



# Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present, and Future

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**PUNCTURING THE  
COUNTERINSURGENCY MYTH:  
BRITAIN AND IRREGULAR WARFARE  
IN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

**Andrew Mumford**

**September 2011**

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## FOREWORD

The British “way” of counterinsurgency warfighting has often been held up by academics and military practitioners alike as a model worthy of replication by other national militaries, including the United States. In this insightful and provocative monograph, Dr. Andrew Mumford posits that the popular perception of British counterinsurgency efficacy from Malaya onwards has certainly not been supported by the historical record of consistent tactical errors in the early phases of campaigns and long-term strategic obfuscation. Mumford takes the body of experience accumulated by the British in the past 60 years and uses it as a rich empirical base from which to rethink issues of immense strategic salience, such as the state of counterinsurgency education in the British military system; the utility of a “hearts and minds” strategy; and the nature of coalition-based irregular warfare. Sluggish British military lesson-learning, as seen through Mumford’s “10 myths of British counterinsurgency,” provides today’s strategists the opportunity to understand the value of lesson transferral and the problems of strategic inertia.

From the standpoint of the questionable British performance in Iraq, this monograph fundamentally assesses the arguable myth that surrounds British competency at counterinsurgency warfare, hopefully sparking a debate about the “mythology” of recent British counterinsurgency warfighting.



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ANDREW MUMFORD will be Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom, beginning in September 2011. He is convenor of the British International Studies Association's (BISA) Insurgencies and Small Wars working group. Dr. Mumford is the author of *The Counter-Insurgency Myth: The British Experience of Irregular War* (2011) and co-editor of *International Law, Security and Ethics: Policy Challenges in the Post-9/11 World* (2011). He is Reviews Editor of the journal *Civil Wars* and has previously been a Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University.





## SUMMARY

Britain's numerous counterinsurgency campaigns in the post-World War II era have resulted in a generally accepted academic assessment that this volume of experience equates to competence in the realm of irregular warfare. However, the British response to the complexities of 21st century insurgencies, particularly in their decentralized and globally networked form, has threatened to expose this competency as a colonial-era myth. Quantity of counterinsurgency combat experience has not equated to outright quality.

We cannot understand the British process of re-learning counterinsurgency since the beginning of the War on Terror unless certain axiomatic elements are first exposed. This monograph sets forth 10 myths of British counterinsurgency performance and learning. First among these is the allegation that the British have always been fast learners. However, the early phases of nearly every campaign in the classical era were marred by stagnancy, mismanagement, and confusion. Indeed, this trend reveals a second painful myth regarding British counterinsurgency conduct, namely, the alleged British perceptivity in COIN strategic planning. The preponderance of template solutions, however, arguably stemming from the over-hyped Malaya blueprint, has contributed to a process of biased selectivity when it comes to imbibing doctrine and disseminating a lesson-learning program. Simply, Mumford concludes on the basis of such myths as the two above that the British scorecard in counterinsurgency campaigns is not as impressive as recent credulous historiography would have us believe.



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**INTRODUCTION**

Britain's irregular warfare experience in the post-World War II era presented the military with numerous insurgent challenges where the *casus belli* ranged from communism (in Malaya), to tribal supremacist land struggles (in Kenya), to socialist-inspired nationalism (in Yemen), to the nationalist fight for an alternative union (in Northern Ireland). It was generally accepted that, as the War on Terror morphed into a protracted counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, the large volume of British irregular warfare experience has equated to competence in COIN operations. Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster's (in)famous *Military Review* article in 2005, which admonished American thinking and performance in Iraq, encapsulated the entrenched British mindset of superiority when it came to COIN.<sup>1</sup> "Take a leaf out of our book," Aylwin-Foster seemed to imply, "as we know best."

However, the British response to the complexities of 21st century insurgencies, in its decentralized and globally networked form, has exposed this competency as a colonial-era myth. Quantity of COIN combat experience has not equated to outright quality. This author holds that conventional academic and military perceptions of British performance in the realm of irregular warfare are highly suspect. This study sets forth 10 myths regarding British COIN performance, and then seeks to invalidate them by critically assess-

ing the efficacy of the British “way” of COIN, from the much-vaunted, yet over-hyped Malayan Emergency through the withdrawal of British combat troops from Iraq in 2009.

