The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 brought to an end a religious sectarian conflict which had raged in Northern Ireland for nearly three decades and resulted in over 3,500 deaths. During that time the British government developed a sophisticated strategy that aimed to prevent a Protestant insurrection whilst at the same time convincing the Irish Republican Army (IRA), that ‘the ballot box and not the Armalite’ was the only viable solution to resolving this internal conflict. A vital component of this strategy was the deployment of a garrison force of between 11,000 and 14,000 soldiers whose job it was to support the civilian government, restore order and contain the threat posed by terrorism. Fundamental to the success of this campaign was the recognition that, in spite of a massive numerical superiority enjoyed by the security services (25,000 soldiers and police versus 300 active terrorists) there was no military solution in Northern Ireland. This campaign reinforced Galula’s maxim that counterinsurgency is 80 per cent political and 20 per cent military (Galula 1964: 63). In essence, this conflict demonstrates that in this kind of war force works best when used in support of a wider political and economic strategy which attacks the root causes of the conflict.

Much of what was seen as ‘best practice’ in this internal war supposedly grew out of a set of values and traditions which could be equated to a British way in small wars which was based on the British military’s experience of past colonial campaigns (Strachan 2006). According to Pimlott, the recognition by the British military that force had such a limited role to play in counterinsurgency stemmed from the paucity of resources available to the British. This imbalance between resources and commitments was most pronounced in the inter-war period when the British Empire was at its maximum size at a time when the political consciousness of those colonised was starting to challenge the legitimacy of empire (Gwynn 1936). Lacking sufficient force to impose its will resulted in the British understanding that success depended on dealing with the political roots of a conflict rather than prosecuting a campaign to annihilate the threat. In practice this meant using force discriminately and proportionately so that reconciliation became possible (Pimlott 1988: 17–20). In a similar vein, Strachan emphasised the importance of the civil–military relationship which emerged in the era of colonial warfare as an additional force multiplier. As such the military became accustomed to working closely with the political authorities. Equally important, the British military also played a key role in establishing governance in newly conquered territories. An important question that Strachan addresses is how this experience was captured and survived within the memory of an institution which had little in the way of formal written
doctrine. Within the context of the era of decolonisation he believes this experience was captured in the first instance by soldiers who served in campaigns in the inter-war period on the North West Frontier and Palestine. This experience was then brought to bear in Malaya. Again little in the way of formal doctrine emerged from this conflict and so lessons learned were disseminated as officers left Malaya for other theatres of war. A second important repository of information came from books written by the likes of Sir Robert Thompson and Sir Julian Paget. In the case of Northern Ireland, Frank Kitson’s *Low Intensity Operations* provided a contemporary overview of how to make colonial counterinsurgency operate within the social, political and economic setting of Northern Ireland (Strachan, 2007).

Although it took many years to apply these lessons properly, both the government and the security services learned from earlier failures and by the late 1970s both possessed a range of capabilities and skills which made them quite formidable in this largely urban conflict. In the case of the army a key part of its ability to learn and adapt was helped by the creation of the Northern Ireland Training and Assistance Team (NITAT) in 1972 which drew upon the latest operational experience to provide comprehensive pre-deployment training to all units going to Northern Ireland. Another component of the army’s increased effectiveness was the conceptual and doctrinal application of tactics, techniques and procedures taken from earlier campaigns and their fusion with new ideas developed to deal with the specific challenges of fighting the IRA. Most important was the focus placed on intelligence. To this end the army created a new intelligence unit called 14 Intelligence which became heavily involved in the surveillance and infiltration of the IRA. They also invested heavily in the creation of an extensive system of passive and active surveillance across the province as a whole based upon cameras, telephone bugs, the use of other electronic sensors and powerful computers which were connected to all units down to the level of the company. Equally important was the use of ordinary soldiers on the street providing information based on their observation of changes in day-to-day life in their sector and information provided by the local Catholic community. To obtain this information it was important for the military to treat the Catholic population with a modicum of respect and to compete with the IRA for the hearts and minds of the people. Of even greater importance was the role of the police and in particular Special Branch in penetrating the organisation of the IRA and providing valuable intelligence which allowed a more discriminate campaign to be carried out (Chin 2007: 119–47).

