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Pages/faculty_pages/MCWAR/Dr.%20James%20Lacey.aspx) (last visited Oct. 15, 2015) [hereinafter Lacey Bio].

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> JAMES LACEY, *THE FIRST CLASH: THE MIRACULOUS GREEK VICTORY AT MARATHON AND ITS IMPACT ON WESTERN CIVILIZATION* (2011); JIM LACEY, *PERSHING: A BIOGRAPHY* (2008); JIM LACEY, *TAKEDOWN: THE 3RD INFANTRY DIVISION’S TWENTY-ONE DAY ASSAULT ON BAGHDAD* (2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Lacey Bio, *supra* note 8.

Force where he served for five years as an officer.<sup>13</sup> Upon completion of his military service, he returned to his alma mater where he earned his Ph.D. in military-diplomatic history.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Murray's previous books include *Military Adaptation in War and War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness*.<sup>15</sup> He also co-authored *The Iraq War: A Military History* with Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr. (Ret.) and *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* with Alan Millett.<sup>16</sup> Following an illustrious career teaching at various military and academic institutions including both the Air and Naval War Colleges, Dr. Murray presently serves as the Director of the History, Social and Strategic Ideas Program at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.<sup>17</sup>

### III. Analysis

These prominent historians begin their journey through history with a discussion of the Battle of Marathon, 490 B.C.<sup>18</sup> They claim that the very existence of Western civilization is attributed to the courageous fighting and success of the Athenians "who bravely went forward against overwhelming odds to victory and never-ending glory."<sup>19</sup> Had the Athenians fallen to the mighty hand of the Persian Army, little opposition would have remained to resist the continued expansion of the Persian Empire, especially given the weakened state of Rome at the time.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the authors spend sixteen pages discussing in excruciating detail the tactical decisions and actions on the battlefield.<sup>21</sup> While this level of detail is thoroughly researched and coherently written—as expected from these distinguished historians—the authors do not provide substantial support for their claim that without the defeat of the Persian forces that fateful day, the evolution of Western civilization would have been substantially different if existing at all. Instead, the authors provide only three paragraphs of discussion to

conclude their thesis; they fail to provide thoughtful analysis or pertinent facts to reach their conclusion.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, the authors' penchant for providing tactical details of the selected battles reverberates throughout the book while they frequently fail to include sufficient discussion of the events leading up to the battle. Specifically, the authors repeat this lackluster approach in their discussions of several other battles including Gaugamela, Adrianople, Yarmuk, Midway, Kursk, and the least convincing selection in this book—the battle to secure Objective Peach.<sup>23</sup>

The authors propose that the battle for securing Objective Peach (the al-Qa'id Bridge) in the Iraq War was so significant that without American forces securing that bridge, the course of the world would be considerably different than it is today.<sup>24</sup> There is little argument that securing the bridge ensured the rapid progression of American forces to Baghdad, resulting in the collapse of Saddam's regime just days later.<sup>25</sup> It is not clear why the authors chose to include this battle, not only because they acknowledge that the battle may be too recent to determine its long-term impact but specifically because they offer no discussion or analysis as to why it is significant enough to have changed the world.<sup>26</sup> Specific to the recent Iraq conflict, some might argue that it was the second Battle of Fallujah that turned the tide in the Iraq War.<sup>27</sup> Others may assert that without the success of the surge, the Iraqi Government would not have been able to officially take the reins of their newly democratic country.<sup>28</sup> Continued disruption in the Middle East leads others to argue that in spite of the alleged success of the Iraq War, the region remains unstable in such a way that new threats emerge and threaten the regional stability and security leaving the future

<sup>13</sup> See Biography of Williamson Murray, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, <https://history.osu.edu/directory/murray1> (last visited Oct. 15, 2015) [hereinafter Murray Bio].

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> WILLIAMSON MURRAY, *MILITARY ADAPTATION IN WAR* (2014); WILLIAMSON MURRAY, *WAR, STRATEGY, AND MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS* (2011).

