



### Reading between the Lines

#### ***Transformation Under Fire: Revolutionizing How America Fights***

by Douglas A. Macgregor, translated into Hebrew by Baruch Korot

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372 pages

### Or Barak

Colonel (ret.) Dr. Douglas Macgregor is one of the most prominent voices that for years have been calling for radical change in the United States armed forces in general, and in the ground forces in particular. Macgregor dedicated his intellectual life to the paradigmatic crisis that has beset the US military and how to overcome it, disseminating his doctrine in this book, which was first published in English in 2003 and translated into Hebrew four years later. IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi's directive to his officers from the rank of lieutenant colonel up to read *Transformation under Fire* has prompted discussion among researchers that has illuminated a broad spectrum of themes.

In the book, which is divided into ten chapters and an appendix, the author insists on the need for fundamental structural changes in modern armies in order to make them more efficient. The vision of this former armored corps officer includes the creation of multi-branch tactical units<sup>1</sup> that would integrate

forces and command based on state-of-the-art technological systems. According to Macgregor, this structure will maximize the ground forces' ability to work with the air and naval forces. Joint command of all of the forces and use of digital technologies will establish the most effective channel of communication.

As correct and important as his ideas may be regarding structural contexts of force buildup and analysis of "the global trends that influence the United States' strategic and operational environment, [which] correspond with the questions that Huntington understood as central when it comes to the relevance of military organizations" (Gross, 2020), it is doubtful whether these are the most relevant messages that Macgregor sought to convey.

This assumption relies first and foremost on two explicit warnings that Gross issued, whereby "the considerable time that has passed since the writing of this book" must be taken into account. As such, the Israeli reader must examine critically whether the challenges Macgregor describes as facing the US military early in the previous decade are similar to those facing the IDF in 2020 (Gross, 2020). Moreover, Macgregor himself holds more up-to-date perspectives and presents them in his book *Margin of Victory* (Macgregor, 2016), in which he provides five historical examples that connect forward-looking force buildup with victories on the battlefield. This strengthens the argument that if the intention were to apply Macgregor's military doctrine to the IDF and its commanders, decidedly more recent literature could have been suggested. Moreover, it shows that the tactical and strategic conclusions formulated in this book two decades ago are not necessarily its most important message, and certainly not the only one.

Rather, what is important here is to shine the spotlight on Macgregor's worldview, which highlights a timeless perspective that does not lose its relevance even when challenged by technological developments, as effective as they may be. This worldview validates the assertion

that the impetus for change must include the need to understand the changes and the ability to discard fundamental assumptions as a basis for implementing any change.

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The fact that the writer chooses to open each chapter with a quotation is no coincidence. Aside from what these excerpts drawn from various fields contribute to the structure of the book, they form a booklet of interdisciplinary analysis that corresponds well with Macgregor's central motif. The essence of this motif is purposeful change that requires implementation of the principles of innovation as a central component of victory. Macgregor adopts meaningful insights from different realms because in his opinion they can make the military arena more effective.

The book begins with a quotation from the founder of the internet portal LYCOS, Bob Davis: "We have been implementing technology over the past few years almost without regard for the changes that it demands of our organizations.... Empower your employees. Change the process. Make a contribution to organizational effectiveness." This statement illustrates the notion Macgregor seeks to establish in the introductory chapter, which focuses on the fact that military power is no longer based on mass enlistment of manpower and puts forward an up-to-date thesis regarding precision attacks using networked intelligence capabilities that provide a rapid flow and distribution of intelligence.

Chapter 2 opens with a quotation from the philosopher Peter Drucker, the father of modern management theory: "We have tried to substitute mass for purpose. We have tried to regain military potency of defense by making it gigantic, unwieldy, complex. It never works." In other words, changes occur all the time. The

faster we identify them and adapt to them, the greater our chance of winning. For example, Macgregor considers weapons of nuclear destruction as something tangible (and not unthinkable), highlights the difference between the old notion of streamlining mass force and the concept of using more limited resources, and states that small and lethal teams are needed, and not mass armies that were intended for territorial victory and conquest.