These contemporary lessons were captured in the 1977 edition of the British army counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, the main tenets of which were represented by the six principles of British counterinsurgency. These principles were as follows:

1. recognition of the political nature of the problem;
2. civilian supremacy of the campaign and application of a coordinated government and security plan which ties civil, police and military agencies together;
3. the development of an effective intelligence and surveillance network;
4. split the insurgents from the people via propaganda, winning hearts and minds and imposition of physical security;
5. destroy the isolated insurgent;
6. conduct political reform to prevent a recurrence of conflict.

Although this did not represent an explicit theory of COIN it served to provide a framework within which to develop a strategy for defeating an insurgency and it is claimed provided the basis for much of the success the British enjoyed in the 'brush fire' wars it fought in the period of decolonisation and Northern Ireland (Mockaitis 1995).
However, the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have called into question the validity of this framework (Metz 2007: 1–29). Interestingly, British army doctrine writers warned in the 2001 edition of British COIN doctrine that relying on the recent experience of Northern Ireland was potentially dangerous because it could constrain military thinking on the subject in the post-Cold War world (AFM Vol. 1 Part 10, B–2–1, 2001). Having said that the 2001 COIN manual continued to rely on an insurgent type which was driven by a secular or nationalist ideology, usually a variation of Marxism, Leninism and/or Maoism, which was not helpful in understanding the causes and prosecution of insurgency in the post–Cold War era (Metz 1995: 35). However, this intellectual inertia was understandable given that the immediate problem facing the British military in the 1990s was the crisis in Bosnia and the challenges this posed to its existing peacekeeping doctrine. This conflict absorbed much of the intellectual energy of the army and resulted in the production of not one but two new peacekeeping doctrines between 1994 and 1997.

In addition, many of the tactics, techniques and procedures used by the British in past counterinsurgency campaigns were used to good effect in this peacekeeping mission, which probably served to reinforce the impression that existing counterinsurgency doctrine remained ‘fit for purpose’. It is also important to remember that in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War the future of insurgency looked bleak. As Metz explained, by the end of the twentieth century Maoist insurgency was on the verge of extinction because most states possessed the means and the knowledge to contain and defeat this phenomenon (Metz 2004: 12). This over-optimism was also reinforced by the end of the Cold War which resulted in state sponsorship of insurgent groups ending (Mackinlay 2002: 17–23).

In general, most experts recognised that insurgency would persist, but from the perspective of the British, this remained a phenomenon very much on the periphery of their own vital interests. In truth, even the cataclysmic event of 9/11 did not result in an immediate and profound revision of British counterinsurgency doctrine. Thus, in the view of the military, the main challenge posed by the war on terror was not doctrinal (House of Commons Defence Committee, HC 93, 2003, Q51). The focus instead was to ensure we were better able to conduct what could be described as global counter-terrorist campaign (MOD, Cm 556, 2002). Unfortunately, as the war against terror progressed, it became increasingly clear that al-Qaeda was pursuing a more complex and multi-faceted strategy which included terrorism but also incorporated a global guerrilla war (Cassidy 2005: 336). In fact, according to one former CIA analyst, al-Qaeda was and always had been primarily a guerrilla as opposed to a terrorist group. Its aim was to build an army capable of fighting ‘jihad’ (Scheuer 2005: 63–7). The failure of the Americans to realise this was cited as one reason why operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan mutated from rapid decisive operations to bloody and protracted wars (Benjamin and Simon 2005: 159). But such debates tended to support the view that British COIN doctrine remained relevant, even in a post-modern world dominated by non-state actors such as al-Qaeda.

However, as Mackinlay explains, this event could be interpreted as a manifestation of a new kind of insurgency which served to challenge the logic of British COIN. In his view migrant communities have become increasingly radicalised by Western military intervention in ‘Islam–dom’ caused by access to satellite television, the Internet and the DVDs produced by insurgents as a way of promoting their cause (Mackinlay 2009: 167–73). But the British response to events like 7/7 was to see this as a problem for domestic counter–terrorist rather than requiring a new COIN doctrine (JDCC 2006).

