COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM MALAYA AND VIETNAM

Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife

John A. Nagl

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"To make war upon rebellion is messy and slow,
like eating soup with a knife."
—T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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Acknowledgments

Making war upon insurgents is messy and slow. To the extent that the writing of this book was not, first thanks are owed to Professor Robert O'Neill, veteran of the Vietnam War and of my M.Phil. and D.Phil. theses. He suggested the topic and saw it through to the end. Just as important was the support of the United States Military Academy's Department of Social Sciences; I owe a great deal to its former Chair and the current Dean of West Point, Brigadier General Daniel J. Kaufman, another Vietnam veteran and scholar. Sincere thanks to all of my colleagues during three wonderful years of teaching at West Point.

The American and British armies were very helpful and open in the course of my inquiry. A large number of veterans of the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War were kind enough to share their thoughts and memories; their names are listed in the Bibliography. The custodians of several archives in Britain and in the United States were extremely helpful; I should cite Brigadier (Retired) Gavin Bulloch and Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Tim Harris of the Tactical Doctrine Retrieval Cell, Dr. Conrad Wood of the Imperial War Museum, and Dr. Peter Boyden of the National Army Museum; and in the United States, Dr. Richard Sommers of the Military History Institute and Dr. Richard Hunt and Dr. Jim Wright of the Center for Military History. I owe special thanks to Miles Templer, who opened his father's papers to me and thus enriched my understanding of the Malayan Emergency.

Professor Williamson Murray is both a veteran of the Vietnam War and one of the most important thinkers on military adaptation; knowing him

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With so much assistance, I can claim credit for little that follows except the errors of fact and interpretation that remain despite the best efforts of all of those listed here.

Introduction

Two months to the day after the attacks of 11 September 2001, U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers played a critical role in the defeat of Taliban forces at Mazar-i-Sharif. The victors displayed a remarkable ability to improvise, calling in precision-guided munitions while riding horses into battle. This was not a war the American military had prepared to fight; none of the Special Forces soldiers were trained in horse cavalry tactics. But the circumstances of the war in Afghanistan demanded that the Army adapt its traditional way of fighting and the Special Forces were able to learn on the fly, leading to the collapse of the Taliban regime in a remarkably innovative campaign.[1]

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld uses the horse cavalry charge at Mazar-i-Sharif to make a telling point about the military in the twenty-first century. He writes, "The lesson from the Afghan campaign is not that the U.S. Army should start stockpiling saddles. Rather, it is that preparing for the future will require new ways of thinking, and the development of forces and abilities that can adapt quickly to new challenges and unexpected circumstances."[2] This book explains how to build military organizations that can adapt more quickly and effectively to future changes in warfare.

Otto von Bismarck suggested that fools learn by experience whereas wise men learn from other peoples' experience.[3] This book examines how two armies learned when they were confronted with situations for which they were not prepared by training, organization, and doctrine: the British army in the Malayan Emergency and the American army in the Vietnam War. These cases are of particular interest today because both armies confronted

opponents who chose to fight them asymmetrically, avoiding their strengths while exploiting their weaknesses. Despite the difficulty of the task, the British army adapted itself to meet the demands of defeating a Communist rural insurgency, whereas the United States Army was less successful in learning how to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign. The comparison offers some interesting lessons in how armies can adapt to changed conditions.[4]

The Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War have been the subject of comparative study before, notably in Richard Clutterbuck's *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*[5] and more recently in Sam Sarkesian's *Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*.[6] This study differs from these earlier works in that it analyzes the performance of the British and American armies, acting as executive agents for a number of government agencies, in learning how to deal with a situation for which they were originally unprepared. It follows the learning process by using the technique of *process tracing*, defined by the political scientist Alexander George as "attempts to assess the possibility of a causal relationship between independent and dependent variables by identifying intervening steps, or cause-and-effect links, between them."[7]

The cases of Malaya and Vietnam were not selected primarily because the two wars are similar in geographical location, colonial history, or time span, although these surface similarities do serve to make more apparent both the differences in the philosophy of counterinsurgency practiced by the British and American armies and the differing abilities of the two armies to learn and change during the course of a conflict.[8] This book does not attempt to provide the definitive answer as to why the United States "lost" the war in Vietnam, nor why the British "won" in Malaya—although the conclusions it will draw about the organizational culture and learning ability of the two armies certainly demonstrate some of the reasons for the differing results of the two conflicts.