The third chapter, in which Macgregor relates to potential global threats, opens with the words of the chair of the Harvard University Advanced Leadership Initiative, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, whose explicit goal is to develop new leadership power that is suited to global changes by means of strategies of innovation and leadership for change. In her words, "Nativism limits choices. It closes people's minds to new ideas that come from outside their own group." This approach echoes Macgregor's statements that "rather than trying to forecast the future, we should try to shape it." Macgregor explicitly emphasizes that attempts to breathe new life into comatose concepts "are not a starting point for creative thinking...solutions to the past will only cause us to relive the past."

The fourth chapter opens with a quotation from Admiral Edward [sic] Giambastiani, commander of the United States Joint Forces Command: "While some aspects of transformation involve new systems and high technology, I view the challenge of transformation as principally intellectual." The quotation matches Macgregor's statements in the chapter, which deals with effects-based thinking.<sup>2</sup> This thinking changes the way we see the enemy, ourselves, and the actions to be included and emphasized in planning and carrying out operations, hence leading to the conclusion that "simply put, effects-based thinking is another way to plan backward from victory." The original basic assumption that Macgregor demonstrates requires an inter-branch force to understand the end goal (victory) while progressing toward it. He believes that

“achieving effects that will bring about victory” is what J. F. C. Fuller refers to as “elasticity of mind” (Fuller, 2000, p. 399).

The fifth chapter, which discusses perspectives and architectures for inter-branch warfare conducted by expeditionary forces, opens with a quotation from Lt. Gen. James Gavin from 1947: “We professional soldiers are traditionally laggard in facing and adopting changes.” Macgregor undoubtedly could have found a quotation more recent than that of Gavin, who died a decade before the book was written. But similar to Macgregor’s conceptual themes, the selected quotation also expresses a timeless message. Macgregor opens the chapter with, “The dominant feature of our time is information technology (IT), the most important feature of which is the leverage that it gives human intelligence in observing, understanding, and adapting to developments in *real time*.” In other words, Macgregor suggests that his readers not be surprised by the fact that “the nature of command and control in land warfare changes every time the technology changes...[because] If we are going to reach any degree of joint C4ISR interoperability, we must embrace and understand this new way of thinking. If we do not, we will never realize the potential that lies within IT.”

The sixth chapter discusses preparations for global inter-branch warfare of expeditionary forces. Macgregor opens this chapter with another quotation from Gavin: “Organizations designed to fight the last war better, will not win the next!” Like Macgregor and like Kochavi, here Gavin focuses on “victory” itself, conveying the message that unconventional creative thinking, which can overturn basic assumptions if necessary, contains the stuff that victory is made of.

The seventh chapter opens with a quotation from the historian Donald Kagan: “In 1940, the British Fleet could do nothing...The only thing that could be counted on to deter any German leader who was not insane was the certainty of the presence on the western front, soon after

the outbreak of war, of an army large enough... an army of such a size as the British ultimately put into the field, too late to deter war but just in time to avoid defeat.” This idea is echoed by Macgregor, who explicitly states that “contrary to the images of success in action projected onto Hollywood’s silver screen, victory in combat is not accidental. It is also not the function of sudden inspiration or dumb luck.”

The writer opens the eighth chapter with a message from British psychologist Norman Dixon: “It is indeed ironic that one of the most conservative of professions should be called upon to engage in activities that require the very obverse of conservative mental traits. It is rather like expecting the Pope to run an efficient birth control clinic.” This message supports Macgregor’s assertion: “If we ask the right questions, the right answers will emerge.” The metaphor used by Macgregor later in the chapter, that “it makes no sense to enter mules into the Kentucky Derby when racehorses are needed to win,” also echoes the message that opens the chapter, that the emphasis here is not on one particular change or another but rather on the ability to execute one change or another.