But even in the specific cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, the British were slow to realise that the nature of these conflicts posed a serious challenge to the logic of its COIN doctrine. In the case of Iraq, the British were quicker off the mark than their American counterparts to realise
that the country was descending into a state of insurgency. However, initially at least, this was seen very much as an American problem caused largely by an American strategic and organisational culture which resulted in a brutal and indiscriminate response to the Sunni insurgency (Aylwin-Foster 2005: 3). This merely reinforced the validity of the British approach. Thus, in 2004, the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Mike Jackson, distanced the British military from their American ally stating: ‘we must be able to fight with the Americans. That does not mean we must be able to fight as the Americans’. In his view, the British approach to post-conflict situations was doctrinally different from that of the United States (Defence Committee, HC 65, 2005, Q361). He like many others in the UK believed that the British army played an important role in creating a permissive environment in Multi National Division South East (MND SE) in 2004. According to one observer the key to success was the ability of the British to draw on its experience in past counterinsurgency campaigns and apply tactics, techniques and procedures which ranged from ‘a willingness to abandon the dehumanising effect conferred by wearing a helmet to simply removing one’s sunglasses when communicating with people’ (HCDC, HC 65, 2005, para 81).

Unfortunately, such a view failed to take into account the very different environments facing the British and American forces. In the case of the British they controlled an area containing a population of six million people, but the majority of these were Shia Muslims who had every reason to celebrate regime change when it came in 2003. Although the British received a mixed response from the population nearly all the people were prepared to wait and see what the occupation brought in terms of change. However, the British failure to seize this window of opportunity resulted in increased instability and from 2004 until the end of 2008 the British became embroiled in a cycle of violence which stemmed from an array of motivations reflecting the complexities of local politics, culture, religion, corruption and crime that existed within Iraq. In the first instance, the military response to this challenge was to externalise the very obvious problems that confronted them in Iraq and blame Whitehall’s departmental system of government which militated against an effective reconstruction and development plan. The most important articulation of this position was published in early 2006. Called The Comprehensive Approach it argued that we needed to do more to link and coordinate the military, economic and political levers of power within the theatre of operations (JDCC 2006). This became an issue because, in Iraq, the perceived absence of this coordination played a key role in causing the British to fail in terms of delivering security and reconstruction, which played a critical role in allowing an insurgency to erupt in MND SE (Synott 2008: 19). Although not technically COIN, the Comprehensive Approach provided a framework which reinforced rather than contradicted past experience in COIN campaigns in terms of the institutional set-up required for success. Most important it shaped our approach to campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The most obvious manifestation of this can be seen in the creation of the Stabilisation Unit, an interdepartmental organisation whose primary function is to provide assistance in post-conflict situations. In addition, the British also adopted an American idea: provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) which brought together the military and civilian agencies at the local level in each theatre of operations. First established in Afghanistan they were quickly applied to Iraq and one was set up in Basra in 2006.

In the case of Afghanistan, the British perceived this to be essentially a peacekeeping mission and little happened between 2001 and 2006 to challenge this view. The catalyst for change was the decision to deploy 16 Air Assault Brigade to Helmand in summer 2006. Although the deployment of the brigade looked like a haphazard exercise in planning, the sad truth is that the government went to great lengths to ensure that the Comprehensive Approach was at the centre of its efforts to re-establish governance in this province. In December 2005 all the key departments
of state met over a two-week period to create a joined-up comprehensive plan (Ferguson 2008: 25–46). Equally important, although there was no expectation of large-scale resistance, the military drew heavily on the classic counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya to shape and inform their operations in Afghanistan. One of the most important outcomes of this exercise was the view that the focus of operations in Helmand was reconstruction not war (Tootal 2009: 30–1). Yet, in spite of these good intentions, both the Comprehensive Approach and the icon of Malaya were stillborn as British military operations came to be dominated by what became known as the platoon blockhouse strategy; in essence a series of defensive battles to hold key towns and villages from the Taliban. Although less dramatic, it was also clear that the British faced a similar fate in Iraq. By September 2005, they were not just fighting the militias but had also become locked in a violent battle with elements of the Iraqi security forces in Basra.

