Beyond Thompson and Malaya: The Search for a Usable Counterinsurgency Past

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/10/11/beyond-thompson-and-malaya-the-search-for-a-usable-counterinsurgency-past/

TITUS VAN DE KERKE, OCT 11 2015

During the nation's extensive engagement in counterinsurgency (COIN) conflicts in the 20th century, British counterinsurgency doctrine developed a reputation for effectiveness.[1] As a result, British COIN has been studied far beyond the nation's borders. According to some however, research on the subject has consequently misinterpreted the past, constructing a British COIN myth with questionable foundations.[2] In his recent book *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* , Douglas Porch criticizes the influence of what he perceives as the misinterpretation of British COIN history on "the naïve, impracticable, unworkable and perhaps institutionally fraudulent" counterinsurgency doctrines laid out in the United States Army's latest COIN manual (known as *FM 3-24*) and implemented during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[3] Similarly, Andrew Salamone rejects the manual's use of selective historical examples in his article *Military History and the Drafting of Doctrine: FM 3-24, Relevant Case Studies or Seductive Analogies?* [4] This essay asks the question whether their criticism can be extended towards Britain's counterinsurgency manual and explores the extent to which British COIN research has already problematized the influence of British COIN history on modern day doctrine.

The essay will start by discussing some of Porch's and Salamone's arguments. Subsequently, it examines the extent to which British COIN writers have engaged with the historicity of the British approach to counterinsurgency and the transferal of counterinsurgency lessons from one context to another. Finally, this essay asks whether there is an apparent overreliance on the disputed principles of British Counterinsurgency or on historical example in the most recent COIN manual published by the British army. It ultimately argues that while British COIN research has severely nuanced some of the persistent myths surrounding British COIN history, official British counterinsurgency doctrine could benefit from a thorough questioning of the origins as well as the operational relevance of the historical examples it incorporates and the influence these examples exert on the COIN principles which the doctrine presents.

Scholars and practitioners alike have delved the past of British counterinsurgency experience in search of usable lessons for future engagements. Several American authors have engaged in the practice: For Thomas Mockaitis, who wrote extensively on the conflicts occurring during the decolonization of the British empire, the primary lesson British COIN history has to offer lies in adherence to the use of as little force as possible to maintain the legitimacy of both the soldiers and the government engaged in the counterinsurgency effort.[5] According to Mockaitis, "governments would be well advised" to reflect on the perceived lessons of British COIN experience when engaged in a variety of low intensity conflict.[6] In his book *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, John Nagel explicitly compares the British COIN experience in Malaya with that of the United States in Vietnam for the purpose of identifying the principles which led to British counterinsurgency success.[7] In Nagel's narrative, it is most importantly the British army's ability to adapt to the local situation which helped them defeat the Malayan insurgency.[8]

According to Douglas Porch, both views by Mockaitis and Nagel, which became highly influential in the way the United States engaged in counterinsurgency through *FM 3-24*, the US army's 2006 COIN manual, are based on faulty generalizations of the British COIN past.[9] In Porch's view, both authors continued in a trend set by Sir Robert Thompson's influential *Defeating Communist Insurgency* by overestimating the effectiveness of British COIN and ascribing too much potential to the five COIN principles which Thompson distilled from his experiences during

Malayan campaign.[10] Porch rejects the idea (which he believes is perpetuated through Mockaitis' and Nagel's research) that British COIN success in Malaya lay in the effectiveness of its "doctrine and its experience in imperial policing".[11] Instead, he attributes British victory to "circumstances in the strategic environment", pointing at the fact that in the case of Malaya "the insurgent, overwhelmingly Chinese immigrants composed a geographically isolated racial minority".[12] According to Porch, the success Thompson, Mockaitis and Nagel ascribe to British COIN operations and thought has contributed to the overconfidence in the use of COIN tactics as a source of success in ill-fitting strategic circumstances by US policy makers and military leaders.[13] Porch maintains that the proponents of the use of COIN tactics have represented them as "infallible prescriptions for effortless conquest, nation-building, and national grandeur".[14]

