

H-NET BOOK REVIEW
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Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife

by John Nagl
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Leave It to the Marines?

Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, possesses very impressive credentials. A graduate of West Point, where he later taught national security studies, a Rhodes Scholar, and an Oxford DPhil in International Relations, he led a tank platoon in Operation Desert Storm, and served as an operations officer in Iraq in 2003-2004.

This book evolved from his doctoral thesis; the title is a quotation from Lawrence of Arabia. In it, **LTC Nagl considers the question of how armies adapt to changing circumstances during the course of conflicts for which they have not been prepared; or more bluntly, why the American Army had such a hard time in Vietnam. Army Chief of Staff Peter J. Schoomaker liked the book so much that he ordered copies for every four-star general and contributed a foreword to the second edition.**

Nagl compares two case studies: the experiences of the British Army in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and the American Army in the Vietnam conflict (1961-1975). The book consists of four parts: a setting-the-stage discussion, followed by separate examinations of Malaya and Vietnam, and a concluding “lessons” section.

Nagl relies heavily on concepts from the field of organization theory, declaring that “the primary argument of [this] book is that the better performance of the British Army in learning and implementing a successful counterinsurgency doctrine in Malaya (as compared to the American Army's failure to learn and implement successful counterinsurgency doctrine in Vietnam) is best explained by the differing organizational cultures of the two armies; in short, that the British Army was a learning institution and the American Army was not” (p. xxii).

“Organizational culture is key to the ability to learn from unanticipated conditions, a variable which explains why the British Army successfully conducted counterinsurgency in Malaya but why the American Army failed to do so in Vietnam” (from the book cover). The American Army's dedication to conventional war-fighting – to the destruction of the opponent – prevented it from arriving at, or even looking for, the correct formula for defeating the insurgency in South Vietnam.

Although the book has been widely praised, it raises some concerns. Consider first the use of a single case from which grand conclusions are drawn. Nagl does not remind his readers that not only the United States, but all major military powers of the twentieth century – the British, French, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, Soviets and Russians – have encountered great difficulties in suppressing insurgencies. Consider also that **Nagl compares Malaya, widely accepted (perhaps too uncritically) as a textbook example of successful counterinsurgency with Vietnam, usually**

(and even more uncritically) offered as a textbook example of the opposite type. Nagl is of course aware of the structural problems inherent in his comparison, admitting that “the two conflicts were very different in scale, geography, and level of external support provided to the insurgents” (p. xxv). But that is quite an understatement. The British had very long experience in Malaya. On that peninsula bordered by pro-Western Thailand, they easily prevented outside aid to the insurgents, whom their forces outnumbered 28 to 1, and enjoyed the reflexive support of the Malay half of the population. Nevertheless it required twelve years to suppress the insurgency. In Vietnam, invaded daily by an implacable and well-equipped enemy, the Americans and their allies had a numerical advantage of merely 1.6 to 1, yet they broke the guerrillas in three years (a fact which the chattering classes have never grasped). Indeed, the Tet Offensive stemmed from the Viet Cong's inability to sustain their enormous casualties. And under General Creighton Abrams the Americans did in fact generate an effective system of counterinsurgency, which Nagl acknowledges and then dismisses.

But there is much more to the issue than that. **Had Nagl compared Vietnam to British counterinsurgency in Palestine or Cyprus or Aden or Northern Ireland, the British Army would not have emerged looking quite so good nor the Americans quite so inept.** Recall that in Northern Ireland, the British Army was operating in an English-speaking province no bigger than Connecticut and with one-third its population, where it enjoyed proximity to its bases, an overwhelming numerical ratio to the guerrillas, and the support of the great majority of the civilian population. Still, it took well over twenty years to bring the IRA in Northern Ireland to heel. And, Nagl notes correctly that despite its century of experience in small wars, between 1948 and 1951 “it is difficult to argue that the British Army [in Malaya] developed a successful counterinsurgency doctrine” (p. 78). In contrast, from 1965 to 1968 the American Army reduced the Viet Cong from a menace to a nuisance. Since, moreover, as Nagl suggests, the British Army's supposed culture of adaptability derived from the larger national culture, he seems close to blaming American soldiers for not being British.

Was the alleged gross American failure in Vietnam (a position that requires one to ignore the very effective changes under General Creighton Abrams) entirely or even mainly due to the Army's “inability to learn”? Recall that during the Vietnam conflict, the United States and its allies were confronted by overwhelming Soviet power in Europe; conventional strength, not small-war prowess, was going to determine the fate of the West. Moreover, **the British did not have to contend with any Ho Chi Minh Trail, which the politicians in Washington forbade the Army to close,** the key decision of the entire Vietnam conflict, and the one from which almost all the lamentable experiences of the Americans there flowed. Nor did the British face the North Vietnamese regular Army (at the time one of the very best in all Asia), whose increasing involvement in the war infinitely complicated the U.S. counterinsurgency task.

Above all, does the American Army's drive to “get the war over with” not reflect the notorious impatience of a large element of the American people, impatience stoked by news media eager for the latest photogenic outrage? **According to Nagl, “television was almost unknown during the Malayan campaign”** (p. 94). **Thus the British Army in Malaya could not be hounded by anything like the omnipresent and increasingly adversarial U.S. media, whose grotesquely incompetent reporting of the 1968 Tet Offensive went far to turn American opinion against the war.** What if television had been absent from South Vietnam? Conversely, would it have been possible, with our contemporary media, to win through to victory in World War II, if the casualties of the first few days of Normandy had been trumpeted? Would the Battle of the Bulge have been presented as evidence that Roosevelt and Marshall had been lying about Germany's imminent

defeat? How would today's television networks have presented the staggering losses to kamikaze attacks at Okinawa?

Toward the end of his book, Nagl concedes that “the very attributes that allowed the British Army to respond to the demands of counterinsurgency in Malaya – decentralization, minimal use of firepower, independent and innovative theater commanders – made it a less effective learning organization on the conventional battlegrounds of World War II” (p. 219). From this he concludes that “the demands of conventional and unconventional warfare differ so greatly that an organization optimized to succeed in one will have great difficulty in fighting the other” (p. 219). Does this mean that improving the American Army’s admittedly inadequate approach to counterinsurgency will reduce its ability to fight conventional war? If yes, is that a good idea? The American Army was organized and trained first to defeat the Axis and then to deter the Soviets. It accomplished both tasks well. Had it failed at only one of those tasks, nobody today would be discussing either Vietnam or Iraq. Clearly this question deserves wide and thoughtful discussion.

Better than an either / or approach to the problem, as Nagl himself suggested in another venue, might be for the Army to assume responsibility for “clearing” a territory of conventional hostile forces and turning over responsibility for “holding” that territory – fighting guerrillas – to local or regional forces. Or **might it be best to leave counterinsurgency mainly to the Marines?**

All these difficulties aside, John Nagl has produced a book that is vigorously written, accessible to non-specialists, grounded in original research including primary sources and personal interviews, and animated by the passion of a highly talented and deeply dedicated professional officer. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* will reverberate in national security circles for a long time.