

# Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy

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Until recently, the British were considered to have an unusually high aptitude for counterinsurgency.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with other major armies of the world, the British Army has a record of relative success in this form of warfare. In staff colleges worldwide when the syllabus turns to counterinsurgency it is C.E. Callwell's work on "small wars," as well as post-war quasi-doctrinal British books by the likes of Robert Thompson and Frank Kitson, that form the canon.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Thomas Mockaitis:

The British Army has excelled in small-unit, antiguerrilla warfare as they did in other aspects of counterinsurgency. History had given them an army that was relatively small and decentralized and, therefore, ideally suited to such warfare.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the consensus has been that while the British "got" counterinsurgency, the United States decidedly did *not*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after Vietnam the American military effectively defined counterinsurgency as outside the army's *metier*—the 1976 edition of FM 100-5 *Operations* did not even mention counterinsurgency, as sure an indicator of the concept's Siberian exile from the American military mind as it is possible to imagine.<sup>5</sup>

In late 2005 *Military Review* published a sharp critique of the U.S. military's very poor performance in counterinsurgency in Iraq by a British

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<sup>1</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (St Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005); Frank Kitson, *Low-Intensity Operations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-60* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Donald B. Vought, "Preparing for the Wrong War," *Military Review*, May 1977, p. 29.

Brigadier, Nigel Aylwin-Foster.<sup>6</sup> The essay was not entirely well received.<sup>7</sup> However, to their credit, and partly as a reflection of the widely held apprehension by 2006 that the United States was poised on the brink of defeat in Iraq, the army published it—because, in the words of the editor, he wanted to “win the war.”<sup>8</sup> Aylwin-Foster’s critique was detailed, timely and constructive. Unfortunately for transatlantic military relations, this has not always been the case of British pronouncements on American counterinsurgency.<sup>9</sup> There was more than a kernel of truth to the criticism and it was not just Brits saying it. In testimony to Congress in July 2004 Major General Robert Scales claimed,

Even today the British Army has an advantage over the United States in that they possess officers with the ability to move comfortably between and within the inner circles of foreign militaries. Great Britain’s relative success in Basra is due in no small measure to the self-assurance and comfort with foreign culture derived from centuries of practicing the art of soldier diplomacy and liaison.<sup>10</sup>

However, British attitudes sometimes displayed an unattractive tendency toward smugness and a sense of arch superiority which was bound to rankle. If only today’s Rome, the United States with its addiction to firepower and muscularity, had listened to less powerful but wiser Greece (Britain) then Iraq might not have imploded. This sort of stance seems increasingly hubristic. The plain fact of the matter is that, at the time of writing, it seems entirely possible that the Britain will suffer what amounts to a strategic defeat in both its ongoing counterinsurgency campaigns.

*Lord Lamont of Lerwick speaking in the House of Lords:* . . .there is no getting away from it: this is a defeat for us, not for our troops who have performed brilliantly, but the whole episode is a defeat for our country and for the Government.<sup>11</sup>

*Field Marshal Sir Peter Inge at an Open Europe debate:* I don’t believe we have a clear strategy in either Afghanistan or Iraq. I sense we’ve lost the ability to think strategically. Deep down inside me, I worry that the British army could risk operational failure if we’re not careful in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review*, November-December 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See Kevin C.M. Benson, “OIF phase IV: a planner’s reply to Brigadier Aylwin-Foster,” *Military Review*, March-April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, “Army’s Iraq Work Assailed by Briton,” *Washington Post*, January 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/10/AR2006011001456.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Devenny and Robert Mclean, “The Battle for Basra,” *The American Spectator*, November 1, 2005, <http://spectator.org/archives/2005/11/01/the-battle-for-basra>.

<sup>10</sup> Statement of Major General Robert Scales, USA (ret.), ‘Army Transformation: Implications for the Future’, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee (15 July 2004), <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/congress/04-07-15scales.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Lord Lamont of Lerwick, Lords Hansard (22 February 2007), column 1222, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldhansrd/text/70222-0007.htm#07022239000004>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Townsend and Peter Beaumont, ‘Britain “Risking Defeat in Afghanistan”’, *The Observer* (22 October 2006), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/oct/22/afghanistan.iraq>.

Making Britain's disorientation more poignant was that all this took place against a backdrop of dramatic increases in American competence.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which the U.S. defense community has been willing, in recent years, to meet uncomfortable truths head-on and to embrace reform is simultaneously commendable and testimony to the fact that there were serious problems with American strategy and operations. However, in the face of these reforms, a curious development has taken place which too few observers in the United Kingdom have grasped: as the Americans have improved, British performance seems to have either declined or remained relatively static.

The British Army has struggled with ongoing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan because, for reasons largely having to do with insufficient resources, it has not applied its own principles of counterinsurgency.<sup>14</sup> Moreover the army today is a different force than the one that endured and ultimately "waited-out" the troubles in Northern Ireland; it is a much leaner "high-tech" force in structure, equipment and outlook. This makes it a formidable generator of combat power but compromises it in counterinsurgency.<sup>15</sup> However, the root cause, given that a fish rots from the head, is that the British Government, in part as a reflection of public opinion, is lukewarm in its commitment to Afghanistan, mutedly hostile to the Iraq war, at the highest levels, and fears (probably correctly) that operations in both countries are undermining its domestic counter-radicalization program. The confluence of these factors has created a strategic void into which the Army has fallen.