In his article *Counterinsurgency: The Graduate Level of War or Pure Hokum?* Gian Gentile states that "counterinsurgency wars have not been won or lost by the tactical methods of the armies that have fought them".[15] In accordance with Porch, he is highly critical of the idea that the introduction of the "classic tactics of counterinsurgency" to the US army's occupation of Iraq by General Petraeus (who took command of the troops in Iraq in January 2007) "put the war on the path to success".[16] According to Gentile, there is a persistent myth of "enlightened counterinsurgency generals who turn failed wars around by making their armies fight them better".[17] Gentile fears that as long as the "fantasy that American wars in foreign lands can always be made to work as long as the "professors of war" at the graduate level are put in charge" is perpetuated, the fact that "what mattered most" in the success or failure of COIN tactics "were the strategic, political, and social contexts in which these wars were fought", will remain hidden.[18]

In his article *Military History and the Drafting of Doctrine: FM 3-24, Relevant Case Studies or Seductive Analogies?* Andrew Salamone questions "the validity of the historical analogies used in FM 3-24", which he believes is "firmly grounded in the classical theories of insurgency and counterinsurgency", and speaks out against "the continued reliance" on historical examples that are "diminishing in relevance" in current COIN doctrine.[19] According to Salamone, the counterinsurgency manual's "key concepts, historical case studies, and even the list of suggested readings" point towards the experiences gathered in fighting communist insurgencies during the second half of the 20th century. Salamone maintains that the manual touts "Sir Robert Thompson's defeat of the insurgent movement in Malaya and David Galula's efforts against insurgency in Algeria" as examples of successful COIN that can supply useful insight in the way counterinsurgency should be fought today.[20]

According to Salamone, the manual's focus lies primarily with Maoist-inspired insurgencies and the lessons learned in fighting them, assuming that "those of today's religiously-inspired groups have a similar overarching ideology that can be countered with similar strategies" and leading it to neglect other insurgency frameworks which bear a closer resemblance to the way in which modern insurgents are operating.[21] While the manual emphasizes the notion that every insurgency is different, demanding a different response and urging practitioners to "identify the philosophy behind the approach insurgent leaders have adopted", Salamone believes that it fails to convey the "changed motives driving today's global insurgency".[22] Another point of criticism concerns the manual's selection of historical examples. According to Salamone, both *FM 3-24* and other contemporary literature about COIN tactics and strategy focus "on an extremely narrow pool of historical examples from which to draw lessons" while neglecting many past COIN conflicts which could provide more useful similarities to today's conflicts.[23]

Subsequently, Salamone points at the fact that the manual does not utilize any examples from outside of Western COIN experience and notes that examples such as the Russian campaign targeting "Chechen nationalists, jihadi elements, and organized crime syndicates" in Chechnya, India's approach to deal with "Sikh uprising in the state of Punjab during the 1980's and 90's" as well as the nation's efforts to counter "Pakistani-backed Muslim insurgency in the state of Kashmir" are ignored.[24] This leads Salamone to conclude that the use of historical example in both doctrine and COIN literature needs to be more "carefully examined to insure we are drawing lessons from case studies whose similarities to today's circumstances are more than superficial".[25] It is important to note that the manual's 2014 version has partially resolved this issue by incorporating some very limited case-studies from outside of the Western counterinsurgency experience such on the Hukbalahap-insurgency in the Philippines, the Shining Path in Peru, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the Pathet Lao in Laos, all organizations with a partially Marxist oriented background.[26]

