

# H-Net Reviews

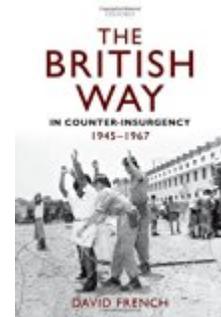
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David French. *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 283 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-958796-4.

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The U.S. Army and U.S. Marines' field manual on COIN (counterinsurgency) identifies the war that Britain conducted in Malaya from 1948-60 as a model of successful COIN. One of the principal reasons for this assessment is the fact that the lessons of this war were put into writing by one of the architects of the suppression of the uprising (or in British terminology, the emergency), Robert Thompson. His book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (1966), provides a number of basic principles that Thompson defines as effective patterns of action in a COIN war. Similarly, he argues that these patterns were put into operation in Malaya, but not in South Vietnam. The book became a classic in COIN theory, so claims David French in his new book, mainly because it seemed that the British model had been very successful and that, if properly executed, the strategy would eliminate uprisings. However, did the British in Malaya and in other places where they operated after World War II actually implement this same strategy that Thompson writes about? This leads to another question: Was the British experience actually so successful as to become a paradigm? In other words, can the British model be accepted and integrated into present-day COIN wars and justifiably serve as one of the theoretical bases of U.S. FM 3-24? It should be noted that this has been the existing approach for the past decade, and discussions of relearning the British experience in Malaya may be found in various American army journals.[1]

French's study challenges the British paradigm, and leaves no doubt that he fears that FM 3-24 accepted the British model without any criticism. This is not the first time that the American army has adopted, almost without criticism or adjustments, the British model. Prior to the Americanization of the Vietnam War, Thompson was

invited to serve as a senior advisor to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Vietnam, the American headquarters that had already begun to act alongside the South Vietnamese to put down the Viet Cong insurgency. One of the important principles in Thompson's theory is the attainment of control over the civilian population. This control was achieved in Malaya by the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Chinese villagers. At the same time, the whole population had to be convinced to support the government's efforts; or in the words of Gen. Gerald Templer, the British high commissioner in Malaya (1952-54), "The answer [to the uprising] lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people." [2] Thus, we can see that Thompson preached a similar plan, to be executed in Vietnam. Many studies written by the Rand Corporation determined, too, that the process of resettlement was what lay at the basis of the British success in Malaya. French's objective is apparently to inveigh against this paradigm.

French's book offers a comprehensive, detailed examination of the history of COIN wars conducted by the British after World War II, from Palestine to the evacuation of British forces from Aden in 1967. The first chapter deals with the essence of British colonial policy after World War II. The second chapter discusses the goals, the ideology, and the tactics of the insurgents who fought against the colonial authority. This is an important chapter, serving as a kind of background for understanding British policy, which in the final analysis operated as a response to the actions of the insurgents in the various locations. French then proceeds to analyze British COIN strategy. The main point of discussion concerns what lessons were learned and how they were transmitted or put into operation in other COIN cases. In effect, the

book's division is thematic, not chronological, with the historical events constituting reference points for proving the author's claims. Thus, we have a study with a comparative dimension, creating the opportunity to examine similarities and differences, as well as continuity or change in British patterns of action in various war arenas. A thematic division in effect connects all COIN wars and so enables the reader to examine British counterinsurgency as one process and to derive conclusions as to whether the British did indeed develop a theoretical COIN model.

In French's opinion, the model developed in Malaya, which as said has been perceived as the most successful COIN model, was not systematically implemented in other locations, such as Palestine and Kenya (p. 250). The author argues that the British military and civilian authorities had no culture of learning or organization that preserved knowledge of successful tactics, derived lessons from failures, and transmitted this knowledge while remaining sensitive to the relevant special conditions of other regions of activity. Therefore, French's conclusions shatter convention although he is not the first to argue along these lines.[3] French bases his arguments and conclusions on very careful research in the national archives of England and other archives, such as the Imperial War Museum. He also uses television documentary material and the memoirs of those who participated in the various COIN wars. In so doing, he creates a methodology through which to critique what is written in the official documents, his research constituting another layer of historical writing that opposes complete acceptance of the British paradigm. The book joins a list of studies published in recent years whose basic claim is that it is a mistake to project lessons from the British experience onto Iraq and Afghanistan.[4] It should be noted, though, that such voices had already been heard in the United States in the early 1960s, at a time when the British paradigm began to be studied by the Americans and its principles became practice in South Vietnam.

In October 1961, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, wrote a memo to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was serving as a special advisor to President Kennedy, in which he argued that the British experience in Malaya should be used, but with great caution, since "there are major differences between the situations in Malaya and South Vietnam." [5] Lemnitzer pointed to a number of factors that, in his opinion, differentiated Malaya from South Vietnam, especially the fact that there were substantial ethnic differences between the Chinese minority, who supported the commu-

nist guerrillas, and the Malayan majority, which opposed them. These ethnic differences aided the British in bringing together significant proportions of the Chinese rural population and, in so doing, cutting off the guerrilla fighters from the population—or to paraphrase what Mao had said, to dry up the fishes' sources of water. In Vietnam, it was not possible to make this ethnic distinction. Moreover, the boundary between Malaya and Thailand was blocked quite effectively on both sides. Thailand had a security interest in seeing to it that the communist guerrillas would not find refuge or cover in its territory. South Vietnam did not enjoy such cooperation with a neighbor, and the Viet Cong found shelter across the country's land borders.

Additional testimony to the argument that it was not possible to execute the British paradigm exactly is found in a study by Guy Pauker of the Rand Corporation.[6] Pauker examined the non-military factors that contributed to COIN success in Malaya and also in the Philippines. His principal conclusion was that attaining control of the population and the resumption of government authority were the main factors in suppressing the insurgency in these two places. However, at the end of his study, Pauker admits that the reality in South Vietnam was different, that it was more complex than it had been in those two countries. One factor was the cancellation of the nationalist aspect, which was part of the ideological infrastructure presented by the communist guerrilla movements. The Philippines achieved full independence in 1946, while the British clearly announced that their intention was to prepare Malaya for self-rule. Pauker was aware, as well, of the racial differences between the Chinese minority, who supported the guerrillas, and the Indian and Malayan majority.[7]

This controversy can be solved by saying that historical lessons are in the final analysis a matter of interpretation. Nevertheless, many military scholars argue that history can supply lessons but that these should not simply be accepted as is; they need to be well examined to see whether they are appropriate to the contemporary reality. Most certainly there are differences between wars in the past and present wars, but in the end insurgency and counterinsurgency are methods of war and, therefore, have a number of similar (and perhaps even identical) elements along with differences stemming from the historical period and the geographical space. There is no doubt that the projection of historical experience to contemporary reality without a dimension of criticism or adjustment is a fundamentally faulty procedure.[8] General Lemnitzer understood this back in 1961, and French