The primary argument of the 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. This difference in organizational culture between the two armies is the primary cause for their markedly different performances in learning and applying the lessons of counterinsurgency. The United States Army resisted any true attempt to learn how to fight an insurgency during the course of the Vietnam War, preferring to treat the war as a conventional conflict in the tradition of the Korean War and World War II. The British army, because of its traditional role as a colonial police force and the or-

ganizational culture that its history and the national culture created, was better able to learn quickly and apply the lessons of counterinsurgency during the course of the Malayan Emergency.

The organizational learning approach has not previously been applied to explain cases of military adaptation during the course of a conflict. Efforts to understand adaptive behavior in organizations have their roots in theories of bureaucratic politics, the fledgling field of organizational science, and recent attempts to apply theories of psychology and cognition to international relations. Because of the lack of consensus on the essential attributes of learning organizations and the absence of previous explanations of military adaptation during conflicts using this approach, the author has been forced to develop his own criteria by which to conduct what George describes as a "structured, focused comparison"[9] of British army counterinsurgency learning in Malaya and United States army learning in Vietnam. Literature on learning and cognitive psychology, the histories of successful and unsuccessful military organizations, and the author's own experiences of military organizations were all drawn upon in structuring and focusing the comparison. Particularly helpful was Richard Downie's *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War.* Downie examines United States Army counterinsurgency learning after Vietnam, using a theoretical framework upon which this study is built.[10]

The sheer volume of writing on the Malayan Emergency and (especially) on the Vietnam War can be too much of a good thing. Research for this book began with the use of secondary sources to sketch narratives of the two conflicts and published compilations of primary documentation.[11] This preliminary work allowed a focused research effort on the critical points at which learning happened—or was blocked—during the two conflicts. Documentary evidence, some never before seen, and interviews with both high-level decision makers and their more junior "eyes and ears" provided many answers. Oral histories, the midpoint between documents and interviews, were surprisingly useful in this regard.

The single most important archival source on British army learning during the Malayan Emergency are the papers of Gerald Templer: thirty boxes archived at the National Army Museum in Chelsea to which the author was only the third researcher granted access.[12] Of these, the most important are the thirty-nine letters exchanged between Templer and Colonial Secretary Oliver Lyttelton between 20 February 1952 and 25 May 1954; it would be difficult to overstate their significance. The papers of General Robert Lockhart, also catalogued at the National Army Museum, are open but underutilized in explanations of British army performance in Malaya.

Many of the critical decision makers in both conflicts studied have reached an age and a position in life at which they enjoy recalling their role and are no longer hesitant about placing blame for mistakes made on other participants or, in rare cases, on their own heads. Many were willing

to talk more openly and of different topics with a serving army officer than they would have been with a purely academic researcher. Of the British army participants in the Malayan Emergency, General Sir Frank Kitson, who served at the operational level, and Major General David Lloyd Owen, Templer's Military Assistant and the provider of an invaluable perspective on high-level decision making, were particularly important.

The Colonial Policeman R. J. W. Craig MC was significant not just for revealing his insights into the importance of police forces in defeating the insurgency but also for opening the door to the Imperial War Museum's Department of Sound Records, where the archivist Dr. Conrad X. Wood has painstakingly compiled nearly one hundred interviews with participants in the Malayan Emergency, ranging from private soldiers through to the postwar Malaysian secretary of defence, Sir Robert Thompson. This resource has not been cited in any other work on the subject known to this author; Dr. Wood shares the author's hope that this project will emphasize its value and availability to future researchers.