## **MYTH #1: THE BRITISH MILITARY IS AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING INSTITUTION**

According to John Nagl, the British succeeded in Malaya—in contrast to the American failure in Vietnam—because the British army had an organizational culture akin to a so-called “learning institution,” whereby the army quickly adapted to COIN conditions and changed tactics accordingly.<sup>2</sup> The array of operational activity, ranging from limited to total war, that the British army has experienced has arguably led to a greater degree of pragmatism in its military outlook. A dogmatic adherence to rigid military doctrine has been absent, which, when compared to the generation-long postmortem on the failure of U.S. strategy in Vietnam, perhaps explains more than most other factors why an almost mythic reputation has descended upon the British. However, this does not explain, nor should it obscure, the languid application of appropriate irregular warfare tactics and the absence of swift strategic design. When it comes to COIN, the British are slow learners.

The early phases of nearly every campaign in the classical era were marred by stagnancy, mismanagement, and confusion. The military was 2 years into the Malayan Emergency before it conceived of a cohesive civil-military strategy in the form of the Briggs Plan. The crucial early years of the troubles in Northern Ireland were marked by displays of indiscriminate force and an inability to modulate the response.<sup>3</sup> The Direc-

tor of the United Kingdom (UK) Defence Academy also concedes that, in relation to Northern Ireland, “[I]t is easy in the light of the later success . . . to forget the early mistakes and the time it took to rectify them.”<sup>4</sup> As Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely rightly observes, the Malayan Emergency was, “a much lauded counterinsurgency campaign, but often overlooked is the fact that in the early years . . . the British Army achieved very little success.” In COIN terms, therefore, the British have been consistently slow to implement an effective strategy and achieve operational success. Moreover, the vast body of campaign experience has not translated into a cogent COIN lesson-learning process within the British military. The very need to re-learn COIN in the post-September 11, 2001 (9/11) conflict environment has undermined assertions as to the British military’s being an effective learning institution. Such amnesia has created an imperative for the armed forces now to hone their lesson-learning abilities while simultaneously adapting to the intricate challenges of sub-state and transnational post-Maoist insurgent violence in the third millennium.

## **MYTH #2: BRITISH CIVIL-MILITARY COIN PLANNING IS STRATEGICALLY PERCEPTIVE**

This myth points to a painful element of British COIN conduct, namely, the short-circuiting of context. The preference for template solutions, arguably stemming from the Malaya blueprint (or Templer solutions, as they should perhaps be known; more on this later), has contributed to a process of tendentious selectivity when it comes to interpreting doctrine and disseminating a lesson-learning program. As far back as when the first pieces of Emergency Legislation

emerged in 1948, the campaign in Malaya proved that some things had not changed in the way Britain dealt with threats to its national security interests. Detention without trial, the forced relocation of elements of the local populace, and controversies surrounding excessive use of force, have a long heritage. It is essential to put contemporary debates surrounding these issues in their historical context in order to observe the historically derivative nature of British strategic design vis-à-vis COIN.

What is clear is that understanding the mercurial and complex nature of contemporary transnational *jihadi* insurgency does not lend itself to any facile template. Jihadist soldiers are not mere replicas of the more geographically bounded, communist-inspired Cold War enemy. Insight into the context of a conflict's origins and the insurgents' motivations is essential if both the psychological and the martial aspects of COIN operations are to be effective and nuanced. Again, this blindspot has marred British strategic perceptions. Political posturing in the wake of the withdrawal from Iraq has masked the COIN failings, which only serves to stifle meaningful reflection upon the state of strategic planning for the war. Such a lack has led to severe strains in UK civil-military relations on the subject of COIN. With the use of a single civil-military commander now increasingly anachronistic (indeed, they were the exception and not the rule in the British experience), there is an imperative for clear lines of communication and access of commanders on the ground to the highest echelons of government (both back home and within the host nation) if future COIN strategy is to be effectively executed. This concept is increasingly important in the present era of globalized post-Maoist insurgency.

