

LEARNING TO EAT SOUP WITH A KNIFE:

COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM MALAYA AND VIETNAM

BY JOHN A. NAGL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS:

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Review by Major Lisa Taylor

This book was first published in 2002, with this 2005 edition being published with an updated foreword and preface. In my opinion, it is an excellent study of how counterinsurgency operations need to be waged. It was clear to me by the end of the book that the US approach described within was quite ineffective. As Canada moves into a prospective new phase of operations in Afghanistan focusing more on nation-building, this book is recommended reading for military and diplomatic planners. It provides useful, contemporary insight into the capability requirements to facilitate Afghanistan's continued evolution toward stable and peaceful nationhood.

This book uses British Army experience in Malaya, 1948-1960, and US Army experience in Vietnam, 1950-1972, to expose the differing organizational cultures and resultant learning abilities of the two armies. Because of these differing organizational cultures and learning capabilities, the author, a US Army Lieutenant-Colonel with two tours in Iraq, argues that the British Army has become better suited to counterinsurgency operations than the US Army.

Chapter 1 begins with an examination of organizational culture, learning theories and how armies apply them. He uses concrete examples of

how both armies have developed and employed doctrine as well as how institutional learning has evolved or been resisted in some cases.

Chapter 2 continues with a detailed analysis of insurgency and its theoretical evolution from Clausewitz and Jomini to Mao Tse Tung, concluding that due to its very nature, insurgency cannot be combated by military might alone. All elements of national power must be integrated – diplomacy, information operations, intelligence, financial and military – to achieve primarily political objectives related to establishing a stable national government capable of thwarting both internal and external threats.

In Chapter 3, a comparison of the two organizations' histories allows the reader to appreciate the organizational cultures that have evolved. He concludes that because of their respective histories, one army was prone to succeed in its next campaign while the other would enjoy less success. With these first three chapters, the stage is set for the author's evaluation of the two counterinsurgency experiences, and from here, he turns his attention to in-depth explanations of the differing experiences of the British Army in Malaya and the US Army in Vietnam.

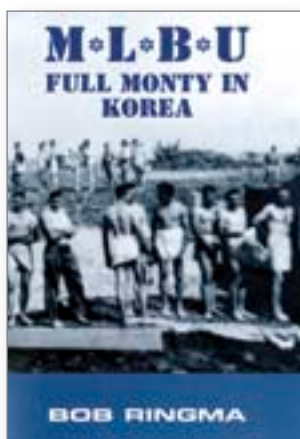
Chapters 4 and 5 explain the British Army experience beginning in 1948 and culminating

with its complete withdrawal in 1960 and a stable, independent Malayan nation. It is clear that the British discovered the requirement for a political-military-economic approach early in the emergency and that this was necessary to win hearts and minds. Chapters 6 and 7 explain the US Army experiences in Vietnam commencing with the advisory staffs deployed in 1950 to help construct military forces in South Vietnam and ending with the US troop withdrawal in 1972. Ultimately, the author provides evidence that while there was a degree of innovative thinking employed by some facets of the US military in Vietnam, the US Army insisted on employing massive firepower, technology and large US troop concentrations to sweep the jungles and destroy the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army – in other words, employ an annihilation approach, in spite of documented failures.

Chapter 8 turns the reader's attention to institutional learning theory to explain, in depth, why both armies had very different levels of success in their counterinsurgency operations. The author opines that it is directly attributed to the strength or flexibility of the two institutional cultures. The final chapter provides ideas about how to make

military forces adaptable to emerging changes in warfare and how to overcome institutional culture to build learning institutions. Nagl also provides evidence that due to the differing demands of conventional and unconventional warfare, an organization optimized to succeed in one will have great difficulty in fighting the other. The organizational culture that makes it so successful in one arena might actually blind it from seeing deficiencies that make it fail in the other. Thus, he concludes, organizations should focus on achieving one critical mission. Finally, the author concludes that in these "dirty little wars," political and military tasks intertwine, and the objective is more often "nation building" rather than the destruction of an enemy's army. And the ability to quickly learn during these "dirty little wars" and adapt strategies and tactics is key to "learning to eat soup with a knife." ■

Maj Lisa Taylor, a military police officer, has spent the years since 9/11 focusing her training and employment on force protection. She is currently employed with the Concepts & Doctrine Development Branch at CFAWC, responsible for FP, CBRN and military police doctrine for the Air Force.



MLBU – MOBILE LAUNDRY AND BATH UNIT

– FULL MONTY IN KOREA

BY BOB RINGMA

BURNSTOWN, ONTARIO:
GENREAL STORE PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2004
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Review by
LT(N) Pierrette LeDrew

History has shown that logistics is crucial to success in warfare. Countless books have been written about the many facets of logistics, with one notable exception. According to Bob Ringma, the author of

MLBU (Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit) – Full Monty in Korea, these essential components used in the field in the Second World War and in Korea have been largely neglected by military historians.