### Counterinsurgency the 'British Way'

Where did it all go wrong? What is this mythic British Way in COIN anyway? And where along the way did the magic die? A substantial body of literature exists on British counterinsurgency. Some of this is composed of secondary academic texts, but a major part of the literature takes the form of works produced by the practitioner-theorists noted above. The policy recommendations and historical narratives provided by this canon are not uniform, but they show enough points of similarity for us to posit an "Ideal Type" of British counterinsurgency, encompassing the following benchmarks:

- The importance of coordinated government machinery;
- Defeat insurgent subversion not the insurgent per se;
- Use minimum force;
- Adhere to the law;

<sup>13</sup> As emblemized by the publication of US Army/Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> John Mackinlay and Alison Al-Baddawy, *Rethinking Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2008), pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Theo Farrell, 'The Dynamics of British Military Transformation', *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (2008), pp. 777-807.

- “Clear and hold” not “search and destroy”;
- Operations should be intelligence-led; and,
- Success is obtained by political settlement.

There will be disagreements as to the finer points of this model and as to the degree to which it has been applied with any real consistency. However, when members of the British defense community talk about British counterinsurgency, this is essentially what they are talking about. The degree to which this is uniquely British should not be exaggerated. Readers of David Galula’s work will find much overlap with British thinking. To a great degree, in fact, the British Way is simply COIN best practice. It is no slur on the compilers of FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* to say that it is largely a codification of British theory with adjustments for the contemporary context. The substance of the “British Way,” if substance there be, lies not so much in the fact that it is theoretically unique, but that the British are perceived historically to have been more consistent than their peers in putting the theory into practice. The degree to which the standard historical narrative of British counterinsurgency theory in the post-war period is reflective of actual practice is a matter of some dispute, but must remain beyond the scope of this particular article.<sup>16</sup> However, it is worth asking a few question relevant to the post-9/11 era.

### **Basking in the comforting warmth of False Memory Syndrome?**

It is commonly felt that the British benefit from their imperial legacy.<sup>17</sup> To a degree this is the case. However, the thesis should not be overstated. The imperial context acclimatised the Army to operating within a tightly defined political context. It created a situation in which economy of force could be achieved by working with native auxiliaries. It sometimes meant that British forces possessed reserves of cultural knowledge. However, the “classic” period of British counterinsurgency came during the retreat from empire when colonial administrations were winding down or heavily disrupted.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been nothing like imperial policing. Far from being the recognized authority in these countries, with all

<sup>16</sup> The best recent critical study of a British COIN campaign is David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (W. W. Norton, 2005). Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993) does a good job of illustrating the uneven implementation of policy in Malaya.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular Warfare* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), pp. 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> At the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency Britain was sorely lacking in local expertise, language capabilities, cultural sensitivity or intelligence networks. See Stubbs, 1993.

that implies in terms of broad control over the governmental security forces and a pre-existing bureaucratic structure, the Army operates as a “guest” of the host nation, while being further subordinate to allies. The environment in which strategy must be formulated and enacted is different from that of the classic period of British counterinsurgency.

For all the supposed promise of the imperial legacy, the opening phases of British counterinsurgency campaigns have been characterized by a period of failure, poor intelligence, inaccurate perceptions and organisational lethargy. Lessons continually seem to have to be re-learned. That the conclusions drawn are similar from conflict to conflict does indicate continuity and a degree of shared cultural assumptions (and obviously that lessons were learned at all is positive). However, the very fact that this re-learning has to take place raises questions about the strength of institutional memory and the degree to which prior experience really acts as a force multiplier.<sup>19</sup> It bears noting, also, that with a few exceptions those generations of top servicemen who cut their teeth as junior officers conducting counterinsurgency have retired. The arrival of peace to Northern Ireland also has an impact. The tangible links to the classical “British Way” have been eroded.

### **As if things weren't complicated enough in the first place. . .**

Mackinlay and Al-Baddawy have argued that the British experience should be “precisely understood but not overestimated.” The “British way” evolved to defeat Maoist revolutionary wars whereas those we face now, and subsequently beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, are “complex insurgencies” which have different characteristics.<sup>20</sup> It follows, therefore, that even skill counter-insurgents may face changes above and beyond their predecessors.<sup>21</sup> The strategic fundamentals remain the same and are not subject to change, but the character of the conflicts have become increasingly multilayered and richly textured. This is thrown into starkest relief when one considers the linkages between British efforts abroad and the situation regarding indigenous Muslim radicals on the British mainland. Be this as it may, regardless of whether or not one subscribes to recent thinking regarding “wars against the people,” is also clear that in Iraq and Afghanistan the fundamental principles simply have not been followed. The British Army has not implemented a proper counter-insurgency campaign in either theatre of operations. Whether this accounts for the whole or just part of the strategic failure is another question.