The ninth chapter opens with a quotation from Jim Collins: “First, get capable, motivated people on the team—the rule of ‘First Who, Then What’...If a company begins with the right people, it will be better prepared to execute a different strategy when the world changes. And if it has the right people—those with a wired-in drive for excellence—the problem of how to motivate them largely goes away.” The explicit “operating instructions” emerging from this quotation are very similar, both on the conceptual level and on the applied level, to the instructions Macgregor specifies, whose essence is the basic belief in human potential and in the value of excellence. He states this directly later in the chapter: “I argue that the cultural legacy of bigger is better, inspired by Henry Ford’s assembly line, is the wrong foundation for

combat and institutional strategy for a military organization in the information age.”

A message from Donald Rumsfeld, the youngest US Secretary of Defense (in the 1970s) and the oldest Secretary of Defense (in the 2000s), opens the tenth chapter. “Preparing for the future will require us to think differently and develop the kinds of forces and capabilities. . . . An ability to adapt will be critical in a world where surprise and uncertainty are the defining characteristics of our new security environment.” This idea mirrors Macgregor’s vision, which also sees fit to demonstrate his ideas by citing the Israeli case: “Having succeeded brilliantly in 1967 against virtually all of the surrounding Arab armies, the IDF rested comfortably on its laurels.” Yet in the same breath he also notes, “There is little doubt that the IDF would have incurred fewer losses and avoided the initial reverses had it extended its thinking and its development beyond 1967.”

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**“If you are like this doll,” Macgregor would say, “I don’t need you in my unit. *I need soldiers who can think for themselves.*”**

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Macgregor’s conceptual sub-text regarding the conservative nature of the majority of military commanders and his assertion that “the conservative military mind meticulously plans, trains, and rehearses to eliminate as much risk as possible” warns of a situation in which the army prefers “conservative technology,” even at the cost of “less advanced technology.” In this sense, his words match the statements of Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shimon Naveh, who established and directed the Operational Theory Research Institute, and who, like Macgregor, was seen as a groundbreaking and controversial writer in the field of the art of war. The writer even quotes Naveh, who referred to Tukhachevskii’s approach to military technology and force buildup, which “stemmed from a systemic approach aimed at linking to the advanced

operational maneuver, any relevant technology or tactical element that could be utilized in its application.”

The writer’s own character is reflected in the particular figures he chose to quote at the opening of each chapter. The picture that emerges is clearly of someone who sanctifies independent thinking as a supreme value. This approach is expressed in his famous statement to his soldiers in every opening talk with them: “If you are like this doll,” Macgregor begins, “I don’t need you in my unit. *I need soldiers who can think for themselves*” (Speiser, 2019).

*Transformation Under Fire* is not a book about military strategy, even though it discusses strategic issues. To a great extent, it can be seen as a work of military philosophy that focuses on the concept of transformation (Speiser, 2019). This statement joins Macgregor’s own repeated assertion that the most important quality for commanders is independent thinking (Speiser, 2019). This summarizing statement, which encapsulates a collection of immortal messages distilled from the book, “emphasizes the indispensability of teaching commanders *how to think* rather than *what to think*,” and this, Macgregor believes, is the key.

Thus in deciding to recommend this particular book, Chief of Staff Kochavi likely sought to single out those commanders who would identify the intellectual distinctions that require the reader to seek out the insights inherent in the lines themselves. He evidently aspires to direct his commanders toward groundbreaking thinking with the hope they will not focus on tactics, which, as important as these may be, will not by themselves lead to the next victory.

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## Notes

- 1 Units based on information and time and not on masses, in line with the new systemic inter-branch doctrine regarding maneuver and firepower operations.
- 2 Effect-Based Operations (EBO) is a process aimed at achieving a strategic result through implementation that integrates all military and non-military capabilities on the tactical, systemic, and strategic levels.