Archival resources on the Vietnam War are vast. An invaluable road map to those that proved most relevant to this study was provided by Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam.*[13] It led to the U.S. army Center for Military History, which houses the twenty boxes of the Westmoreland History notes, a diarylike account of the most important United States Army decisions on Vietnam by the most significant American commander there. They were most valuable, as were the Signature Files of both General Westmoreland and of his deputy and successor, General Creighton Abrams. The U.S. Army Military History Institute is the repository of other important archives and of oral history interviews of the army's key decision makers conducted by U.S. Army War College students; like those held at the Imperial War Museum, these are open but underused.

Interviews on Vietnam ranged from the lowest officer ranks through the highest, including the Secretary of Defense. Again, the author's status as a serving army officer and the fact that the research was conducted under U.S. Army sponsorship and auspices both opened many doors and made those inside more willing to talk more openly about their experiences. Of these, the interview with Mr. McNamara was extremely useful despite his insistence that it remain background only. A brief meeting with General and Mrs. Westmoreland also provided important background knowledge, and Westmoreland's operations deputy during the critical year of 1966, Major General John Tillson III, was of great substantive help, as was the deputy MACV commander during the transition from Westmoreland to Abrams, General Andrew J. Goodpaster. Many of these participants will soon be lost to researchers; the author is extremely grateful for the chance to learn from them and for their assistance in providing context for the written record.

Through the selective use of archival sources, interviews, and oral his-

tories, this book attempts to explain the differing performance of the British army in Malaya and the United States Army in Vietnam in "learning" how to defeat two very different Communist insurgencies during the cold war. The two conflicts were very different in scale, geography, and level of external support provided to the insurgents; they were similar in requiring an adaptive response from the Western armies involved. One army adapted successfully; the other did not, with profound effect on the international relations of the postwar era.

Chapter 1 builds on current research into innovation in military organizations, organizational culture, and organizational learning theories to construct a model of a military learning organization and tests with which to evaluate the ability of military organizations to "learn." The second chapter discusses the long history of guerrilla warfare, the changing nature of revolutionary warfare from Napoleon through Mao, and the definition of a successful counterinsurgency strategy, which is necessary to evaluate the performance of the British and American armies in developing their own counterinsurgency doctrines. The third chapter examines the organizational culture of the British and American armies before 1945 and their differing proclivities to reinforce learning behavior.

The book then examines the specific cases of the British in Malaya and the Americans in Vietnam to determine how, why, and how successfully the two armies adapted to the demands of revolutionary warfare. Finally, it draws some conclusions concerning the ability of military organizations to learn from their own experience and from that of other armies, as well as the ability of Western militaries to deal with insurgencies. It concludes with a discussion of ways to ensure that military organizations follow Bismarck's advice to learn, not just from their own experiences, but from those of other militaries as well, in the hope that more armies can prepare to fight the next war rather than the last one.

NOTES

1. Evan Thomas and John Barry, "A Fight over the Next Front," *Newsweek* (October 22, 2001), 43.

2. Donald A. Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs* 81: 3 (May/June 2002), 22.

3. Quoted in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 220.

4. The political scientist Alexander George suggested studying "cases of both success and failure in order to identify the conditions and variables that [seem] to account for this difference in the outcome." Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 44.

5. Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1966).

6. Sam Sarkesian, *Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

7. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development," in Lauren, *Diplomacy*, 40.

8. Robert Thompson discusses the comparison in his own book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972). "We have, then, a Malaya in comparison smaller, more prosperous and better administered: all great advantages in counter-insurgency. But perhaps the greatest advantage of all was that Malaya was completely isolated from outside Communist support." He goes on to note several advantages that the Vietnamese enjoyed, including "almost unlimited support from the American government" (19–20). Thompson, who worked on behalf of the American effort in Vietnam as head of the British Advisory Mission, did not always find the support of the American government to be an advantage.

9. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development," in Lauren, *Diplomacy*, 62.

10. Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998). The author is grateful for Downie's research assistance, especially during a meeting at the Pentagon on 19 September 1996.

11. Primarily A.J. Stockwell, ed., *British Documents on the End of Empire: Malaya*, 3 volumes (London: HMSO, 1995), and *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel Edition, 4 volumes (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

12. The author is grateful to Miles Templer for permission to use his father's papers.

13. Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Krepinevich provided more assistance during a 17 September 1996 interview in Washington, D.C.

List of Abbreviations

AID	Agency for International Development
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BMD	British Military Doctrine
BRIAM	British Advisory Mission
CAP	U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoon
CEPS	Combined Emergency Planning Staff
CG	Civil Guard
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CINPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific
CMH	U.S. Army Center for Military History
CO	Colonial Office
COIN	Counterinsurgency
COMUS-MACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
CPO	Chief Police Officer
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army
CT	Communist Terrorist
DRV	Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam
DSR	Department for Sound Records, Imperial War Museum

DWEC	District War Executive Committee
FARELF	Far East Land Force
FM	Field Marshal
FWEC	Federal War Executive Committee
GVN	Government of (South) Vietnam
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
ISA	International Security Affairs
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
LIC	Low Intensity Conflict
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MHI	U.S. Army Military History Institute
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
MPAJU	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Union
MRLA	Malayan Races Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NITM	Notes and Information on Training Matters
OCPD	Officer in Charge of the Police District
OOTW	Operations Other Than War
PFF	Police Field Force
PRO	Public Records Office
PROVN	Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RAND	Research and Development Corporation
RD	Revolutionary Development
RF/PF	Regional Forces and Popular Forces
RSA	Royal School of Artillery
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAS	Special Air Service
SB	Special Branch
SDC	Self-Defense Corps

SEP	Surrendered Enemy Personnel
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SOOHP	U.S. Army Military History Institute Senior Officer Oral History Project
SOV	Special Operations Volunteer
SWEC	State War Executive Committee
TDRC	British Army Tactical Doctrine Retrieval Cell
TRIM	Training Relations and Instruction Mission
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
USA	U.S. Army
USIA	U.S. Information Agency
VA	Voice Aircraft
WO	War Office

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I

SETTING THE STAGE

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1

How Armies Learn

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MODELS OF MILITARY INNOVATION

There is substantial disagreement over what spurs military innovation. An early debate in the American academy centered on whether it was possible for military organizations to adapt to changes in their environment without substantial pressure from outside. Barry Posen argued that fundamental change in military organizations occurs as a result of the efforts of external civilian reformers, often with the assistance of individual military officers he called "mavericks." These reformers respond to the emergence of national security threats that current military doctrine is unable to meet. Other writers also focus on pressures outside the military that they feel are the key to doctrinal change.[1] A common feature of their arguments is the belief that military organizations are essentially conservative and reflexively opposed to change; thus, in order to simplify their possible responses to the uncertain environment of future war, they focus on offensive military doctrine, regardless of whether it is appropriate to the nature of the warfare of the time or to the strategic situation of their nation. In this view, civilian leaders intervene to force changes in doctrine only during times of imminent crisis. This has been called the "Cult of the Offensive" explanation.[2]

In 1991, Stephen P. Rosen argued that neither defeat in wartime nor civilian intervention to assist military "mavericks" is a necessary prerequisite for military innovation. Instead, senior military officers who create new military tasks and missions for their service, inspire a generation of young officers to take up this new career path, and are assisted by senior

government civilians can create major changes in military doctrine.[3] This could be described as an internal model of military innovation.