<sup>19</sup> See John Kiszely, “Learning About Counterinsurgency,” *RUSI Journal*, December 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Mackinlay and Al-Baddawy, p. 14; for a definition of complex insurgency and a definition of its notable characteristics see John Mackinlay, *Defeating Complex Insurgency: Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Whitehall Paper 64, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> This is a theme developed by David Kilcullen in “Counterinsurgency Redux,” *Survival*, December 2006, pp. 111-30.

## **Iraq – You’ve got to be in it to win it?**

Britain has never had a clear political aim or an overall plan in either Afghanistan or Iraq. As a result, it has never had the coordinated government machinery that success requires. In Iraq, the root of the problem was Britain’s distinctly junior status relative to that of the United States, coupled with a willingness to commit to action without clearly shared foundational principles. While Washington’s aim in Iraq was regime change and the establishment of a friendly democratic government in the heart of a strategically and economically important region, London’s aims were more modest. It sought to fulfil its traditional role as transatlantic link between Europe and the United States and to demonstrate to its long-term ally that it was committed to the “special relationship” at a crucial time. In spite of the United States centrality to British concerns, no strategy was developed to define British “red lines,” coordinate effectively with the United States or maximize British influence. The United Kingdom was, therefore, in no position to set the agenda in Iraq and the government’s limited aims were insufficient to compel its sustained interest. As Andrew Garfield observed in 2006, “The British generally have lower ambitions than Americans and would normally avoid seeking more lofty and problematic societal change.”<sup>22</sup>

A telling example is that when the top diplomat Sir Hilary Synnott arrived in Basra, as the leading British civilian official, things went wrong almost from the start because he had received vague and inadequate instructions from London whence he was sent with orders to “play it by ear.” Once in the field, he had neither the staff or the resources to provide effective administration of his territory. An added complication was the relationship with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which was focused primarily on Baghdad and had little time or interest for Basra.<sup>23</sup> This was matched by a desire in Whitehall to turn Southern Iraq into a model of stability, brought about solely through British influence. This attitude amounted to little more than a flight of strategic fancy that foolishly decoupled Basra from what was going on elsewhere. In other words, the overall national effort was uncoordinated and the British section of it was chronically under-resourced. Arguably, the British came to a true assessment of the conditions in Iraq much more quickly than the CPA, which would hear nothing about a burgeoning insurgency throughout 2004, but they were never in a position to challenge U.S. thinking on major policy issues.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Garfield, *Succeeding in Phase IV: British Perspectives on the US Effort to Stabilize and Reconstruct Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: FPRI, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Hilary Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra: My Turbulent Time as Britain’s Man in Southern Iraq* (London: IB Tauris, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> See Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 241.

## **Afghanistan—Or, how we learned to stop worrying and love coalition operations**

The story with regard to the Afghan campaign is slightly different. The aim as declared by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in December 2007 is straightforward: “to rebuild the failed state, to prevent the return of the Taliban and to root out al-Qaeda. . . [and] support President Karzai and his Government in their efforts to reconcile all parties to Afghanistan’s democratic constitution.”<sup>25</sup> However, there has been no effective linkage of means and ends and the actual approach has been haphazard. If it were only the UK national contingent that lacked a really joined-up approach able to survive contact with the enemy then things might not have gone so badly. Unfortunately, by and large British efforts were exemplary by comparison with many other national contingents.

The NATO bureaucracy demands that command rotates internationally and the coalition is broad enough that there is inevitably a substantial amount of difference-splitting and compromise in order to keep all parties happy. In private, one senior British officer with extensive NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) experience has characterised any genuine dovetailing of national attitudes and aims, when it comes to formulating strategy, as “merely the product of happy coincidence.” Furthermore, the presence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the majority of which are inclined to guard their impartiality, constitutes a serious impediment to the development of a holistic strategy. As General Barry McCaffrey observed in a recent after-action report, the overall command structure of the NATO operation in Afghanistan is essentially a shambles: “There is no unity of command in Afghanistan. A sensible coordination of all political and military elements of the Afghan theater of operations does not exist.”<sup>26</sup>

However, this aspect of post-9/11 operations, which would also be familiar to Kosovo veterans, should not be permitted to obscure the fact that serious problems at the national level also exist. The problem was illustrated by Brigadier Ed Butler, British national contingent commander in Afghanistan and later head of the Helmand Task Force:

The military is pretty clear on what the chain of command means. The other government departments – Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs – are less clear on that. . . this was the first time we had undertaken a comprehensive plan with the other government departments. . . What was not fully recognized, by some of our civilian counterparts, was that no plan survives contact with the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Prime Minister Gordon Brown Statement on Afghanistan (December 12, 2007), <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page14050>.

<sup>26</sup> General Barry R McCaffrey USA (Ret), After Action Report: Visit NATO Shape Headquarters and Afghanistan, July 21-26, 2008, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/mccaffreyafghanistanaarjuly2008.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Brigadier Ed Butler, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, KS: April 16, 2008), <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/p4013coll13&CISOPTR=1147&filename=1149.pdf#search=%22discussing%22>.