### MYTH #3: THE BRITISH MILITARY HAS FLEXIBLY ADAPTED TO THE DEMANDS OF COIN

As Theo Farrell has observed, the process of British military transformation to gain facility in network-centric warfare and to satisfy the demands of contemporary strategy is conditioned by resource constraints, domestic politics, and military culture.<sup>5</sup> However, none of these three elements is conducive to quick adaptation in the British case. The military culture of the British Army is essential to the success of COIN lesson-learning, especially given the inherent aversion of the army to formalized doctrine. Pragmatic flexibility on a campaign-by-campaign basis has necessarily been evident given the absence of codified strategic guidance (the recent exception to this was the publication in October 2009 of the *British Army Field Manual, Vol. 1 Pt. 10, Countering Insurgency*).<sup>6</sup> Essentially, COIN lesson-learning for the British has been an ad hoc process, not historically continuous. The transmission of lessons, particularly during the late colonial era, occurred in large part due to the deployment of personnel who brought with them residual notions of the best operational practices, based upon previous COIN experiences – often outdated or inappropriate – in other theaters. This reliance on the transfer of COIN lessons from dated personal experience, especially among senior officers (for example, Captain [later General Sir] Frank Kitson from Kenya to Northern Ireland) was encouraged, if not necessitated, by the lack of an authoritative doctrinal underpinning.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, in the technologically-fixated, nuclear-armed mindset that dominated Cold War military thinking,



COIN was not deemed an appropriate or even relevant form of warfare requiring significant thought or adequate training. Despite the army's plethora of combat experience in low-intensity scenarios, COIN fell to the bottom of the British strategic pile. Still, this only partially explains the relative ambivalence with which the British military has adapted to COIN in the "Long" War on Terror. A fear exists in Western military circles that the current emphasis on COIN is a temporary fad and that an undue focus on low-intensity and peace support operations undermines the ability to conduct potential future conventional wars.<sup>8</sup> Despite these concerns, however, there is a discernible need to adapt to the utility of a dual-use force. Preparing for COIN operations can still be achieved with a degree of flexibility that does not ignore traditional high intensity warfare training.

#### **MYTH #4: THE BRITISH MILITARY HAS AN INGRAINED EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO COIN**

There is a basic, indeed inescapable, reality that COIN is inherently difficult to learn. It is a unique form of warfare, posing its own complex strategic problems and requiring challenging tactical adaptation. This is a hurdle not unique to the British Army, as the American, French, Russian, and Israeli militaries have attested. Consequently, a reliance on training maneuvers is rendered largely irrelevant. COIN requires a much higher degree of education within the military as to the distinctive threat posed by this form of conflict. This education must engender a heightened level of historical consciousness pertaining to past strategic and tactical successes and failures in COIN, and it must increase understanding of the contemporary insurgent threat.

Although progress has been made over the past decade and despite the seeming ubiquity of COIN-related courses at the staff colleges, there is some indication that the British military still has a way to go before COIN becomes an ingrained element of armed forces learning. A 2009 study sample of 114 officers at the Joint Services Command and Staff College revealed that more than two-thirds “had no knowledge of fundamental COIN principles.” The study concluded that there was “a lack of general awareness amongst junior officers of military doctrine underpinning the types of operations being routinely conducted in Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup> It must be noted, however, that the military cannot learn COIN without first understanding the nature of insurgency itself. This is a time-consuming process, requiring as much emphasis on nonkinetic elements such as cultural learning as it does on the kinetic training itself. This demands of military commanders a set of characteristics and leadership skills different than regular warfare, fostering the imperatives of cultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence as key tools in the contemporary COIN toolbox. The relative absence of these qualities within the British armed forces perhaps explains the next myth, regarding British performance in Iraq.

#### **MYTH #5: IRAQ REPRESENTED THE ZENITH OF 60 YEARS WORTH OF MODERN COIN LEARNING**

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki removed British troops from the planning and execution of Operation CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS in April 2008 to rid Basra, the epicenter of British-controlled Multi-National Division South-East, of the proliferating influ-

ence of the Mahdi Army militia of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This insulting gesture epitomized the degeneration of faith in British COIN competency. In September 2007, keen to ensure a peaceful withdrawal to their Contingency Operating Base at Basra Airport, the British commanders had negotiated a deal with the insurgents: all British troops would withdraw from the city, and previously detained Mahdi Army members would be released. The fulfillment of both of these provisos understandably led to claims that the British bowed to insurgent demands, even if the result was a reduction in violence against British troops. Nouri al-Maliki's furious reaction was thus to cut the British out of all responsibilities for restoring the security situation in this key southern city. British embarrassment was exacerbated by the relative success of the U.S.-Iraqi operation, Operation CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS, in dampening the potency of the Mahdi Army in Basra.

