



Counterinsurgency: Theory and Reality by Daniel Whittingham and Stuart Mitchell.

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Studies of insurgency and counterinsurgency have proliferated since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan altered the American and British focus on warfare. No single school of thought has emerged in the Anglophone world, as military historians Daniel Whittingham (Univ. of Birmingham) and Stuart Mitchell (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst) make clear in *Counterinsurgency*.

The book comprises an introduction, four succinct chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters move chronologically through the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French and British imperial policing efforts to the Anglo-American war in Iraq. The authors avow that “This book is our attempt to shed light on this difficult topic and to explore how the theories that have shaped counterinsurgency have frequently smoothed over the difficult realities of these campaigns” (xii). The book is an introductory overview, meant to provoke further study. It begins with a welcome preliminary definition of key terms like strategy, insurgency/counterinsurgency, terrorism, and use of force.

Chapter 1 begins in the eighteenth century, but concentrates on the great, foundational counterinsurgencies of the first French experience in Algeria, the British in South Africa and Ireland, and finally the Arab revolt of 1936. These “small wars for empire” feature states’ reactions, distant or near, to the problems of imperial reach and in an environment of scarce resources. The reader is also introduced to such notable leaders and theorists as Thomas-Robert Bugeaud and Charles W. Gwynn. The authors conclude the chapter by asserting that the relative successes of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century counterinsurgency efforts laid the intellectual foundation for the future.

Chapter 2, “Counterinsurgency, 1945-2000” concerns two well-known conflicts: the French effort to retain Algeria and the American war in Vietnam. The discussion of the Algerian War stresses policy over operations, but thoughtfully taps non-traditional sources like director Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The authors introduce the new reality of the insurgency as a “people’s war” and the required changes to counterinsurgency strategy. Readers are introduced to the two most celebrated theorists—Lt. Col. Roger Trinquier and Col. David Galula. The repeated presentation of major theorists, as the book’s title promises, creates a strong starting point for further reading. The authors survey US actions in Vietnam without adducing a body of theory comparable to that of the French. They do, however, draw on histories written after the war to make sense of, for instance, the US fixation on “body counts.”

Chapter 3 examines a “British way” of counterinsurgency between 1945 and 2000. Given the expertise of the authors, this makes sense. Again, brevity forces choices and the chapter highlights imperial efforts in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and later Northern Ireland. As in the fourth chapter, these were wars of decolonization, though many argue that the British fighting at the time did not necessarily see it that way. In each case, theory is given its due; with a focus on the works of Rob-

ert Thompson¹ and Frank Kitson.² Since the British enjoyed existing bureaucratic structures and often allies among the indigenous populations, they had a ready-made base on which to build. Since the effort in places like Malaya were also an effort to defeat communist expansion, the British retained a trump card in indigenous hearts and minds—the promise of eventual independence. This was true for neither the British nor the Americans in Iraq. The authors deftly summarize theory, as in their outline of Thompson’s basic principles for counterinsurgency. The notion of a single “way” in British counterinsurgency is questioned and examples are cited to clarify that expediency often trumped the heralded notion of a “minimal impact paradigm.”

The book’s final chapter covers Iraq and Afghanistan in (2001–14). Given the abundance available material on this subject, the authors’ commitment to brevity catches up with them. The chapter’s restriction to forty-eight pages results in an unfortunate breathlessness. That said, the significance and effects of theory remain a concern, particularly useful in gauging the successes and failures of US and British counterinsurgency.

In their conclusion, the authors affirm that “counterinsurgents were able to fall back on a set of increasingly common principles, something of a counterinsurgency canon. Many of these principles were established in the context of colonial warfare” (150). The value of an evolving canon is made clear in the authors’ stress on levels of violence, the interplay of theory and practice, the existence of external support, and even the question of applying historical theory in the present.

Daniel Whittingham and Stuart Mitchell have written a succinct and helpful primer for both students and scholars seeking a starting point into a vitally important topic. *Counterinsurgency* will leave such readers with questions and concerns but also motivate them to read further. A noble goal.

1. *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (NY: Praeger, 1966).

2. *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping* (London: Faber, 1971).