In Britain, the subject of Counterinsurgency doctrine has been a topic of interest and research among scholars and military professionals for several decades. Writing on the subject has moved far beyond the mere chronicling of the countless insurgencies and engagements in which British forces engaged in COIN activities during the twentieth century. Instead, publications have critically examined the idea of a British counterinsurgency tradition and questioned the extent to which every British counterinsurgency deployment really revolved around the same principles. There are several debates surrounding the accuracy and usability of the British COIN past. These debates can either relate to specific counterinsurgency deployments and their supposed lessons, parts of the perceived established British counterinsurgency approach such as the implementation of "hearts and minds" campaigns and the minimum use of force, and challenge the idea that British COIN practitioners have been significantly more successful than their foreign counterparts or the notion that British success was based on the tactics British troops deployed.[27] Researchers have already delved into the foundations of some of the myths surrounding the British COIN past and attempted to create a more genuine and balanced image of its history. D. Hazel's paper on the development of British COIN doctrine since 2001 gives an ambiguous view of the position that the mythical images of British COIN have in its official handbooks as well as in the psyche of modern soldiers. Hazel explains that, "Despite popular belief that the British are all about 'hearts and minds' and the use of minimum force (and there is some truth in that) neither of these actually feature as British COIN principles" but are present in "all the thinking about the British approach to COIN and they reflect the British approach to policing rather than military operations".[28]

In *The Evolution of British COIN*, a paper written as part of a series on military doctrine published by the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (a think tank for British ministry of defense) Michael Crawshaw advises a cautious approach. According to Crawshaw, "any attempt to read across from one campaign to another is dangerous".[29] The paper does maintain that "some very broad principles can be applied to solving the problems involved" and points towards those laid out in Sir Robert Thompsons works on counterinsurgency which, in Crawshaw's view, are still applicable to today's situations and "will probably remain enduring into the future".[30] Crawshaw notes that in the campaigns where British forces achieved "a measure of success", they usually did so after an extended learning period which involved "unlearning preconceived ideas and getting rid of people who would not do so" while troops were already engaged. The need for what Crawshaw calls "adaptation in contact" reinforces the question to what extent a strong adherence to counterinsurgency principles can offer an advantage on the battlefield or obscure the need for a conflict-specific approach. It is on the other hand, the adherence to the broad principles of "simple and effective governmental and command structures coupled with clear directives and mandates", which Crawshaw believes British COIN success can be attributed to.[31]

The authors of the British army's counterinsurgency manual, published in 2009, take a stance toward the importance of incorporating the lessons from deployments in the past in current COIN doctrine, which is very similar to that laid out in Crawshaw's paper. Although they maintain that "Every counterinsurgency campaign is different from the last", they believe that a successful counterinsurgency campaign is built on both knowledge of the environment in which the conflict is fought out and the basic guidelines of accumulated COIN doctrine. They emphasize however, that the application of this knowledge calls for pragmatism and adaptation.[32] Besides going into the development of British COIN itself and focusing on the growth of religious fanaticism as a theme in counterinsurgency operations, the manual incorporates several case-studies from the British COIN past: the campaigns in Oman during from 1970 until 1975 and the Malaya campaign in the 1950's are identified as successes, while South Arabia and Aden during the 1960's and the long campaign in Mozambique from 1976 until 1992 represent more difficult chapter's in British COIN history.[33] While Salamone criticized *FM 3-24* for not trying to look for some relevant case-studies on engagement with religiously fuelled insurgency outside of Western experience, the British manual does not attempt to incorporate any historical examples from context outside of the British experience.

Besides the use of these historical cases to provide some context for the principals the manual presents, it provides a short summary of "successful and unsuccessful practices from a century of counterinsurgency operations".[34] The list provides broad but potentially important guidelines such as an emphasis on the development of intelligence sources and host-nation security forces, the need to offer security to the population and isolate insurgents from their civilian support system.[35] This list of successful practices is offset by one marking approaches likely to fail such as "the number of insurgents killed or captured, not on gaining the support of and securing the population" and the use

of large troop formations "rather than investing in company or small-scale operations".[36] The broad principles offered in the list further reinforce the manual's adherence to classic counterinsurgency thought. The case studies themselves are in no way presented as models for counterinsurgency deployment but rather serve as a testament to the different needs of every COIN engagement. In the case of the Malaya campaign, which the manual earmarks as the "most discussed and cited counter insurgency campaigns of the twentieth century" and the most "successful British campaign", the manual offers considerable moderation and notes the necessity "to be careful about drawing conclusions and applying them to other, often different, types of campaign without an understanding of the appropriate context".[37] By taking this approach, the manual clearly shows that the British army has developed a COIN doctrine which is firmly anchored in past experience but emphasis the need for pragmatism and adaption. According to the manual, counterinsurgency doctrine in both Britain and the US has always "lagged behind events" and was only updated after intervals of a decade or more. The manual notes it was partly due to the unofficial work of scholars and practitioners that "military doctrine has evolved and developed".[38]