Coordination between the military and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Department for International Development (DFID) is widely perceived as inadequate. A repeated complaint is that of perceived intransigence among the non-military Whitehall agencies when it comes to integration and coordination of aims and means. FCO and DFID civil servants are even less willing than their American counterparts to deploy to a combat zone. These attitudes play a key factor in ensuring that any efforts (and their has been much talk in this area) to develop a “Comprehensive Approach” have largely been still-born. Development mandarins are also perceived as viewing any linkage between counterinsurgency and development work as representing a compromise of the integrity of their operations. In short, there is a view, expressed by the Chief of the General Staff, that what we need are skilled colonial administrators while that is exactly what many British diplomats and international development wonks are determined they will not become:

. . . [I]n a desire not to be considered to be still colonial, I sense that we lost the mindset and skills across Government that our fathers and grandfathers instinctively understood and there was perhaps—and still is in some quarters—a reluctance to do anything that appeared to be colonial in nature.<sup>28</sup>

Unless this circle can be squared, the United Kingdom will continue to struggle to formulate a well co-ordinated and holistic counterinsurgency strategy.

Until such time as all the political memoirs are written and the Cabinet records are made available, it would seem that Britain entered into the Afghan conflict under the strategic misapprehension that the conflict there would be easier than Iraq. In an interview with BBC Radio 4, then defence secretary John Reid explained the *two* missions in Afghanistan, the American one which was about counterterrorism and the British one which was about reconstruction—as though these two could be separated:

If we came for three years here to accomplish our mission and had not fired one shot at the end of it we would be very happy indeed. If the American Operation Enduring Freedom came here to counter terrorism and seek them out and had not fired a shot in three years time they would be very unhappy and disappointed.<sup>29</sup>

The point here is not, as is frequently claimed, that the government was naive about the prospect of fighting (3 Para, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, which provided the bulk of the force is the most “gung ho” regiment in the British Army); rather that it exhibited severe strategic lassitude—they wanted to play the reconstruction theme of the opera and did not overly

<sup>28</sup> General Sir Richard Dannatt, speech to RUSI Land Warfare conference, June 12, 2008, <http://kingsofwar.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/cgrusilwcspeech1.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> See transcript of BBC Radio 4 interview with Dr. John Reid, Secretary of Defence, April 24, 2006, <http://www.operations.mod.uk/afghanistan/statements/transcriptjohnreid.doc>.

concern themselves with how or by whom the other elements of the orchestra would be conducted.

Again this comes through in Brigadier Butler's interview:

. . . London was very concerned that there was too much kinetic activity going on and too many soldiers were being injured and killed. . . [they] needed to see the evidence of reconstruction and development. They were fixed on this issue because that is what the government had presented to the British people.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Elephant in the Room—Public Support and Political Leadership**

The exercise of willpower will not compensate for bad strategy. However, in counterinsurgency it does represent a necessary condition for success, unless the operation involves a disinclination of the media to give the conflict coverage. The tenuous nature of British public support for the Iraq campaign is an open book at this point. It reached a peak in the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime when optimistic observers might have been forgiven for hoping that the conflict would win legitimacy on the basis that nothing succeeds like success. However, once things got sticky and support went into the sort of decline more normally associated with victims of consumption in Victorian melodrama.

For some time, Afghanistan avoided being tarred with the same brush because the public perception of the conflict is largely free of notions of government calumny: it *was* seen as the proverbial "good war." This is no longer the case. A recent poll found that three quarters of the public believe that troops should be withdrawn within the year.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for this collapse in support are uncertain but may include increasing casualties, equipment shortages, strategic drift, hostility to the misguided drug war aspects of Afghan operations, media campaigns by Muslim pressure groups seeking to undermine the war effort and a tendency for Afghanistan to be tainted by association with Iraq. In the case of the Iraq War, opposition has always been fairly strident. The government, however, has forsaken strong leadership on the issue in the hope that by keeping things on a very gentle simmer, the public will remain lethargic enough for military commitments abroad to remain off the electoral menu.

Ongoing British operations have become like the crazy aunt living in the attic, a familial embarrassment nobody wants to talk about. The government lacks the will to escalate the situation in the hopes of achieving some sort of victory (however defined. . .), or to bear the diplomatic impact of cutting its losses and running. As a result, the Army is committed just enough to lose. The

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Brigadier Ed Butler, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, KS: April 16, 2008), <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/p4013coll13&CISOPTR=1147&filename=1149.pdf#search=%22discussing%22>.

<sup>31</sup> "Britons call for troop withdrawal", BBC News (November 13, 2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7725228.stm>.

government's public relations have been dismal with no articulation of why strategic and operational aims are worth the cost that their realization would entail. When forced to confront the issue, ministers tend to be rhetorically vigorous – framing the conflict as an existential, values-driven fight that it is essential to win. However, the public is capable of following the money and at no point has the government's behaviour and rhetoric dovetailed: sweeping claims are paired with inadequate funding and strategic drift.<sup>32</sup> The result is public disillusionment.