In 1993, Ricky Lynn Waddell compared the usefulness of the theories of Stephen Rosen and Barry Posen to explain developments in U.S. Army Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine from 1961 to 1993.[4] He found that civilian reformers and members of the army combined to cause changes in military doctrine, but that maverick officers were not necessary for doctrine to change in response to changes in the international system and the requirements of new forms of warfare. Waddell thus combined the internal and external schools of military innovation in an integrative model of doctrinal change. He is joined in this approach by Kimberly Martin Zisk, who believes that military organizations innovate in response to foreign doctrinal shifts that they view as a threat, even in the absence of civilian intervention,[5] and by Deborah Avant, author of *Political Institutions and Military Change*.[6] Avant's book, which compares the performance of the British army in the Boer War and the Malayan Emergency with that of the American army in Vietnam, concludes that the parliamentary British system of government has created a more adaptable army than has the presidential American system.

An integrative perspective is also adopted by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, although their explanation of causality differs from Avant's.[7] Murray and Barry Watts conclude, "Without the emergence of bureaucratic acceptance by senior *military* leaders, including adequate funding for new enterprises and viable career paths to attract bright officers, it is difficult, if not impossible, for new ways of fighting to take root within existing military institutions."[8]

Organizational and Strategic Culture

Although these studies provide valuable perspectives on the factors that spur innovation in military organizations, they do not adequately evaluate how different military forces create, assimilate, and disseminate doctrinal change during the course of conflicts, nor why some military forces are more successful at the process than are others. One possible explanation originates in the realm of organizational theory.

Organizational theory suggests that organizations are created in order to accomplish certain missions. Over time certain missions become more important than other missions to the leadership of the organization. According to an early proponent of organizational theory, the essence of an organization is the view of the dominant group in that organization on the best roles and missions for that organization.[9] The essence is "the notion held by members of an organization as to what the main capabilities and primary mission of the organization should be."[10] Morton Halperin lists a number of ways by which organizations demonstrate the importance of

their essence. Organizations favor policies that will increase the importance of the organization, fight for the capabilities that they view as essential to their essence, seek to protect those capabilities viewed as essential, and demonstrate comparative indifference to functions not viewed as essential.[11] Leaders of organizations have substantial influence over their own destinies: "Career officials of an organization believe that they are in a better position than others to determine what capabilities they should have and how they should best fulfill their mission. They attach very high priority to controlling their own resources so that these can be used to support the essence of the organization."[12]

In order to contribute to the concept of the organization as successful, organizations reward those members who contribute to the essence of the organization. Thus, as Halperin observes, "military officers compete for roles in what is seen as the essence of the services' activity rather than other functions where promotion is less likely . . . Army officers compete for roles in combat organizations rather than advisory missions."[13] Maintaining morale in organizations can become even more important than accomplishing the missions of that organization: "Short-run accomplishment of goals and even increases in budgets take second place to the long-run health of the organization." Halperin notes the example of the army's one year tour of duty for officers in Vietnam, which many observers think contributed to the poor performance of the army in that conflict. The army was dedicated to the policy because it gave the greatest possible number of officers the opportunity to experience combat, widely viewed as necessary for promotion.[14]

As thinking about the sources of military innovation evolved, some analysts turned to the idea of strategic culture to explain differing responses from different organizations to similar situations. In the words of James Wilson, "Every organization has a culture, that is, a persistent, patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of and human relationships within an organization."[15] This school of thought believes that, whereas military organizations are alike in many ways, different militaries have different organizational cultures.[16] The British and American armies played very different roles in the international system and in the lives of their nations in the years before they joined in an alliance to defeat Nazi Germany; it is not surprising that their organizational cultures are very different. These differences were magnified in the postwar era, as the American army focused itself on preparing to fight the forces of the Warsaw Pact in Europe. Although the British army also had substantial responsibilities to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it simultaneously engaged in a series of what have been described as "Brushfire Wars" during the devolution of empire. These modified the British army's own concept of its role in the international system.

In the 1990s Lieutenant General Theodore G. Stroup demonstrated how