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Counterinsurgency lessons for Iraq and Afghanistan

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Military and political pundits often advocate John A. Nagl's excellent book, "Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam," as the definitive source for understanding an insurgency and how to defeat it. Some say that if the U.S. were only to follow the British example in Malaya for our current war on terror, especially in Iraq, we could expect a better outcome.

An interesting historical point is that the British did not manage the insurgency in Cyprus, which occurred at about the same time, in the same manner as Malaya. As a result, the outcome in Cyprus was completely different from what they had originally envisioned.

James S. Corum's March 2006 monograph for the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, "Training Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency: A Tale of Two Insurgencies," contrasts the Malaya and Cyprus insurgencies in detail.

The important point that comes to mind is that in Malaya the leadership made early mistakes too. However, Nagl points out that they eventually learned from them and put leaders in place who genuinely understood that the conflict was not primarily a military war, but a socio-political conflict. The Malaya Emergency was managed as a large-scale policing operation, and their military operations were subordinate to the greater political aims of providing security and justice at the local levels where the insurgents operated. In the end, the communist terrorists were utterly defeated.

Nagle reminds us that in South Vietnam, the flawed U.S. strategy was ultimately about firepower and technology and implies a hugely significant question for the Bush administration.

Have they learned these important, deeper lessons about insurgency?

The administration and Department of Defense are now talking about their soon to be released field manual on counterinsurgency. This may be a significant advance as far as the military's role is concerned, but the U.S. government as a whole must apply all of its resources and agencies in a coordinated manner in order to defeat the insurgents. It must be ready to work with outside resources as well, like the United Nations, non-governmental aid organizations and religious institutions.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration, the secretary of defense and the other key leaders

have not demonstrated much in the way of flexibility or adaptability. This ability to learn, along with understanding that insurgency is a war of ideas that relies upon the military being subordinate to local political needs, are the key points implied by Nagl's research.

Due to the intensity of the internal conflicts in Iraq that have resulted from U.S. occupation, it appears that a counterinsurgency model by itself may no longer be effective there. However, the principles of counterinsurgency as described above always apply in any war and it is not too late to apply these lessons in Afghanistan.

Matthew B. Rowe

Noblesville