### **Everybody's favourite cliché – Boots on the Ground (Lack of)**

While there is no mono-causal explanation for the problems that beset British policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, British counterinsurgency strategy in the post-9/11 period has been shaped by issues relating to manpower more than any other. Two of the factors that characterise counterinsurgency are its manpower-intensive nature and its generally extended duration. Counterinsurgency is a light infantryman's war; but the structure of the British armed forces is not suited to maintaining this sort of commitment. Policy decisions, going back to the end of the Cold War, have tended to favor other parts of the military other than the infantry. Much of the investment in technology, in recent years, has been founded on the premise that enhanced technological capabilities in the fields of killing power and battlefield awareness will enable a lighter infantry footprint.<sup>33</sup> When issues such as the maintenance of the domestic defence-industrial base and the safeguarding of jobs in Britain's manufacturing sector are factored in, an environment exists in which big ticket procurement is favoured over infantry numbers. The sustainability of this attitude, which involves an unspoken urge to replicate American capabilities, is highly questionable.

During the initial assault on Iraq, British forces constituted almost a third of the assault force. However, this level of force was deployable only as a one-shot "silver bullet" and could not act as part of post-conflict stabilisation operations. A drawdown of forces occurred following conventional operations including engineering and intelligence assets. The British Army has come under sustained criticism in sections of the American commentariat for failing to take a more assertive line against Shi'a militias in post-Saddam Basra. In the abstract, a more aggressive strategy may or may not have been ideal. The point is that it is rendered more or less irrelevant by virtue of the fact that the British force was never large enough to implement an offensive counterinsurgency: in

<sup>32</sup> One of the most startling decisions of the current government was to provide Des Browne, when Secretary of State for Defence, with a second portfolio covering Scottish affairs, while simultaneously trying to convince the public that the stakes in Afghanistan and Iraq were so high as to make failure not an option.

<sup>33</sup> See Lutz Unterseher, *Europe's Armed Forces at the Millennium*, Project on Defense Alternatives, December 1999.

2003 in Basra the ratio of British troops to Iraqi civilians was approximately 1:370, in sharp contrast to the 1:50 ratio of British peacekeepers to civilians in Kosovo or 1:65 in the Belfast area of Northern Ireland.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the Afghan campaign in 2002 the overall force ratio was 1:2000.

In the case of Afghanistan, manpower has also been lacking in the context of the strategy that British forces have been tasked with implementing. Early deployment in “platoon houses” that were intended to afford a British presence among the people, resulted in the Taliban being able to concentrate and launch repeated assaults at company level and above, which were only repelled with the employment of substantial amounts of airpower. This is self-defeating because British forces remain unable to clear and hold territory on the needed scale. Recent testimony from the field suggests that patrolling below company level invites intensive attack. However, most British Forward Operating Bases are able to put out company patrols only once every few days and are largely unable to do so without the insurgents being made aware of the fact. Given that it is axiomatic in counterinsurgency that the support of the population is critical and will go to those players who provide the most effectively coercive presence this seems to come worryingly close to a *Catch 22* situation.

### **Principles Forfeited and Misapplied: Minimum Force**

There is no doubt that the employment of minimum force is one that would be heartily endorsed by the great majority of British officers in the field today. Where the boundaries seem to be shifting is with regard to how minimum force is defined. In both Iraq and, especially, Afghanistan, British forces have employed ever greater amounts of firepower, particularly of the air-delivered variety. In the case of Iraq, this has involved the controversial employment of sub-munitions in suburban Basra.<sup>35</sup> In Afghanistan, airpower has been routinely employed to blunt Taliban offensives. The ready recourse to air power by British (and other European NATO) forces has reached the point where, ironically, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has stepped into the debate and criticized European employment of heavy firepower as part of the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to disaggregate issues relating to the employment of heavy firepower from issues relating to manpower and public support. Inadequate manpower has led—particularly during the period in which British forces were

<sup>34</sup>The quote and the reckoning of force ratios are both from Michael Knights and Ed Williams, *The Calm Before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq*, Policy Focus 66 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2007), pp. 7-8.

<sup>35</sup>“Basra Troops Used Cluster Bombs,” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2003-<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/may/30/iraq.richardnortontaylor>.

<sup>36</sup>“Gates says NATO force unable to fight guerrillas,” *LA Times*, January 16, 2008-<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/16/world/fg-usafghan16>.

dispersed in platoon houses—to a situation in which the only way to avoid positions being overrun was aerial bombardment. Part of the traditional British approach to counterinsurgency has been that casualties are acceptable in the pursuit of a strategic victory. This follows from the notion that a tactical success can be a strategic failure if it alienates the population. Put crudely, if the only way to save soldiers' lives is to kill civilians then the men in uniform may just have to get killed. This is a horrible calculus—especially when laid out by civilian writers ensconced in comfy London offices—but it goes beyond ivory tower strategist navel-gazing.<sup>37</sup>

However, pushing against this is an extremely brittle domestic situation: each death raises a debate in which the viability of the deployment is called into question. It is possible, therefore, that the loss of an infantry section or platoon house would have drastic domestic consequences; it is not inconceivable that such an event would mark the beginning of the end of the British national commitment. The tension between force protection and minimizing civilian casualties is thus far greater than it has been in previous British deployments.