Although both conflicts were fundamentally different they also shared common traits which presented important challenges to existing COIN doctrine. Realising that the problem was not due entirely to the structural weaknesses of the Whitehall machine, the military began to reflect on its own practices and to question whether their doctrine was appropriate for the new conditions in which counterinsurgency operated. The first doctrine publication to specifically address this issue was Countering Irregular Threats (CIA). Published in 2007 it attempted to create a new taxonomy for insurgency which captured the rise of a range of groups that presented an armed threat to the authority of the state. Irregular activity was defined as behaviour that attempted to achieve political change through the illegal use, or threat, of violence ‘conducted by ideologically or criminally motivated non-regular forces, groups or individuals, as a challenge to authority’ (JDCC 2007: para 102).

Most important given the array of different insurgent types, the CIA questioned the relevance of British experience of counterinsurgency and questioned the extent to which principles derived from past campaigns could be applied to these more complex, internationalised and multi-faceted insurgencies (JDCC 2007: para 104).

The CIA acted as a catalyst for change and helped shape and inform the debate about the future of British COIN. A second milestone in this process of reflection was the production of the American COIN manual FM3–24, in December 2006. This huge tome set a new standard in doctrine writing and provided the start point for the British who responded by producing two new doctrine publications, a new counterinsurgency manual for the army (AFM 10, Vol. 1, 2009) and a joint manual for all three services called Stabilisation (JDP 340, 2009). Both publications drew heavily on the experience of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These two doctrines were justified on the grounds that the Army COIN manual was designed to assist planning at the tactical level and JDP 340 focused on the campaign plan or operational level within the theatre of operations.

Both doctrines acknowledged the perceived change in terms of the motivation and behaviour of the insurgent and the contemporary operating environment and accepted this required a new approach. With regard to the insurgent it was recognised that insurgency was mutating and becoming more hybrid in nature, meaning that past distinctions between high and low intensity combat were becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, one of the cherished assumptions of British counterinsurgency – that it falls generally into the low-intensity bracket – was no longer valid. Now insurgents employed ‘a mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the same “battlespace” to achieve their political objectives’ (AFM 10, 2009, 1–1). It is also recognised that the number of armed groups had increased significantly and, as in the case of CIA, a broader categorisation of what constituted an insurgent was required. Again experience in Iraq and Afghanistan provided ample evidence to support this position. In the case of Iraq it is estimated that the British faced over 300 different militias in
From Belfast to Lashkar Gar via Basra

Basra during the latter stages of the occupation (Munson 2009: 103). Similarly in Afghanistan it is estimated that the British faced at least six armed groups who were connected to the Taliban insurgency and countless numbers of warlords and militias (Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 302, 2009, ev 78). Most important were the connections between these groups, the drug trade and al-Qaeda. Giustozzi notes that the Taliban’s support for global jihad and the exploitation of the Internet is evidence that this is now a very different movement from the one which governed Afghanistan until 2001 (Giustozzi 2007: 13–14) and this raises important questions about how doctrine tackles transnational insurgents.

Even more important however is the environmental context of counterinsurgency today. British success in COIN in the past was due to the fact that these campaigns were largely conducted in colonies controlled by the British and as such there was usually a functioning administration and local security force through which to prosecute the campaign. In addition, the legitimacy of these operations often went unquestioned because it was deemed to be an internal affair within the empire or homeland. In contrast, British counterinsurgency today is generally conducted in support of a sovereign government and consequently British operations must take into account the wishes of the host government. Although the British have experience of this practice from their campaign in Dhofar in the 1970s, this was the exception rather than the rule and British experience in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate how frustrating they found having to liaise with a host government.