<sup>16</sup> WILLIAMSON MURRAY & MAJOR GENERAL ROBERT H. SCALES, JR., *THE IRAQ WAR: A MILITARY HISTORY* (2003); WILLIAMSON MURRAY & ALAN R. MILLETT, *A WAR TO BE WON: FIGHTING THE SECOND WORLD WAR* (2001).

<sup>17</sup> See Murray Bio, *supra* note 13.

<sup>18</sup> LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 20.

<sup>20</sup> CREASY, *supra* note 7, at 11–12, 15–16, 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at 20.

<sup>22</sup> See *id.* at 19–20.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 21–40, 81–100, 101–15, 318–39, 340–60, 407–25.

<sup>24</sup> But see JOHN KEEGAN, *THE IRAQ WAR* (2008) (providing only a general mention of the river crossing sites along the Euphrates and their importance to American forces advancing into position to take Baghdad as opposed to the assertion that without the bridge, the war, and the world, would have been substantially different).

<sup>25</sup> See *id.* at 189–203.

<sup>26</sup> See LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at 407–08, 425.

<sup>27</sup> DICK CAMP, *OPERATION PHANTOM FURY: THE ASSAULT AND CAPTURE OF FALLUJAH, IRAQ* (2009) (presenting a historical discussion of the events of the Iraq war leading up to and including the Second Battle of Fallujah which took place from November 7 until December 23, 2004. Dick Camp argues that the battle was not only the largest battle by the Marine Corps in the Iraq War but also the most significant battle during the occupation of Iraq).

<sup>28</sup> David H. Petraeus, *How We Won in Iraq: And Why All the Hard-Won Gains of the Surge are in Grave Danger of Being Lost Today*, FOREIGN POLICY (Oct. 29, 2013), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/29/david\\_petraeus\\_how\\_we\\_won\\_the\\_surge\\_in\\_iraq](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/29/david_petraeus_how_we_won_the_surge_in_iraq).

of the region in flux.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the authors do not offer sufficient evidence or analysis to support the worldly significance of securing Objective Peach.

Aside from the deficiencies mentioned above, the authors still provide opportunities for the reader to glean important takeaways from each passage. For example, the authors frequently provide considerable details about the conduct of leaders in times of battle that—perhaps unwittingly—convey important leadership lessons. For example, the discussion of the Battle of Midway shines light on what the authors refer to as “victory disease” or the arrogance of the Japanese leadership and their refusal to accept that the enemy, whom they viewed as inferior, could pose a formidable threat, reminding the reader of the dangers of over-confidence and complacency.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the passage about Lieutenant General Hamdani, commander of Iraq’s II Corps during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and his bizarre conversation with Qusay Hussein demonstrates the importance of flexibility and trusting your commanders in the field to adapt the mission to changing circumstances.<sup>31</sup> This selection also underscores the dangers of tyrannical leadership and highlights that fear of disagreeing with your superior often clouds sound judgment.<sup>32</sup>

In the midst of the scattered disappointment that this book offers, redemption soon follows as the authors provide more substantive presentations of other battles, though still somewhat lacking in terms of analytical discussion. For instance, the authors set forth a mediocre historical backdrop leading up to the battle at Dien Bien Phu in the First Indochina War. The discussion then leads to the decisions of the French and the Viet Minh in the months leading up to the battle followed by detailed discussion of the siege itself.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the ultimate conclusion posits simply

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey White, *ISIS, Iraq, and the War in Syria: Military Outlook*, THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY (June 19, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-iraq-and-the-war-in-syria-military-outlook>.

<sup>30</sup> See LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at 319–28 (discussing the tactical decisions leading up to the Battle of Midway made by Japanese commanders based on their perceived lack of threat from the American fleet in the vicinity of Midway, often disregarding their own intuition because they felt the Americans were far inferior and could not defeat the Japanese fleet).