There comes a point in the campaign at which, in order to achieve complete security, tougher measures are required. . . the government must show that it is not only determined, but prepared, to be ruthless.<sup>38</sup>

So wrote Sir Robert Thompson in the canonical *Defeating Communist Insurgency*. In Iraq particularly the Army appears to have paradoxically overvalued prudent restraint at the expense of credible ruthlessness in defending the very Iraqi institutions which it has itself created. As Rory Stewart observed, “The authoritarian response they wanted—as instinctive to them as an old colonial administrator—was not instinctive to us. Certain measures were difficult for us even to contemplate. How many unarmed people were we prepared to kill to defend a ministry building?”<sup>39</sup>

### **Acting within the law—not the generator of legitimacy that it should be**

British Army operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have satisfied, by and large, the principle of acting within the law. Perversely, however, this has generally not helped to generate legitimacy. There are two main reasons for this. The first lies in the widespread perception that in *jus ad bellum*

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Garfield related this point to his own experience in Northern Ireland during his address to FPRI on the subject of “Foreign Perspectives on U.S. Counterinsurgency Efforts,” April 14, 2005 <http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20050414.garfield.foreignperspectivescounterinsurgency.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Michael Knights and Ed Williams, “The Calm Before the Storm,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 66, February 2007, p. 21.

(justice in going to war) terms the war in Iraq suffers from a legitimacy deficit for which no amount of *jus in bello* (justice in conduct of the war) can compensate.<sup>40</sup> The second is that the standard of law against which army operations are measured is not that of the host nation, but British civil law, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Criminal Court. This is correct: Britain should act in accordance with the laws to which it has subscribed. As it was put in the *Daily Telegraph*, a few years ago, after a spate of stories (some true, others false) about abusive and illegal conduct by some British soldiers, particularly in Iraq, “If soldiers have abused their positions, they should be given exemplary and expeditious punishment; and let us hear no nonsense about young boys far from home facing difficult circumstances.”<sup>41</sup>

However, having set the bar so high it has proved enormously difficult for the government to validate the armed forces’ conduct in the eyes of the British population, let alone the multiple populations which in a globalized “media space” are a vitally significant propaganda target. By 2006 the situation had come to a point that Defence Secretary John Reid was arguing that extant international law was a constraint on the utility of Britain’s armed forces that had to be rectified by measures including changes in the Geneva Conventions.<sup>42</sup> This self-defeating compromise of ideals was an echo of the concerns of senior military leaders such as former Chiefs of Defence Staff Lord Guthrie and Lord Boyce who, in the House of Lords in 2005, remarked that British soldiers and their commanders had been “hung out to dry” and that the army was under “legal siege. . . by people schooled not in operations but only in political correctness.”<sup>43</sup>

The Army has done its best to behave within the law and where crimes have been suspected they have been investigated and pursued rigorously in courts martial. There is no reason to believe that abuses in Iraq or Afghanistan have been worse or more frequent than they were in Malaya, for instance. But the standards are perceived to be higher and, whereas in the days of vacuum tubes and steam ships, what happened in theatre would have little immediate impact on the home audience, in the days of silicon chips and airliners, the links are direct and immediate.<sup>44</sup>

The belief that the legal regime, as currently applied, compromises the Army’s “fighting ability” is not new. Kitson warned in the early 1970s that ideal

<sup>40</sup> Christian Enemark and Christopher Michaelsen, “Just War Doctrine and the Invasion of Iraq,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005), pp. 545– 563.

<sup>41</sup> “Britain needs the truth without feeble excuses,” *Daily Telegraph* (September 5, 2004), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2004/05/10/dl1001.xml>.

<sup>42</sup> John Reid, ‘Twenty-First Century Warfare - Twentieth Century Rules’, *RUSI Journal*, June 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Lords Hansard text, July 14, 2005, columns 1233-35, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldhansrd/vo050714/text/50714-08.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, pp. 284-5.

soldierly conduct in counterinsurgency may “run counter to that most important military attribute, an offensive spirit, which is carefully inculcated into all soldiers in order to fit them to fight battles rather than to umpire them.”<sup>45</sup> The Lords Boyce and Guthrie probably understand this. What they are responding to is a disjuncture between the mood of the Army and that of the public. The Army feels itself to be at war, engaged in some of the hardest fighting it has faced since Korea (and taking losses accordingly). British society, however, does not feel itself to be at war—yet, paradoxically, it faces a daily deluge of reports of its armed forces in action abroad.

However, building governmental legitimacy by acting within the law is not only a matter of eschewing torture, brutality or collective punishment. Equally important is trimming corruption and providing a modicum of effective governance, the lack of which adds further layers of friction between the people and the government. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, government corruption combines with a failure to provide security and justice to fuel the insurgency.<sup>46</sup> Both countries according to the World Bank score below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on a range of governance indicators including government effectiveness, rule of law and control of corruption.<sup>47</sup> Generally speaking, Britain has not the wherewithal to change this even should it wish to.