Moreover, this operation encapsulated the frustrations that had been increasing even within the American military command at the performance of their British allies. In mid-2007, U.S. General Jack Keane, one of the architects of President Bush's troop surge strategy, outspokenly criticized the British military performance in Basra, stating that he was "frustrated" by the "disengagement" of British troops.<sup>10</sup> After the British had pulled back from Basra Palace to the airport in September 2007, a dejected senior U.S. intelligence official interpreted this action as "a British defeat in the south."<sup>11</sup> Thomas Ricks concurred, arguing that the withdrawal represented a remarkable turnaround for the British, who in the early phase of the insurgency "had felt rather superior to the clumsy Americans," but who had now fallen "almost silent"

since the Petraeus-implemented surge had radically reformed the situation in the American-occupied provinces.<sup>12</sup> On this reversal of fortunes, Hilary Synnott, the leading British political coordinator in Iraq during the early phases of the insurgency, had warned that “extol[ing] the merits of the British approach” to countering insurgents in southern Iraq “implied that the British could manage such challenges better than the United States. . . .” Synnott also noted that praise for the British COIN effort in 2003-04 was an irritant to American military commanders, who “proved remarkably sensitive on this point.”<sup>13</sup>

Prominent within these debates lay the weight of the British historical experience. The lessons from Northern Ireland in particular were interpreted by the Americans and British alike as having great utility for the British military in Iraq, able as they were to rely upon decades of familiarity with unconventional warfighting. Optimistic constructions of a characteristic British way of COIN certainly shaped expectations not only of what the British military would achieve in Iraq. They also encouraged jaundiced perceptions of American military culture in the realm of asymmetric warfare.<sup>14</sup> Such intra-alliance divisions between the British and the Americans over COIN in Iraq arguably traced their roots to the nature and balance of the coalition.<sup>15</sup> A perception emerged among the British military that American suzerainty over the whole of Iraq, restricting the independent ability of the British to forge separate civil-military solutions in Multi-National Division (South-East) (MND(SE)), prevented the unfettered application of a distinctly British Way. As a consequence of this coalition structure, one British army officer complained, “British military policy became confused and suffered as it sought to serve the

Americans.”<sup>16</sup> However, such an interpretation overlooks the fact that the insurgent campaign in Iraq was *sui generis*, totally alien to the British historical experience.

Moreover, the conflict environment, coalition organization, political restrictions, and the insurgents’ global links all ensured that the decades-old faith in British COIN competence would be brought into question. Although General David Petraeus felt compelled to state that “the significance of the United Kingdom’s contribution should not be underestimated,”<sup>17</sup> his gesture is perhaps overly politic. At best, the British military achievements in Iraq did not match the expectations of 2003. Reduction of insurgent violence in Basra came initially at the price of ceding control of the city to the Mahdi Army, and was later achieved by the Coalition without major British military input. The British military mission in Iraq will hardly mark a glorious first chapter in the history of that nation’s 21st century COIN campaigning.

## **MYTH #6: THE BRITISH CAN DO COIN ALONE**

The bruising experience in Iraq has demonstrated that the British political establishment has no stomach for protracted irregular wars. The desire to undertake such missions in the future in company with others, let alone on a unilateral basis, has been further diminished by recession-induced reductions to the Ministry of Defence budget since the Iraq withdrawal. Militarily speaking, single state COIN campaigns are now of decreased relevance. Junior coalition partner status had become a strategic norm for Britain in the post-Cold War world, as demonstrated in the first Gulf War and again in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Yet Iraq

presented an unprecedented strategic scenario for the British military inasmuch as it was the first time it had to operate as a junior partner in a COIN coalition.

