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Review

The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK

Austin Long. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016. 276 pp.

Aaron Edwards*

The Soul of Armies by Austin Long is a much-needed counter-balancing analysis to the steady flow of hagiographies that have appeared over the past decade on the counter-insurgency operations undertaken by the United States and United Kingdom around the world. Long challenges many of the prevailing assumptions underpinning the increasingly malleable doctrine of counter-insurgency.

Although Long's monograph might take its place alongside some of the fine books on irregular warfare, it both compliments and differs from many of the others in several important ways. First, it examines Western-led intervention not only in the context of the Middle East and South West Asia in the first and second decades of the twentieth century but also in the East Africa and South East Asia in the middle of the last century. Second, and most importantly, it has been produced by way of a solid historical methodology, by testing four key hypotheses against the relevant archives, policy documents and secondary literature in four key cases: Kenya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. To be sure, this is a similar methodology to that found in John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with Knife: Counter-insurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2005), which compared the involvement of the British in Malaya and the U.S. in

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Vietnam. In his book, Nagl argued that Britain's social class structure helped carry their armed forces to victory, while the lack of a rigid chain of command undermined the U.S. in one of its biggest strategic defeats in the twentieth century. However, Long's remit is much broader. He wishes to look at how culture, widely defined, actually inhibited innovation in state battles with insurgents across a geographically and historically diverse array of cases.

To his credit, Long has avoided cherry-picking case studies on the basis of only examining successes, something which Nagl argued must be avoided at all costs. For anyone involved in military education, there is a real duty of care to our students to expose them to both the successes and the failures on a broad spectrum of military operations. Moreover, to avoid providing proper context is to risk misdiagnosing the problem and proscribing a range of Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) that are incongruous with the kind of strategy required to win the war. Thus, in the most famous example covered by Long, we see a change from William Westmoreland to Creighton Abrahams in Vietnam, which produced many tactical successes that did not translate into strategic victory. Unsurprisingly, in this case, the doctrine became confused and lacked utility. However, where Long's book is at its most interesting is where he compares and contrasts the approach by the U.S. Army, Special Operations Forces and, U.S. Marine Corps to counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam over the course of the entire period of American involvement. In doing so, he finds that the period "further underscores the power of organizational culture in explaining U.S. Army counterinsurgency" (136), as well as the limitations on "principals to control agents even in hierarchical organizations" (137).

Long, thankfully, has borne witness to how a misunderstanding of the problem facing counter-insurgents has led to confusion on the battlefield and, as we know from events in Iraq and Afghanistan, a reversal of hard-won gains actually achieved by the United States, United Kingdom and their allies. His book, therefore, gives a complete picture of the limitations of linking policy to TTPs when employing a faulty strategy.

For anyone who has not yet read it, Gian Gentile's brave iconoclastic work on the "Petraeus Doctrine" in *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency* (2013), has to be the benchmark by which we must judge all subsequent critiques of this form of irregular war. I make this observation as a scholar working in the military education environment in the UK who is frequently surprised by the steady

stream of “experts” offering to provide the armed forces with the “magic bullet” needed to resolve the problem of terrorism and insurgency. Not only are such insights usually conceptually flawed, they are also typically devoid of a real understanding of the context in which wars take place. It would be easy to dismiss this rush to obtaining the winning formula in war as a by-product of the narrow bandwidth on the Beltway or in Whitehall where they are often concocted. However, as I am constantly reminded by other commentators, that also provides a convenient escape hatch for politicians, policy-makers and military commanders who are won over by such fads.

The key problem in all of this is that militaries are prone to fight by template when they do not fully understand the physical and human terrain in which they find themselves operating. This was certainly true of the British in Afghanistan, as Long has shown, which “provides additional support for the cultural hypothesis” (220). In this environment, the British Army “sought to do the same kind of operations in both northern and southern Afghanistan that it sought to do in Kenya and Iraq” (220). This, perhaps, needs a slight qualification. Few senior British officers knew much about British Army operations in Kenya in the 1950s and not all of the troops had seen action in Basra by the time they found themselves seriously underprepared in Helmand in 2006–7. Much of their operational experience, such as it was, was confined to Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007, the Falklands War of 1982 and the First Gulf War of 1990–91. NATO’s commander in Afghanistan at this time, British General David Richards, had, of course, notable experience as a Brigade Commander in Sierra Leone at the dawn of the new century. To compound the lack of a proper conceptual understanding of the type of war they were fighting, British generals also listened to some experts offering that elusive “magic bullet” who were recommending operations took on the same character as those undertaken by Britain in Malaya, half a century earlier. This was preposterous, given the obvious contrasts between both contexts. The culture of “make do and mend” in British operations was, by now, omitting a greater gravitational pull than the foundational concept in all British counterinsurgency doctrine, which is to, above all, “treat every context differently.”

For the “foreseeable future culture will have a profound effect on military doctrine and operations,” writes Austin Long. “It therefore behoves military analysts and political leaders to understand the culture of these organizations as they plan strategy” (226). This is an intriguing proposition by which Long concludes his insightful and

challenging monograph. But is it a challenge they are likely to take up? Few academics are prepared to break ranks and criticise the lack of proper understanding of warfare by governments or militaries, for fear of not being listened to by those who make the important decisions.

For strategic theorists, strategy offers one way of avoiding these analytical blind spots. Strategy is a political process that is all about interaction between civilian politicians and the military. It is not something that should be left only to the generals, unless it is of the purely military kind (which is also susceptible to policy and politics), and should be agreed jointly. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan it was either not agreed formally at a coalition level or at theatre level was left to two star commanders to “get on with the job.” This is not good enough, and in the world of irregular wars, it has proven deadly, as Long has proven in this excellent book.