### **Lack of Cultural Understanding: Intelligence-led operations?**

As in the American controlled sectors of Iraq, the British in April of 2003 confronted a collapse of law and order and a wave of criminality. By and large they downplayed this, describing looting as “redistribution of wealth,” and left the situation to burn itself out. The major reason was the insufficient numbers of troops required to provide security.<sup>48</sup> An additional one was the poor cultural awareness and intelligence preparation of the Army. Faced with an outbreak of criminality that they could not control, they turned to the existing local security apparatus for support, to which end they had reactivated

<sup>45</sup> Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (St Petersburg, FL: Hailer, 2006), p. 150.

<sup>46</sup> See Juan Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2003, in which he argues that the appeal of the Sadrist militia in the Shiite areas of the country was based in large part on their ability to deliver de facto justice to a population which craved protection from lawlessness; also Toby Dodge, *Iraq at the Crossroads: State and Society in the Shadow of Regime Change*, Adelphi Paper 354 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2003), who points out that initially it was the extensive criminality in the British sector that accounted for 80 per cent of the violence.

<sup>47</sup> See D. Kaufmann, A. Kray and M. Mastruzzi, Governance Matters VII: Government Indicators for 1996-2007, World Bank, 2008, [http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc\\_chart.asp](http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_chart.asp).

<sup>48</sup> James T. Quinlivan, “Burden of Victory: The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations,” *RAND Review*, Summer 2003, <http://www.rand.org/publications/randreview/issues/summer2003/burden.html>.

for service more than 900 police in Basra by early May 2003. This fit well with their experience in Northern Ireland where the police services provided the real frontline troops of the counterinsurgent campaign. It did not fit well at all in an Iraqi context in which the police had traditionally acted merely as the eyes and ears of the security establishment—the Ba’athist intelligence services and the military—who provided the real muscle. This might have been realized had intelligence and cultural understanding been better.<sup>49</sup>

The sad thing is that within the Army and government there were people who were quite aware of the dynamics of the situation:

The people of Iraq are no different from any other country: they want security, they do not want troops on the street; they do not want people being blown up, they want jobs, they want employment and they want a future for their children—all of which we are seeking to deliver. It is difficult to deliver that. . . because of the nature of the security environment. That is why we have to get that security environment stabilised and why we then, at the same time, have to try and grow all that necessary infrastructure and social environment and political environment. . .<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, being able to diagnose a malady and possessing the wherewithal to cure it are quite different things. In spite of their centrality to counterinsurgency, cultural awareness and intelligence preparation remain problematic. At the time of writing, the British defence community is showing increasing interest in the utility of cultural understanding—staff at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory have been working on the issue and a paper has been produced, though it remains to be seen whether it will be acted upon. Officers on the ground have been absorbing local knowledge and mapping tribal linkages. However, the UK remains noticeably behind the United States in this regard. There is no British equivalent of the Human Terrain program and at least one senior officer with Afghan service met resistance when an attempt was made to encourage the development of one.

There are several problems that impede progress. The first is a general lack of capacity. The supply of officers with language skills remains inadequate (witness the appointment of a man—subsequently revealed as a traitor—generally regarded by his peers as being, charitably, eccentric as translator to Sir David Richards, simply because nobody else could handle Dari).<sup>51</sup> There is also greater institutional resistance within the British civil service to “outsider” expertise than there is in the United States. Readers waiting with baited breath for the emergence of a British equivalent to Minerva—an initiative of the American Defense Department to reach out to

<sup>49</sup> Knights and Williams, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Dr John Hutton in *Uncorrected Transcript of Oral Evidence* to be published as HC 1241-i, House of Commons Minutes of Evidence taken before Defence Committee, ‘UK Operations In Iraq’, 20 June 2006, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmdfence/uc1241-i/uc124102.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> “From ‘King of Salsa,’ to traitor,” BBC News, November 6, 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7711565.stm>.

the academic community on a large scale for “out of the box” views on the big operational and strategic questions of the day—are probably in for a disappointment. On the positive side, the forward-thinking parts of the Army, in particular the Ministry of Defense’s Developments, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, do reach out, for instance to the Insurgency Research Group in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London. However, there is a long way to go on both sides of the relationship in terms of aligning the research efforts of the academic community with the needs of the military and of opening up discussions within the military to the academic community.

British troop rotation policies have also been a problem. The British system has been hailed for relatively short tour lengths which reduce the risk of troops suffering combat fatigue relative to the American system. However, a repeated complaint raised by officers who have served in both Iraq and Afghanistan has been that this is retarding the development of serious local knowledge and continuity of experience. Units—their intelligence details included—begin to culturally acclimatise and grow in ability and are then rotated out of the theatre of operations, after which the whole dreary process begins again with fresh faces. The seriousness of this problem is open to debate in the matter of ordinary combat troops. However, with regard to commanders, staff, intelligence officers and those charged with information operations, where effectiveness is to a very great degree contingent upon continuity, a failure to ensure that the best people are found and put in for the long haul is an albatross around the neck of British strategy. Until and unless this issue of command and intelligence continuity is corrected, British forces are set up to fail. This point cannot be overemphasized.