Coalition-based campaigns are likely to be the norm for the foreseeable future, given the spatial and temporal freedom granted to an open-ended Islamist *jihad* and the shared conglomeration of threats from near and far enemies alike. Indeed, in his introduction to the British *Defence Green Paper* (February 2010), then-Defence Minister Bob Ainsworth openly declared the need for the British military to plan for long-term coalition commitments: “Increasing globalisation ties our security to that of our allies. . . . Therefore we must increase co-operation with our international partners to deliver defence more efficiently and effectively.”<sup>18</sup> For these international partners, the real challenge to effective coalition functioning is internal political intractability on the part of all partners involved. There is a clear imperative to adopt appropriate government structures—domestically (through interagency cooperation), within the coalition itself; and within the host nation where operations are being conducted (via simultaneous programs of strengthening governance structures and economic and humanitarian assistance).

### **MYTH #7: THE BRITISH “DON’T TALK TO TERRORISTS”**

Margaret Thatcher, in characteristically defiant mode, famously asserted that “we don’t talk to terrorists” when asked about the possibility of negotiations with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This quip has given rise to the key myth that dialogue with insurgent opponents has had no role in British

COIN practice. In fact, within 3 years of the outbreak of the Irish troubles in 1969, the British government had undertaken direct covert negotiations with the IRA, and sanctioned indirect talks via intermediaries with that organization. The first secret talks with the IRA came when Labour Party leader Harold Wilson, with the permission of Prime Minister Edward Heath, attended a meeting with the leadership of the Provisional IRA whilst on a visit in Dublin in March 1972. Yet perhaps the most meaningful secret contact came with the extraordinary meeting between six IRA leaders, who were helicoptered in by the Royal Air Force, and the Northern Ireland Secretary William Whitelaw in London on July 7, 1972. Consistent public claims that no talks were occurring belied a significant set of back-channel messages that had been exchanged between the British military and intelligence officials on one hand, and intermediaries and key IRA figures on the other. Ultimately, secret dialogue with the IRA leadership would establish itself as a hallmark of British political management during the bloody height of violence in the 1970s.

Yet secret negotiations were in no way unique to Northern Ireland. Rather, they were present throughout British COIN campaigns, having been conducted in previous colonial conflicts. In Malaya, for example, in December 1955, a back-channel message conduit was opened with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in the jungle-edge town of Baling on the Thai border. The MCP revealed that it wished to end its struggle with the granting of amnesty to the MCP as well as political legitimacy for the MCP's program at the next election. Not surprisingly, the government delegation led by Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman later dismissed these requests on the basis of back-channel

information he had received from the British beforehand. As a consequence, negotiations disintegrated, and no deal was reached.<sup>19</sup> Yet the conduct of this meeting in itself demonstrated a willingness to ensure a managed political end to the conflict, and reveals a historical legacy of the British opening a back-channel conduit with insurgents in efforts to attain a negotiated settlement. The Malayan initiative was, of course, long before the controversies surrounding the secret talks with the IRA in the 1970s and bargaining with the Mahdi Army in Basra in 2007.

### **MYTH #8: “HEARTS AND MINDS” AND “MINIMUM FORCE” ARE SACROSANCT ELEMENTS OF THE BRITISH WAY OF COIN**

The center of gravity for COIN campaigns has habitually been the population of the country involved, ensuring that plans for any military assault upon the enemy are couched in terms of protecting the civilian population and preserving their trust. For this reason, the notion of minimum force has become integral to the theoretical construct of British COIN thinking. However, in practice the British have continuously deviated from such doctrine. A long-standing assumption that British COIN campaigns have traditionally rested on an effort to win civilian hearts and minds must be seen as a colonial-era myth, especially given the regularity with which insurgent suspects were brutally treated during periods of detention and interrogation.

The introduction of internment without trial for IRA suspects between 1971 and 1975 revealed a dark lineage to British COIN conduct. The ill-treatment at the hands of the British inside internment camps was typified by the so-called “five techniques” of interro-