The very first lines in the British Army's general doctrine publication on operations consist of a well-known quote from T.E. Lawrence; "With 2000 years of examples behind us, we have no excuse, when fighting, for not fighting well", which was written down by Basil Liddell Hart in his memoirs.[39] The army's counterinsurgency doctrine does not put this appeal to learn from a broad historical context to practice. While the army's counterinsurgency doctrine has shaken off some of British COIN's persistent mythology, it does perpetuate its established principles while doing relatively little to supplement them through historical examples with relevance for contemporary operations or a thorough explanation of the changing underlying motivations for insurgency. This is very understandable: the manual has to and does offer a coherent, meaningful and clear approach to counterinsurgency. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the modern COIN approach it lays out is being questioned.[40]

Porch's criticism of the way in which he believes that the COIN doctrine presented in *FM 3-24* was politicized is not directly transferable to the British manual, which offers a very balanced appreciation of COIN potential. If anything, Porch's belief that *FM 3-24* and its proponents created an overconfidence in COIN's capabilities in the face of a strategically difficult situation only reinforces the need to provide soldiers with a doctrine that is not only streamlined but usable and relevant in the context that it is being deployed. While a manual is arguably not a place for experimentation or radical thought, the continued possibility that British and American soldiers will be deployed in COIN operations would merit a thorough and far-sighted questioning of the principles current COIN doctrine is based upon, as well as an attempt to identify the consequences of the American and British experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq and introduce them into future doctrine.

Endnotes

[1] Robert Egnell, 'Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: what now for British counterinsurgency?', *International Affairs* (2011), Vol. 87, No. 2, 297.

[2] Andrew Mumford, 'Puncturing the counterinsurgency myth: Britain and irregular warfare in the past, present, and future', *US army war college strategic studies institute* (2011), 1. Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 'Hearts and minds, cultural Awareness and good intelligence: The blueprint for successful counter-insurgency?' *Intelligence and National Security* (2011), Vol. 26, No. 4, 445-446.

[3] Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the myths of the new way of war* (Cambridge university press: Cambridge, 2013), xi, 124.

[4] Andrew Salamone, 'Military history and the drafting of doctrine: FM 3-24, relevant case studies or seductive analogies?', *Small wars journal* (2008), 1.

[5] Thomas Mockaitis, *British counterinsurgency in the post-imperial era* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1995), 143.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] John Nagel, *Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to eat soup with a knife* (Praeger publishers: Westport, 2002).

[8] Ibidem, 213.

[9] Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, xi-xii, 124.

[10] Porch, *Counterinsurgency* 124.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid, xi.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gian Gentile, '*Counterinsurgency: The graduate level of war or pure hokum?' E-international relations* (2013).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Salamone, 'Military history and the drafting of doctrine', 1.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] Ibid, 3.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Salamone, 'Military history and the drafting of doctrine', 4.

[25] Ibidem.

[26] US Army, *FM 3-24: Insurgencies and countering insurgencies* (2014),1-3, 4-12, 8-1, 9-2.

