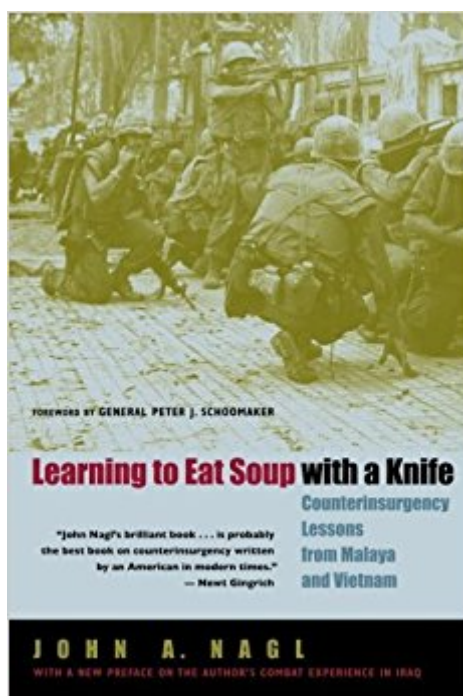


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# Learning To Eat Soup With A Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya And Vietnam



## Synopsis

Invariably, armies are accused of preparing to fight the previous war. In *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl—a veteran of both Operation Desert Storm and the current conflict in Iraq—considers the now-crucial question of how armies adapt to changing circumstances during the course of conflicts for which they are initially unprepared. Through the use of archival sources and interviews with participants in both engagements, Nagl compares the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and practice in the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960 with what developed in the Vietnam War from 1950 to 1975. In examining these two events, Nagl—the subject of a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story by Peter Maass—argues that organizational culture is key to the ability to learn from unanticipated conditions, a variable which explains why the British army successfully conducted counterinsurgency in Malaya but why the American army failed to do so in Vietnam, treating the war instead as a conventional conflict. Nagl concludes that the British army, because of its role as a colonial police force and the organizational characteristics created by its history and national culture, was better able to quickly learn and apply the lessons of counterinsurgency during the course of the Malayan Emergency. With a new preface reflecting on the author's combat experience in Iraq, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* is a timely examination of the lessons of previous counterinsurgency campaigns that will be hailed by both military leaders and interested civilians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“[A] highly regarded counterinsurgency manual.” (Michael Schrage *Washington Post*)

2006-01-15)"The success of DPhil papers by Oxford students is usually gauged by the amount of dust they gather on library shelves. But there is one that is so influential that General George Casey, the US commander in Iraq, is said to carry it with him everywhere. Most of his staff have been ordered to read it and he pressed a copy into the hands of Donald Rumsfeld when he visited Baghdad in December. Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife (a title taken from T.E. Lawrence's "himself no slouch in guerrilla warfare) is a study of how the British Army succeeded in snuffing out the Malayan insurgency between 1948 and 1960 and why the Americans failed in Vietnam. . . . It is helping to transform the American military in the face of its greatest test since Vietnam." (Tom Baldwin Times (UK) 2006-03-28)"An extremely relevant text. Those interested in understanding the difficulties faced by Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, or who want to grasp the intricacies of the most likely form of conflict for the near future, will gain applicable lessons. [Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife] offers insights about how to mold America's armed forces into modern learning organizations. As the Pentagon ponders its future in the Quadrennial Defense Review, one can only hope that Nagl's invaluable lesson in learning and adapting is being exploited." (Frank G. Hoffman Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute 2006-04-01)"Brutal in its criticism of the Vietnam-era Army as an organization that failed to learn from its mistakes and tried vainly to fight guerrilla insurgents the same way it fought World War II. In [Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife], Col. Nagl, who served a year in Iraq, contrasts the U.S. Army's failure with the British experience in Malaya in the 1950s. The difference: The British, who eventually prevailed, quickly saw the folly of using massive force to annihilate a shadowy communist enemy. . . . Col. Nagl's book is one of a half dozen Vietnam histories -- most of them highly critical of the U.S. military in Vietnam -- that are changing the military's views on how to fight guerrilla wars. . . .The tome has already had an influence on the ground in Iraq. Last winter, Gen. Casey opened a school for U.S. commanders in Iraq to help officers adjust to the demands of a guerrilla-style conflict in which the enemy hides among the people and tries to provoke an overreaction. The idea for the training center, says Gen. Casey, came in part from Col. Nagl's book, which chronicles how the British in Malaya used a similar school to educate British officers coming into the country. 'Pretty much everyone on Gen. Casey's staff had read Nagl's book,' says Lt. Col. Nathan Freier, who spent a year in Iraq as a strategist. A British brigadier general says that 'Gen. Casey carried the book with him everywhere.'" (Greg Jaffe Wall Street Journal 2006-03-20)"As the United States enters its fifth year of the war on terror, military leaders are conducting low-intensity and counter-insurgency operations in several different areas around the world. Of the different books produced on this subject, LTC John Nagl's Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife is an absolute must for those who want to gain valuable insight on