gation by the security forces. These methods included wall-standing, hooding, continuous white noise, food denial, and sleep deprivation. Such techniques had been honed in colonial counterinsurgencies in previous decades, notably during the suppression of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. This experience has become the focus of recent critical historiographical study exposing the regular practice of beatings, reprisals, and death sentences dealt to insurgents.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the five techniques were later codified in a 1965 report by the Joint Intelligence Committee, entitled "Joint Directive on Military Interrogation in Internal Security Operations Overseas," which stated that a successful interrogation requires a psychological attack upon the prisoner.<sup>21</sup> To this extent, an element of brutality towards prisoners, whether guilty or not, had been institutionalized in the British Army for a considerable time even before recent similar allegations in Iraq emerged. Widely publicized incidents in Iraq, such as the death in British custody of Basra hotel clerk Baha Mousa in 2003 and the subsequent court-martial of the first-ever British soldier convicted of war crimes in relation to Mousa's death, seriously undermined British efforts to ingratiate themselves with native Iraqis and their attempts to reinforce the perceived legitimacy of their occupation of southern Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

The implementation of torture during detention and interrogation in Northern Ireland left bitter legacies. The intelligence dividend was negligible, and the social and political backlash against the treatment of detainees proved to be a catalyst to greater violence. The rules proscribing the use of torture were not strictly observed during the occupation of Iraq, with the ill-treatment of detainees becoming an all-too-

frequent event. History has thus repeated itself in a brutal fashion; however, it has usefully served to expose the comfortable but false mantras regarding the sacrosanct nature of minimum force doctrine in British COIN practice.

### **MYTH #9: THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY IS THE ARCHETYPAL COIN CAMPAIGN**

The British response to the 1948-1960 Malayan Emergency is widely considered to be the first modern COIN and is often regarded by scholars and practitioners alike as the archetype of a successful operation.<sup>23</sup> Yet we must question the notion of Malaya as an exemplar of COIN success. British victory must be judged in the context of the effects of several external factors, namely, the fortuitous economic dividend resulting from the Korean War (as Richard Stubbs quipped, “trying to organise a revolution is not easy in times of full employment”<sup>24</sup>); the misapplication of guerrilla warfare tactics by the MCP; and the utter absence of any MCP weapons, funding, or training from outside sources. A managed British political withdrawal, in the context of decolonization, was always an essential condition for ensuring indigenous compliance with the peace terms. A counterinsurgency campaign taking 12 years to eradicate an isolated insurgent group is not a glowing achievement and is hardly deserving of the academic salutations it has garnered.

In 1948, the British army still appeared to have a World War II mindset in Malaya, relying on a conventional approach of large sweeps through the jungle that were detected long in advance by the guerrillas. The thick jungle of Malaya, which covered around 80 percent of the entire country, rendered traditional

army weaponry and tactics useless. The British air monopoly meant little until the Special Air Service began to use parachute jumps as a means of troop deployment, as close combat became the only means of fruitful engagement with the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

It was not until May 1950, nearly 2 years into the campaign, that a comprehensive strategy in the form of the Briggs Plan, was conceived. The essence of the plan was the insight that the insurgency could be defeated if the terrorists were cut off from their support base. This could be achieved via a more coherent and systematic resettlement campaign that removed rural inhabitants from the base areas, leaving the insurgents to fend for themselves and lacking a recruitment pool. Entirely new Resettlement Areas were constructed, with new huts built for squatters who were granted the land deeds for their plot. However, it must be remembered that they functioned as a tool for population control and coercion. Despite being depicted as a central tenet of the hearts and minds campaign, the movements of those re-housed in Resettlement Areas were severely restricted outside the barbed wire perimeter fence. The forcible resettlement of hitherto rural and isolated squatters into self-contained social units, where the political framework was defined by the government, resulted in a coercive acquiescence towards the British agenda for Malaya.<sup>26</sup>

By mid-1951, progress in clearing areas of insurgents via the adoption of the so-called "oil spot strategy" was slow, and political hopes of a military success had faded. However, the campaign was to be energized by the appointment as joint civil-military leader of General Sir Gerald Templer. Upon his arrival in Malaya, he openly committed himself to the central tenets of the Briggs Plan as the mainstay of

his own tenure in office. However, Templer succeeded where Briggs's own plan was floundering due to Templer's injection of urgency into the campaign. Yet inspirational leadership has its flipside, and Templer's no-nonsense approach in some quarters created a negative backlash as some communities resented increasingly stringent food rations, curfews, and detentions that Templer had instigated. Malaya was to employ an equal distribution of carrots and sticks. During Templer's tenure between 1952 and 1954, insurgent incidents fell from 500 to fewer than 100 a month.<sup>27</sup> But one of the main questions is the extent to which Templer can personally take credit for this outcome. His bold leadership style and his realization that there should be an intricate marriage between normal and emergency government activities strengthened British confidence and helped build a more coherent COIN campaign. John Nagl states, "It is difficult to overstate the impact that Templer . . . had on the course of the Emergency."<sup>28</sup>