[27] Debate surrounding these questions is present in works such as Huw Bennett, 'The other side of COIN: Minimum and exemplary force in British army counterinsurgency in Kenya', *Small wars & insurgencies* (2007), Vol. 18, No, 4, 638-664. David French, 'Nasty not nice: British counterinsurgency doctrine and practice, 1945–1967', *Small wars & insurgencies* (2012), Vol. 23, No. 4-5, 744-761. Matthew Hughes, 'The banality of brutality: British armed forces and the repression of the Arab revolt in Palestine 1936-39', *English Historical review* (2009), Vol. 124, No. 507, 313-354. Andrew Mumford, 'Puncturing the counterinsurgency myth: Britain and irregular warfare in the past, present, and future', *US army war college strategic studies institute* (2011), 18-20 specifically criticizes the notion of the British military as "the ultimate COIN practitioners".

[28] D. Hazel, 'British counter-insurgency doctrine and its development since 2001', Militaire spectator (2008), Vol. 177, No. 3, 157.

[29] Michael Crawshaw,'The evolution of British COIN', *Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40* (2012), 20.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Crawshaw,'The evolution of British COIN', 20.

[32] Ministry of Defence*, British Army Field Manual Volume 1 Part 10 Countering Insurgency* (2009), i.

[33] Ibidem, ii.

[34] Ibid, 4-22.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ministry of Defense*, Countering Insurgency*, i.

[37] Ibidem, CS5- 1.

[38] Ibid, CS 1 – 1.

[39] Ministry of Defense, *Army Doctrine publication Operations* (2010) 1-2.

[40] Douglas Porch, 'The dangerous myths and dubious promise of COIN', *Small wars & Insurgencies* (2011), Vol. 22, No. 2, 240.

References

Andrew Mumford, 'Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present, and Future', *US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute* (2011). http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1086.pdf. [Accessed 24 July 2015].

Andrew Salamone, 'Military History and the Drafting of Doctrine: FM 3-24, Relevant Case Studies or Seductive Analogies?', *Small Wars Journal* (2008) 1-6. Available from: http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/military-history-and-the-drafting-of-doctrine [Accessed 22 July 2015].

D. Hazel, 'British Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and its Development since 2001', Militaire Spectator (2008), Vol. 177, No. 3, 155-165.

David French, 'Nasty not Nice: British Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice, 1945–1967', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2012), Vol. 23, No. 4-5, 744-761.

Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2013).

Douglas Porch, 'The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2011), Vol. 22, No. 2, 239-257.

Gian Gentile, 'Counterinsurgency: The Graduate Level of War or Pure Hokum?', *E-International Relations* (2013). http://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/03/counterinsurgency-the-graduate-level-of-war-or-pure-hokum/. [Accessed 24 July 2015].

Huw Bennett, 'The Other Side of COIN: Minimum and Exemplary Force in British Army Counterinsurgency in Kenya',

Small Wars & Insurgencies (2007), Vol. 18, No, 4, 638-664.

Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 'Hearts and Minds, Cultural Awareness and Good Intelligence: The Blueprint for Successful Counter-Insurgency?', *Intelligence and National Security* (2011), Vol. 26, No. 4, 445-459.

John Nagel, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Praeger Publishers: Westport, 2002).

Matthew Hughes, 'The Banality of Brutality: British Armed Forces and the Repression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine 1936-39', *English Historical Review* (2009), Vol. 124, No. 507, 313-354.

Michael Crawshaw, 'The Evolution of British COIN', *Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40* (2012), 1-20. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/43334/jdp340theevolutionofbritishcoinbymichaelcrawshaw.pdf. [Accessed 24 July 2015].

Robert Egnell, 'Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: What now for British Counterinsurgency?', *International Affairs* (2011), Vol. 87, No. 2, 297-313.

Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1995).

Doctrine Publications

Ministry of Defense, *Army Doctrine Publication Operations* (2010). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/33695/ADPOperationsDec10.pdf [Accessed 24 July 2015].

Ministry of Defence*, British Army Field Manual Volume 1 Part 10 Countering Insurgency* (2009). http://www.scribd.com/doc/28411813/British-Army-Field-Manual-Counterinsurgency-2009 [Accessed 24 July 2015].

US Army, *FM 3-24: Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (2014). http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/Active_FM.html [Accessed 24 July 2015].

Written by: Titus van de Kerke
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Gerry Hughes
Date written: April 2015