<sup>31</sup> See *id.* at 415, 419–23.

<sup>32</sup> See *id.* at 413–22. Hamdani, fresh from battle and with knowledge of the rapidly progressing American force travelling from the south, attempted to explain to Qusay Hussein and the Minister of Defense that the situation on the ground did not comport with the actions the Iraqi forces had anticipated. *Id.* Specifically, he tried to convince them that the main thrust of the American effort would not be coming from Jordan but was actually en route to Baghdad from Kuwait, nearing the bridges needed to cross the Euphrates that would open the door for the Americans to take Baghdad. Unfortunately for the Iraqis, the meeting participants’ loyalty to Saddam, or their fear of disagreeing with him, led Qusay to decide it was prudent to continue to focus forces on the non-existent American assault force that would certainly be arriving from Jordan. *Id.* The assault from Jordan never came and Baghdad fell within days. *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> See *id.* at 388–404.

that because of the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the government collapsed in Paris ultimately leading to their departure from Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> Events that followed, including the division of the southern peninsula from the north, resulted in the Vietnam War and American involvement.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, the authors failed to address the long-term impact of that conflict neglecting, for example, the impact it had on the spread of communism and perhaps even the impact on Muslim radicalization in the years that followed.<sup>36</sup> While the authors do not develop their arguments in a manner to sufficiently convince the reader, the decision to couch it in a solid historical framework does help the reader draw conclusions on his own. The danger in this approach, however, is that the conclusion of each passage may not be as strong as the authors require to adequately support their thesis. Unfortunately, this approach is repeated in the discussions of the battles at Zama, Teutoburger Wald, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Annus Mirabilis, Trafalgar, Vicksburg, and Normandy.<sup>37</sup>

Lacey and Murray do not disappoint, however, in their discussions of several battles which makes it clear that the battles they selected deserve a proper place in history. For example, the discussion of the Battle of Breitenfeld showcases the level of expertise expected by Lacey and Murray. The authors assert, and establish facts to support, that the actions of Gustavus Adolphus leading up to and during the Battle at Breitenfeld revolutionized the face of war in such a manner that the future of Western warfare was forever changed.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on lessons learned from the ancient Romans and Maurice of Orange, Adolphus instituted sweeping reforms for the administrative and logistical support of his forces.<sup>39</sup> He also changed the way they trained and fought, and he instituted a command structure supported by a system of discipline that would forever change the Western face of battle.<sup>40</sup> The authors thoroughly support the contention that the changes Gustavus Adolphus made revolutionized the face of war for years to come and continue to effect the way countries prepare for and wage war to this day.<sup>41</sup> The authors demonstrate their superior knowledge and intellectual prowess in not only their passage about the Battle of Breitenfeld but also in their assessments of Hastings, Saratoga, the Marne, and the Battle of Britain.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 404–06.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> MAX BOOT, *INVISIBLE ARMIES: AN EPIC HISTORY OF GUERRILLA WARFARE FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT* (2013) 476–77, 524.

<sup>37</sup> LACEY & MURRAY, *supra* note 1, at 41–80, 136–61, 182–201, 225–64, 361–87.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 179–81.

<sup>39</sup> See *id.* at 167–81.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 116–27, 202–24, 265–91, 292–317.

#### IV. Conclusion

Ultimately, Drs. Lacey and Murray write an effective summarization of the events of the twenty battles they present. Unfortunately, the book lacks a consistent approach to each of these battles by often providing facts that do not logically result in substantiating the thesis of the book and by failing to provide the analysis needed to reach those conclusions. *Moment of Battle* can be a useful book for a quick, twenty-page summarization of the battles presented but, with few exceptions, should not be sought for more than that. For the reader that enjoys the play-by-play accounts of the warfare, this would be an interesting book to read. If the reader is looking for the authors to answer the question of why each of these battles changed the course of history, he will likely be disappointed.