Arguably, however, the opposite is true: it is **easy** to overstate Templer's role. His high profile and blustering style may have made him the personal embodiment of success. However, Templer was, to a significant extent, improving and modifying tactics already established by Briggs. Templer has been credited with too much. For example, the MCP's own strategic overhaul, decided upon in October 1951, which would alter insurgent tactics from guerrilla attacks to political education, were not made public until December 1952. The lull in insurgent violence between these dates (from 6,000 incidents in 1951 to 3,700 in 1952) was thus wrongly perceived as the result of Templer's strong and effective leadership, when, in fact, it resulted from the Communists' change in strategy.<sup>29</sup>

The *U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Counterinsurgency*, praised British conduct during the Malayan Emergency for providing “lessons applicable to combating any insurgency.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, ultimately, the lessons of the Malayan Emergency are exaggerated. Although it laid the foundations for future campaigns, we can witness during the Malayan Emergency the appearance of a protracted and slowly developing strategy that allowed an increasingly isolated and dwindling band of insurgents to prolong their uprising for 12 years before they finally capitulated. By the official end of the MCP uprising in 1960, the blueprint for future British counterinsurgencies had been written, but its efficacy in ending the insurgency has been overstated, and its applicability to future insurgencies is limited.

### **MYTH # 10: THE BRITISH MILITARY ARE THE ULTIMATE COIN PRACTITIONERS**

When analyzing the meta-historical evolution of British COIN warfighting in the post-World War II era, we see a picture emerging of slow British learning, a slow-acting military strategy, and a succession of deficient insurgent opponents who have exploited the inadequacies of the British approach. Reflecting on the past insurgent opponents facing the British, we can conclude that despite engendering a perception of an effective COIN approach, the British have actually come up against a set of insurgent groups organizationally weak, strategically incompetent, or lacking in internal and external support. This perhaps explains why the arguable failure of British COIN in Iraq must be judged in relation to the insurgent enemy, who was well-organized, strategically driven, tactically brutal, and well-supported from within and outside Iraq.

Sympathetic observers have noted that during the classical COIN period of the mid-20th century, “the British approach had yielded more success than that of any other nation faced with internal conflict. . . . Nothing like an Algeria or Vietnam tarnishes the British record.”<sup>31</sup> The absence of a catastrophic COIN failure, however, should not obscure the drawn-out strategic inertia that came to characterize consecutive British campaigns. That weakness is perhaps an outcome more indicative of the lack of preparedness and efficiency on the part of the insurgent opponents the British have faced; the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA), Mau Mau, and even the IRA were certainly not as tactically savvy or strategically endowed as the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Algeria or the Vietcong in Vietnam.

The British experience of irregular conflict from Malaya to Afghanistan has demonstrated that, despite the highly politicized nature of COIN warfare, the efficacy of the military aspect of the counterinsurgency remains paramount to operational and strategic success. If the military cannot succeed in reducing insurgent violence, then no manner of political measures will arrest the worsening security situation. The level of external support insurgent groups receive has proved itself to be a critical enabler of their success. An absence of external funding and weaponry has stunted insurgencies and fatally undermined their potency, as was the case with both the MRLA in Malaya and the Mau Mau in Kenya. External insurgent support appears to be more important to the effectiveness of an insurgent group than the level of internal support it receives among its own population, as demonstrated by the vibrancy of the Egyptian-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), which fought the Brit-

ish in South Arabia (now Yemen) between 1963 and 1967. A militant group without weapons is irrelevant, yet an armed group lacking popular support is still an armed group. Its threat to security remains.