In the case of Iraq this problem became acute in terms of the effect it had on the ability of the British to stabilise Basra. In a strange twist of fate, the principal insurgent group, the Sadrists, were represented in the provincial and national government and opposed any attempt to reduce the power of their militias in the area. This political fix presented an unprecedented problem for the British when in 2006 they planned a large-scale sweep of Basra to clear all the militias, but were forced to scale this down to a more modest reconstruction and development project because of pressure exerted by the Sadrists on the Malaki government. As a result, Operation Sinbad failed to remove the militias and made the British withdrawal from Basra in 2007 look like an act of desperation; there were even rumours in the press that the British had been forced to negotiate terms with the militias to ensure this action was not contested. In truth, the withdrawal happened because the British realised that most of the violence in Basra was directed at them and if they left they hoped the violence would decline dramatically, which it did. Similar problems occurred again in 2008 when the Malaki government decided to launch an offensive against opposition groups in Basra. Operation ‘Charge of the Knights’ proved to be a surprise to both the Americans and the British, but it was the British who were perceived to be the biggest losers in this campaign as the media inferred that the Iraqi government and the Americans had lost confidence in the British (Cockburn 2008), something which the British military have been eager to contest. Very similar problems have been experienced in Afghanistan. Indeed as soon as the British deployed into Helmand province in 2006, they were forced to deviate from the plan by the provincial governor and president Hamid Karzai who saw the threat of the Taliban as a challenge to the authority of the government and demanded the British send forces to protect the towns in the north of Helmand. Some have argued that if the military had not bowed to this pressure that the Taliban would have left Helmand and headed to Kandahar, which was their main objective, but once the British moved into the area they fixed the attention of the insurgents and the result was a summer of heavy fighting (Chin 2010). However, as Brigade Commander Ed Butler explained, how could the British deny the request of a sovereign government in whose country they were in? (Ferguson 2008: 153).

The political domain of counterinsurgency today is made more complicated because most campaigns are conducted largely through coalitions frequently led by the United States. As a
result the British have had to fuse their plans with those of their allies as well as the host government. Again recent operational experience demonstrates that this adjustment to being the junior partner has created problems for the British. This was most apparent in post-war Iraq as the insurgency got underway. A good illustration of this was the way in which British plans were undermined by the American decision to disband Iraq’s security services and implement a policy of de-Ba’athification, both of which had a huge impact on the security situation. It is not entirely clear if the British government was even consulted on these decisions before they were announced but many within the British military opposed them. The British were also frustrated in their efforts to advise their American counterparts on how to deal with the insurgency that was growing in the American controlled areas of Iraq, but again were unable to influence their ally until the arrival of a new US commander and ambassador in summer 2004, but this was over a year after the Sunni insurgency began. Many of the same problems were present in the US–UK relationship in the Afghan campaign. At its most basic level there was a fundamental tension between what the British thought they needed to do, which focused on nation-building, and the US military’s emphasis on carrying on with counter-terrorist operations. Inevitably, the Americans did their best to limit the role and size of the International Security Force (ISAF) set up by the British so that it did not come into conflict with their operations. This tension persisted even when the British pushed into Helmand in 2006 and British efforts to win hearts and minds were undermined by US attacks against the same population which frequently caused civilian casualties; a good example of this occurred in area around Now Zad. The British and Americans also came into conflict over the role of counter-narcotics in the context of the wider counterinsurgency campaign. The British military feared eradication would alienate the population and so tried to ignore it, but the Americans remained adamant that eradication was the immediate and long-term solution to stabilising Afghanistan.

