Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare

By David H. Ucko and Robert Egnell
Columbia University Press, 2013
250 pp. $26.00
ISBN: 978-0231164269
Reviewed by F.G. Hoffman

W
writing in his seminal The British Way in Counter-
Insurgency, David French

culated that the United Kingdom
had created a “chequered history of
gathering, analyzing, and disseminat-
ing the lessons” from its irregular
campaigns. This conclusion contrasts
with Dr. John Nagl’s case study of
Britain’s superior organizational learn-
ing in Malaya in his Eating Soup with a
Knife. Both books focused on Britain’s
imperial past. More recently, veterans
from the United Kingdom’s campaigns
in Iraq and Afghanistan have sided with
French, stating that “despite our insti-
tutional [counterinsurgency] heritage,”
the study of small wars “[has been]
relegated to a position of almost com-
plete institutional irrelevance.” This is
now reinforced by a new assessment of
British operations, Counterinsurgency

in Crisis, which argues that Her Maj-
esty’s armed forces overestimated the
relevance of their past imperial policing
to contemporary challenges.

If you want to read a sentimental regi-
mental history of valor and glory in Iraq
and Afghanistan, you will want to pass
on this book. Counterinsurgency in Crisis
is not draped in mythology; it is a sober,
dispassionate, and objectively critical
evaluation of British strategic perfor-
mance. Both authors have stellar scholarly
credentials and excellent prior works
on counterinsurgency. Dr. David Ucko
teaches at the College of International
Security Affairs, a component at the
National Defense University. His Swedish
writing partner, Dr. Robert Egnell,
was a visiting professor at Georgetown
University. Together they have produced
a scathing indictment of British prepara-
tion, strategic direction, and operational
practice in contemporary conflict. Their
brutal bottom line: “There is no fig leaf
large enough here to cover the deep
flaws in the British government’s own
approach and conduct in their counterin-
surgency campaigns.”

The United Kingdom’s poor showing
in Iraq and Afghanistan is multidimen-
sional. One shortfall identified by the
authors was the existence of a smug per-
ception that British forces were uniquely
qualified in counterinsurgency because
of the United Kingdom’s extensive ex-
perience in Africa and the Middle East,
peace support tasks in the Balkans, and
of course, Northern Ireland. Much of
that experience was dated and certainly
not well represented in British doctrine
or military education. Ucko and Egnell
found that this unique heritage retarded
learning and adaptation, further degrad-
ing performance.

The authors’ transition to an as-
essment of the strategic level does not
improve their view of British counterin-
surgency efforts. While strategy requires
a clear alignment of ends, ways, and
means, “strategy making for Bara and
for Helmand was marked by the failure
to grasp the nature of the campaign,
to adapt once new realities came to the
fore, and to resource these efforts, both
politically and financially, to achieve a
clearly established objective.” Some may
suggest that counterinsurgency doctrine
was flawed or, as the title of the book
suggests, a concept in crisis. But the real
problem was simply too little strategic
thinking and too few forces, something
the authors document depressingly
well. The principal challenge, however,
was shortfalls in strategic thinking. As
Ucko and Egnell observe, “the British
capacity for strategic thinking—its abil-
ity to formulate a campaign plan—has
proved consistently and fatefully prob-
lematic throughout the last decade of
operations.”

This will not be news to informed stu-
dents of British security matters. British
generals, including Lieutenant General
Paul Newton, who now heads the Center
for Strategy and Security at Exeter
University, have argued quite openly that
the strategy flame is unlit in London.
Former Chief of the Defence Staff Air
Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup decried
the loss of “an institutional capacity for
culture of strategic thought.” After
considering the past decade, looking at
the prospects of a security environment
laced with instability and complex contin-
gencies similar to the last decade, Ucko
and Egnell conclude their book with an
ominous assessment of current British
capability.