Another striking feature about the British experience is that each campaign begins with an unflattering tale in relation to intelligence capabilities. From Malaya to Iraq, British intelligence has failed to foresee the outbreak of an insurgency and has been woefully unprepared for it. There are obvious difficulties in cultivating human intelligence (HUMINT) on insurgent groups often drawn from narrow and closed segments of a society. For this reason alone, insurgencies are difficult to see coming. Yet British intelligence capabilities, at the top and on the ground, did not, and arguably still do not, have the capacity to anticipate the emergence of substate insurgent threats. On the bright side, however, from these consistently inadequate origins emerges an encouraging picture of British intelligence finally adapting to the threat and positioning itself as an indispensable counterinsurgent tool. Once the insurgency is recognized, the role played by the intelligence agencies, and their military intelligence counterparts, has been integral to operational successes in every campaign.

## **THE VALUE OF THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE**

So what conclusions can we reach about the British COIN experience? After the withdrawal from Iraq, the British COIN establishment stands at a crossroads. The underwhelming performance in and around Basra contrasted with the American display of striking strategic vision and tactical ability in the realm of COIN. The publication of *Field Manual (FM) 3-24*,

*Counterinsurgency*, the rise to prominence and influence of the COIN-savvy General Petraeus, the inculcation of COIN learning at all levels of the American military, and the ubiquity of COIN thinking in the United States across the academic-military divide, have all contributed to a quantum leap of American fluency in irregular warfare. The American military should no longer hold up Malaya or Northern Ireland as exemplars of COIN warfare. It can now look at Anbar province and the Surge as the new ideal case studies in COIN textbooks. The Americans have learned the hard way in Iraq, and, like the British before them, it has been a slow and painful process. However, the combination of British ineptitude in Basra and the eventual American moxie in central and western Iraq has largely debunked the canard relating to British competence in COIN. No longer can we believe that COIN is the British army's default mode.

British thinking in the run-up to the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq was arguably shaped by the formative experiences in Northern Ireland. They had molded the military's low-intensity doctrine, versed a generation of officers in the nuances of urban population pacification, and demonstrated the difficulties of combining a coercive COIN endeavor with a campaign to win hearts and minds not only within the same city, but on the same street. The British ability in Northern Ireland during Operation BANNER to seek and maintain an "acceptable level of violence," combined with the over-hyped colonial successes, especially in Malaya, ensured that British thinking on the issue of countering insurgencies earned respect within foreign militaries and was exported as a rare example of how a state army can subdue a substate enemy without compromising strategic goals. However, setting aside



the matter of the British performance in Basra, its actions in Afghanistan since the resurgence of the Taliban in 2006-07 has done much to sully its reputation in foreign eyes. Indeed, the picture emerging from Helmand seems to be one of a struggling and stretched military, searching for a modest level of strategic clarity and operational potency.<sup>32</sup> Afghanistan now continues as the primary testing ground of new-found American confidence in the realm of COIN, while Helmand province remains the crucible in which the British military might salvage its reputation. Yet, after 8 years into Operation HERRICK, the signs are again pointing to a slow lesson learning experience, especially in exploiting the lessons from Iraq regarding insufficiency of military resources and reconstruction efforts and a too-slowly-developing strategy. We are seeing a reprise of such deficiencies as the protracted inability to reduce the strength of the Taliban and to interdict their underground avenues of support and finance, namely, the Afghan poppy harvest and heroin trade.

COIN is now a far more complex endeavor, given the harsh operational environment, the deficiencies of host-country governance, and the rise of global instant news media coverage. Previous lip service to hearts and minds and minimum force has now transformed into myriad strategic initiatives that are often applied simultaneously: peace support, stability and reconstruction, and humanitarian relief. COIN is arguably the medium-term future of warfighting. There is thus a pressing need for continued study of insurgencies as an evolving concept, that is, in their past, present, and potential future modes, in order to continually update the best means of countering them. The body of experience accumulated by the British in the past 60 years

represents a rich empirical base from which to begin such study, but it is only the starting point in what must necessarily be a never-ending process. The snail's pace of past British military lesson learning provides future strategists the opportunity to appreciate the value of lesson transfer and the pitfalls of doctrinal inertia. The popular perception of high British COIN efficacy from Malaya onwards certainly has not been validated by the pattern of tactical errors displayed in the early phases of their COIN campaigns. After the dismal performance in Iraq, the British military, and especially their political masters, have a long way to go to rebuild a narrative of high British competence in COIN warfare.

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