some of the hard lessons of fighting an insurgency before actually getting on the ground. The book expertly combines theoretical foundations of insurgencies with detailed historical lessons of Malaya and Vietnam to produce some very profound and topical implications for current military operations. The true success of the book is that Nagl discusses all of these complex issues in an easy-to-follow and straight-forward manner. . . . I read this book upon returning from my tour in Iraq after commanding a company on the ground for a year. I was amazed at how insightful and 'true' the conclusions were and wished that I had read it before I deployed." (Nick Ayers Armor 2006-01-01)"Nagl, currently a Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, focuses on organizational culture as the key to defeating insurgencies: successful militaries learn and adapt." "Recommended Reading" on Counterinsurgency," Nathaniel Fick, Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute (Nathaniel Fick Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute 2005-12-01)"The capacity to adapt is always a key contributor to military success. Nagl combines historical analysis with a comprehensive examination of organisational theory to rationalise why, as many of his readers will already intuitively sense, 'military organisations often demonstrate remarkable resistance to doctrinal change' and fail to be as adaptive as required. His analysis is helpful in determining why the U.S. Army can appear so innovative in certain respects, and yet paradoxically slow to adapt in others." "Nigel R F Aylwin-Foster, Military Review (Nigel R F Aylwin-Foster Military Review 2005-11-01)"One key army text is Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife by Lt. Col. John Nagl, which focuses on counterinsurgency lessons from the 1950s war in Malaya and from the Vietnam War. The title phrase was used by Lawrence of Arabia in describing the messy and time-consuming nature of defeating insurgents. Nagl focuses on the ability of armies to learn from mistakes and adapt their strategy and tactics" skills in which he finds U.S. forces lacking. He shows how the British in Malaya were nimble enough to defeat a communist insurgency, while the U.S. military in Vietnam clung to a failing doctrine of force. Sadly, the Pentagon had not absorbed such insights before invading Iraq. Nagl himself says he learned a lot more during a one-year tour in Iraq. His ideas, if applied back in mid-2003, might have checked the growth of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and prevented Sunni Islamists from provoking a civil war with Iraqi Shiites. It may be too late for the Army's new doctrine to stop Iraq from falling apart....It's past time to make Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife required reading at the White House." (Trudy Rubin Philadelphia Inquirer 2006-08-16)"As the Baker/Hamilton club considers America's options in the Middle East, its members would do well to browse" currently hot books on counterinsurgency [including]" Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam...Stimulating, thoughtful and serious." (The Jerusalem Post Michael Leeden 2006-11-19)

"Do Armies really learn from their experiences, or does military bureaucracy reign supreme? As citizens, we should fervently hope the former is the real case; but, alas, as John Nagl shows in this brilliant analysis, foreign armies can on occasion learn more rapidly and thoroughly on their own. As now it attempts a massive transformation, the future of America's Army rests significantly on its ability to absorb and act on the rich insights of its younger generation of leaders, one of whom produced this incisive analysis." (Don M. Snyder, Professor of Political Science, Department of Social Science, USMA West Point)"This book is a powerful examination of the learning cultures of two of the world's most prominent and capable fighting forces. John Nagl sheds much new light on why the British Army recovered from early failures in the Malayan Emergency and, even more importantly, why the U.S. Army did not profit to the same extent from its early experiences in the Vietnam War. Nagl couples extensive historical analysis with a dedicated soldier's eye as to what is practical. The book has both reassuring and disturbing lessons for us today." (Robert O'Neill, Chichele Professor of the History of War Emeritus, University of Oxford) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