The United Kingdom entered two
wars with an overestimation of its grasp
of contemporary conflict, inadequate
machinery and poor practice at linking its
objectives to a sound strategy, and a mili-
tary culture that was short on education
but long on improvisation and “cracking
on.” Doctrine was lacking, but counterin-
surgency theory cannot be a panacea
for so many structural, educational, and
cultural gaps. Nor can shortfalls in our
understanding of contemporary insur-
gency be employed as an excuse to shelter
less than stellar strategic competence in
London (or Washington for that matter).

Ucko and Egnell do not believe
that the United Kingdom’s Ministry of
Defence has fully grasped the formidable
tasks inherent to modern warfare, nor
has it adapted sufficiently for stabilization
missions. They find it clear that civilian
elites are not embracing the necessary
changes in government to support even a respectable role for the country in the most likely of scenarios.

What makes Ucko and Egnell’s work unique and invaluable is its take on future missions and its evaluation of options for British policy planners. Given the reduced resources and the experiences of the last decade, they concisely examine the merits of scaling down British contributions to niche investments, employment of more indirect approaches, and greater burden-sharing with regional organizations. The authors are doubtful that these approaches will meet British political objectives, noting that “strategic abstinence and ‘strategic selectivity’ are options fraught with a different type of risk, particularly for a state with global expeditionary ambitions or when alliance commitments come into play.” Given the U.S. ambitions and its role in the world, American strategists should take serious note of Ucko and Egnell’s conclusions.

This is a serious and objective scholarly analysis of British strategic and operational performance. The United States needs a similar assessment, as its leaders and key decisionmakers have been less willing to come to grips with its own shortfalls in the council chambers of government. Hopefully, someone in the United States will take up the challenge of writing a similar book about U.S. strategic performance.

Because of its objective analysis and solid scholarship, Counterinsurgency in Crisis is recommended to professionals in the transatlantic community interested in strategic studies, civil-military relations, military history, and contemporary conflict. JFQ

---

**Notes**


**Clausewitz: His Life and Work**

By Donald Stoker

Oxford University Press, 2014

354 pp. $27.99

ISBN: 978-0199357949

Reviewed by John T. Kuehn

Donald Stoker, a professor of strategy and policy at the Naval Postgraduate School, has written what could be labeled a military biography of Carl von Clausewitz. One might reasonably ask why a biography of the Prussian general and military theorist is necessary, given Peter Paret’s towering intellectual biography Clausewitz and the State (Princeton University Press, 1985).

The answer is threefold: new sources, new scholarship, and accessibility for new audiences. Stoker’s biography is also the result of a fruitful collaboration with Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, the first historian to publish a biography in English about Clausewitz’s formidable wife and intellectual partner, Countess Marie von Brühl. Together, Stoker and Bellinger mined a treasure trove of recently rediscovered correspondence between Carl and Marie held in Germany by the couple’s descendants. Stoker sprinkles this correspondence throughout his work, and it provides great value in understanding Clausewitz as he confides his innermost thoughts to his soulmate, the woman who took his unfinished work and had it published. The author also uses Clausewitz’s own histories as well as those of his contemporaries (including Antoine-Henri de Jomini) to inform his work, including recent English translations of Clausewitz’s work such as that of the Waterloo campaign by Christopher Bassford. In addition to these primary sources, Stoker uses the most recent and cutting-edge Napoleonic scholarship on key campaigns by Alexander Mikaberidze and Michael Leggiere.

Finally, there is the issue of accessibility for new audiences. Stoker states that his purpose for the book is to answer the question “How did it come to be written?” The reader learns that from the age of 11 until his death in 1831 at the age of 51, Clausewitz served first and foremost as a soldier. This speaks to the book’s appeal to military professionals. Stoker has made Clausewitz more accessible to the military professionals of today by putting him into the context of his times as a long-serving soldier—including his disappointments, frustrations, and personal experiences with cold, heat, thirst, and danger—providing additive credibility and a human dimension. Readers meet a human Clausewitz who felt pain, hunger, and loneliness, experienced setbacks, and struggled with chronic ailments such as gout and arthritis throughout his life.

Readers will also discover in detail Clausewitz’s participation in some of the most famous campaigns of the French and Napoleonic wars, including Russia in 1812 and Waterloo in 1815, as well as some of the more obscure battles. These