### **Conclusion: Where Now?**

When this article was in its embryonic stages, it was the conviction of the authors that virtually nobody, including the British Army top brass, was prepared to face up to some of the uncomfortable truths that have beset British operations since 9/11. This is no longer the case, though reform is in its early stages and remains somewhat tentative. Senior British officers, including Sir David Richards and Sir John Kiszely amongst a handful of others, have shown a willingness to engage with the problems at hand and to set things to rights. This is good news—so far as it goes. The problems to be faced, however, are drastic and do not represent grounds for great optimism.

#### *Old Mother Hubbard Syndrome*

The British government has not emasculated its defense establishment to the degree that has occurred on the Continent. Nevertheless, while the Labour government has shown a willingness to deploy the armed forces as an instrument of policy (however ill-defined), it has not shown an equal will-

ingness to pay for the privilege. Where it has shown a willingness to spend, money has generally been put into big ticket items that will prop up the United Kingdom's defence industrial base, which tends to be precisely the sort of spending that is of least use in the current climate. This was the case during the economic boom years and now there is no money left in the till. Defence spending is a zero-sum game and the situation is complicated by inter-service rivalry, as General Dannatt has recognized.

This is a joint and increasingly inter-agency activity and I would welcome the widening of what has been a largely Army debate to include the role that all environments can have in these most demanding and likely of operations. As I have said, I am sure that we will end up with some down arrows in our existing resource requirement in the Army, and I am ready for that debate right across Defence, where I expect to see other down arrows. Overall, we must recognise that we are unlikely to have enough to do all that we would like – we must now look seriously at what we really, really need.<sup>52</sup>

The army, unfortunately, is going to have to make some tough choices if it wishes to remain a viable force for counterinsurgency. In an ideal world, the army would get a larger share of a larger pie, but the fact is that army reformers may well have to be prepared to realign resources closer to home. This will be a serious test of commitment.

The structural issues challenging British counterinsurgent institutional memory have already been mentioned. The current conflicts do, however, offer the possibility that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan will be able to form a cadre upon which the Army can build going forward. The question is whether these experienced troops, particularly company-level officers and senior NCOs, will stay around for the party. Recruitment figures for the army are reasonably healthy, perhaps a function of the economic downturn.<sup>53</sup> Retention, however, is a serious problem.<sup>54</sup> The question seems to be whether the Army can keep its best people or whether the accelerated operational tempo will drive them into the civilian sector—as seems to be the case at present. Moreover, given that seasoned officers and NCOs cost a great deal of money there is also always the possibility that the government will decide that after Afghanistan and Iraq making some of them redundant would be a good way to “trim the fat.”

*Did somebody mention strategy?*

The situation—not least with regard to procurement and force structure—is complicated by the persistent lack of strategic direction. A new

<sup>52</sup> General Sir Richard Dannatt, speech to RUSI Land Warfare conference, June 12, 2008, <http://kingsofwar.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/cgsrusilwcspeech1.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> “Surge in recruitment as support for troops rises,” The Times, November 1, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article5058403.ece>.

<sup>54</sup> House of Commons Defence Select Committee Report HC424 – Recruiting and Retaining Armed Forces Personnel, July 2008 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmdfence/424/42402.htm>.

strategic defense review is badly overdue and work needs to be done on every aspect of national strategy from the grand strategic level downward. The last strategic defence review was conducted in 1998 with an update in 2002.<sup>55</sup> At the moment, the British public possesses little sense of the reasons why the expeditionary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are vital to their security and worth the substantial cost in men and materiel. Meanwhile there is an impending clash between the expeditionary campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and the desperately failing domestic counter-radicalization campaign which is itself a counterinsurgent operation (though it is not acknowledged as such) of daunting scale. There is an increasing apprehension in government that the wars that Britain is fighting abroad are making the situation with respect to its own Muslim minority all the more volatile. This may well cause a readjustment of strategic priorities in the short- to mid-term.

In capsule form, the attitude of the British government is analogous to a certain breed of player in a high-stakes poker game. American readers should not underestimate the extent to which British “strategy” is motivated simply by the desire to be in the world “game” and to be partnered with the United States; policymakers of both major parties value the “special relationship” greatly. That is why Whitehall behaves strategically rather in the manner of an inveterate gambler with a small pot of chips. Britain wishes to stay in the strategic “game,” the rules of which are set in Washington, and it perceives that in order to do so it needs to place a stake on the table. That stake is the Army.

In the final analysis, the problems Britain faces in meeting the challenge of operations post-9/11 (and of formulating and sustaining a coherent national strategy) are extremely serious and the current Government seems unlikely to ride to the rescue with either better guidance and strategic direction or much more money—indeed less money is a possibility. Solutions, therefore, must come from within via professional self-criticism and the facing up to uncomfortable truths. Fortunately, professionalism is a quality that the army does not lack. John Nagl has written of the “flexibility of thought and action that has long been a tradition of the British Army.”<sup>56</sup> It is notable that despite all that has occurred, that the British Army remains amongst the most professional in the world. It is also extraordinarily psychologically self-contained, used to muddling through and expecting little else. It was that which underpinned its ability to meet the challenge of counterinsurgency in the past and it is that particular historical tradition that it may have to draw upon if it is to overcome current challenges.



<sup>55</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *A New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review*, Report HC 9-31 (2002), <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmdfence/93/93.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), p. 192.