John Nagl's comparative study of the counterinsurgency campaigns of Great Britain in Malaya and the United States in Vietnam is an excellent assessment of how military culture affects the ability of countries to adapt to unconventional or guerrilla warfare situations. Nagl's basic argument is that the United States military culture is centered around the idea of conventional wars of annihilation where the goal is to destroy the enemy forces on the field of battle. This culture, he argues, was reinforced by the United States' victories in the Civil War, World War 1, and World War 2, and neglected the lessons learned from other conflicts such as the Indian wars, and the American experience in the Philippines, that were unconventional in their nature. However, the British military culture emphasized a combination of flexible military and political solutions that resulted from the British Army's history of colonial peacekeeping and empire building. A culture that allowed it to adapt to the situation in Malaya much faster than the United States was able to in Vietnam. Perhaps Nagl's most compelling argument is that the United States military fatally misunderstood the nature of war to begin with. War is not about annihilating the enemy on the battlefield, war is about creating a favorable political solution. The British were able to realize this and focus their counterinsurgency efforts on removing the insurgents from the population through population control, small unit tactics, and a more genuine and focused "hearts and minds campaign". The United States failed to learn this lesson, and instead emphasized destroying the Viet Cong in the field through massive sweeps.

operations, airstrikes, and kill counts. While many individuals in the U.S. army and other branches recognized this strategic mistake, military culture was too strong to bring about any meaningful change in strategy. When a change did occur it was "too little, too late". While this book is excellent, its assessment, as the author notes, is not the only reason why the United States lost the Vietnam War. The book is a quick read and because of that it may feel at times to be an oversimplification of a very complex conflict. Readers should be reminded that Vietnam was a much harder conflict for the United States to fight than Malaya was for the British. The British had a much more stable government situation in Malaya and it allowed for a much better coordination of counterinsurgency tactics. The United States however, was forced to deal with a South Vietnamese Government that was incredibly corrupt and did little to win the support of their own population. The United States also had to face the problems of constant infiltration of North Vietnamese troops and an endless amount of supplies that could flow into South Vietnam from the North. These problems were not present or greatly reduced in the British experience in Malaya. Despite these criticisms, this book presents a well researched argument for why the US military failed in Vietnam and how it can adapt its tactics in the future. Given the United States' unparalleled conventional military strength it stands to reason that the United States will face many more unconventional conflicts in the future. More Vietnam's, Iraq's, and Afghanistan's may be on the way. If the military cannot change and adapt its culture to face the nature of unconventional wars it will continue to fail.

I was very disappointed in this book. The author draws on the successful COIN campaign in Malaysia and ignores the differences in climate, geography, and demographics in attempting to argue the case for utilizing the same British methods for an entirely different situation. The author harps on the differences the USMC and Army employed citing the strategy village and joint action unit theory. The USMC made it work and it probably was the correct approach once the mainforce NVA and VC units were destroyed, but this occurred in 1968 after Tet, which the author ignores. Had Westmoreland attempted such a strategy in 1965-67 he would have recreated the French strategy which allowed isolated outposts to have been overrun and destroyed at a time and choice of Hanoi's choosing. Once the mainforce units were gone, something the British never faced, small unit actions became possible. Nagi seems to forget that Hanoi was orchestrating regimental and division sized attacks, something no platoon could have stopped, and probably would have yielded a larger anti war movement far quicker than Moscow was able to organize. Nagi also fails to recognize that misidentifying your enemy makes even a successful strategy useless. Our enemy was not the VC, or even Hanoi. The enemy was in Moscow, and our efforts should have been to

make Russia pay for its support of Hanoi and encouraging the war. Lest any people doubt this assertion, just ask yourself where the North made its Migs, SAMS, tanks, artillery, as well as the concrete, steel, trucks, needed to sustain its economy under assault from the US. Finally I found that the inability to define your goals, the desire to limit the violence or material to be used (for example the refusal to mobilize the National Guard to exploit the victory after Tet) demonstrated Washington shouldn't have gotten the nation into a war if there were limits to the losses it wished to inflict or endure. To paraphrase "war is too important to be left to hack politicians unschooled in the art of war."

Far more academic than I expected. I'm sure this book is outstanding for its intended audience. The sad truth is that in addition to a well done lesson plan to save American lives in current and future conflict, this is ultimately another indictment of our astonishingly incompetent and self serving "leadership", tossing lives with less regard than poker chips in a nickel and dime game. Recently read "Dereliction of Duty" by McMaster, and then struggled through McNamara's pathetic response, trying to spin the truth as no other.

I have read more on the Vietnam War than most people ever will and I have to say this offers one of the best critiques of the failure of the American command structure to adapt to the necessities of the Vietnam War. I must read for any person who wishes to seriously study the only war the United States was the clear loser.

Was under the impression this would be about actual Infantry Soldiers in VN. It's not. It delves into what were experienced in tactics used by the British & US in & before VN.

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