The third environmental factor which has complicated the application of British counter-insurgency is the way in which such campaigns have increasingly come to be conducted within failed and failing states. British defence policy views failed states as one of the principal security concerns facing the UK because it could be exploited by transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda (MOD, Cm 6041, 2003, para 2.8). Dealing with this phenomenon is the central focus of JDP 340 which envisages COIN as a component part of a wider strategy which seeks to support states weakened by conflict and help in the restoration of governance and security within its borders. Equally important is the assistance given to create political institutions which provide a legitimate and non-violent way to resolve the distribution of political power and ensure sustainable and economic development. The role of the military within this process is primarily to provide security for the population and support the indigenous government. Most important and reminiscent of the doctrinal debate which surrounded peacekeeping in the 1990s, was the realisation that armed forces had an important role to play in nation-building, especially in those states where conflict continued to rage. In such life-threatening situations, charities and civilian development agencies are unable to operate which means the military have to carry this burden. These new tasks include the provision of economic assistance, facilitating disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former insurgents and militia fighters, training new security forces and assisting in the creation of an effective judicial system (DCDC 2010).

However, in spite of these potentially dramatic changes, the British military’s new doctrine represents an evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. A good illustration of this can be seen if you compare the six principles of counterinsurgency with those articulated in the new doctrines:
Principles of counterinsurgency in Army Field Manual:
1. primacy of political purpose
2. unity of effort
3. understand the human terrain
4. secure the population
5. neutralise the insurgent
6. gain and maintain popular support
7. operate in accordance with the law
8. integrate intelligence
9. prepare for the long term
10. learn and adapt. (AFM Countering Insurgency: 1–1)

The principles of stabilisation are very similar:
1. primacy of political purpose
2. understand the context
3. focus on the population
4. foster host nation governance, authority and indigenous capacity
5. unity of effort
6. neutralise and isolate irregular actors
7. gain consent and maintain credibility
8. prepare for the long term
9. anticipate, learn and adapt. (DCDC 2010: viii)

The British army’s latest edition of COIN and JDP 340 both accept that the world has changed, but both remain insistent that classical COIN theorists like Galula, Thompson and Kitson continue to provide useful insights and in particular the emphasis placed on securing and controlling the population, (DCDC 2010: 1–3 and AFM 10 2009: 4–3).

Frank Hoffman notes that the US military’s COIN manual FM 3–24 contains within it a paradox. One the one hand it claims that you cannot fight insurgents today in the same way you fought the Viet Cong, but the manual also states that most insurgencies follow a similar course of development and consequently the past remains an important source of learning (Hoffman 2007: 72). A similar criticism could be made of the latest iteration of British counterinsurgency doctrine. But it is nevertheless an important evolution which attempts to address some of the weaknesses highlighted in FM 3–24. Both British doctrines demonstrate an awareness of the importance of consent and legitimacy in counterinsurgency, which are important factors to take on board when in the midst of what is frequently a military occupation of a country. They also attempt to move beyond the Maoist model of insurgency by identifying a range of different insurgent groups which in the case of AFM 10 reflects a taxonomy which recognises the importance of identity and religion as significant sources of motivation within insurgency today. In theory this should allow a more flexible approach than is normally associated with classical counterinsurgency doctrine. In addition, both doctrines recognise the importance of the propaganda war and a lot of time is invested in developing the theme of ‘Influence’ as a way of countering the insurgent’s exploitation of the information domain. However, the doctrines offer little insight into what the British can do to improve the legitimacy of the host government in the eyes of its own people and other governments; especially when that government is riddled with corruption and is unwilling or unable to reform itself. Similarly it does not provide a convincing solution to the problem of how to generate sufficient force to secure the population. The idea of relying on security sector reform often creates its own problems. This was clearly
demonstrated in Iraq in 2006 when the US strategy of relying on poorly trained and unreliable Iraqi security services as a substitute for American soldiers very nearly caused the United States to lose the conflict. Most important, the situation was only saved by the United States reinforcing Iraq with 30,000 additional troops, which were used to generate the time needed so that the training and mentoring of Iraq’s security forces could be improved (Ricks 2009: 3–21). Obviously, the British military lacks this capacity and consequently this has weakened its ability to conduct COIN. This deficiency has been exacerbated because the British also lack the financial muscle to conduct an effective reconstruction and development programme to support a COIN operation in a failed and failing state. Consequently, in spite of the doctrinal agility displayed by the British military so far, the future of British COIN looks uncertain.

**Recommended readings**


**References**


