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Counterinsurgency as a Whole of Government Approach: Notes on the British Army Field Manual Weltanschauung

An Interview with Colonel Alexander Alderson

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Interview with Colonel Alexander Alderson, British Army, conducted by Octavian Manea (Editor of *FP Romania*, the Romanian edition of *Foreign Policy*).

Can you point out the purpose of the military and of the use of military force in countering an insurgency? After all, the classic counterinsurgency (COIN) arithmetic suggested by David Galula is now the conventional wisdom: 80% political action and only 20% military.

The principal role of the military is to provide security but it is often from ideal to use soldiers to provide civil security. In many countries, this is the role of the police force. Unfortunately, in many cases when an insurgency emerges, it often does so at a point beyond which the police force can contain the situation. If it could, presumably the problem would not have developed in the way it did. But let's say that the government has not been able to stop the insurgency from developing and the insurgency goes on to challenge law and order and governance. Let's say that the insurgents have got to the stage where they control an area where they actively challenge the rule of law if not overturn it. In such a case the government needs to act. At this point extraordinary measures are needed and this includes using soldiers to support the police to re-establish the rule of law, to protect the population, and to confront the insurgent.

Of course, this is not ideal. A soldiers' principal role is to defend the state from external threats so their equipment, training and skills tend to be optimized for general war. That said, good professional armies should be able to rise to the complex challenges of a 'war among the people' by a process of adaptation and adjustment. Specialist training and some adjustment to organizations, equipment and tactics are generally required. The faster an army can do this, the more effective it can be. The initial advantage the insurgent has is that armies tend to be large and often conservative organizations. They can take too long to respond the general environmental challenges of COIN and the specifics of insurgent tactics and equipment. So unless the institutional mindset is attuned to adaptation, the insurgent will have the advantage. It is not for nothing that both US and British COIN doctrine emphasizes the need for adaptation, in

fact 'Learn and Adapt' was made one of the British principles to highlight the importance of not getting stuck in one's ways.

COIN needs its practitioners to be highly unconventional in their approach. This is because there is nothing 'conventional' about it. As the US Field Manual highlights, dealing with an insurgency creates many paradoxes and dilemmas. Nevertheless, COIN is still warfare. It is intensely political and it requires a wide range of responses - not just military; political, diplomatic, and developmental as well. Within this broad framework, the military role is principally focused on improving security but military involvement in internal security should be as short-lived as possible. But this creates a real challenge because the effect they need to create has to be enduring. The intention must be from the outset to hand security responsibilities back from the military to the domestic police force as soon as conditions allow. Key to this is developing a capable police force which can maintain security in the wider context of the rule of law and ministerial capacity which can direct routine police operations. This means that we are not just looking for troops who are expert in COIN, the counterinsurgent really needs an effective host country police force as soon as possible. This clearly takes time, resources and clear prioritization within the overall effort.

The point at which the army-police transition takes place is one of the important indicators that the situation is reasonably under control. The key of course is to create a sustainable police force that can uphold the rule of law. This is what the British Government had to do in Northern Ireland after the Army's intervention in 1969. It took seven years to build a police force - the Royal Ulster Constabulary - with the specialist capabilities of intelligence, public order, and armed intervention which allowed it to take the lead for law and order and counter-terrorist operations.

What is the main purpose of the counter-insurgent?

One issue today is that it is easy to lose sight of the broader issues that insurgency poses. This is in large part due to the ease with which the media can focus on military operations. The underlying logic is, however, simple: the counterinsurgent has to counter the insurgency, not just the insurgent. Dealing with the insurgent alone is not going to solve the problem of why the insurgent emerged in the first place. The list of possible causes is large, but some critical underlying societal, political, or economic conditions are likely to be at the bottom of it all and the government's inability or intent to deal with the root cause is the catalyst. General Sir Graeme Lamb - someone who has had a profound influence on my understanding about COIN - captures the essence of the approach needed when he says that the object of counterinsurgency is to build a better life. He is echoing General William Tecumseh Sherman's view that the purpose of the war is a better peace. The whole aim of counterinsurgency, therefore, is to give to those that have been victims of instability, of political pressure, of physical violence and intimidation a better life. It is not just dealing with the insurgent. That is important, but the challenge is to deal with the root causes and today this means moving a political process on and not simply getting back to the status quo ante. And of course at the same time as root causes are being dealt with, efforts will be required to provide the government with the capacity to avoid the problem flaring up again in the longer term.

This view only really started to shape British COIN thinking after 1945. If we look at British doctrine during the interwar period 1919-1939 - the period characterized as “Imperial Policing” - British doctrine showed no interest in either acknowledging or much less dealing with root causes. As we later saw after the war, this was not a sensible approach to take because all that happened was those unresolved grievances spilled over in the period of post-conflict uncertainty and confusion. The classic example is, of course, Malaya, where the administration was still recovering from the enormous damage inflicted by the Japanese occupation when the Chinese Communists took up arms to fight for what they saw as unfulfilled promises on the part of Britain. Not only did the Malayan administration have to deal with security threats, it also had to develop its own capacity to govern more effectively, a process which required re-structuring of government departments at every level.

The critics tend to say that we responded to the post-Maoist insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan using the same techniques as in the ‘50s or ‘60s. So are we using old tactics for entirely new and different problems?

I think it is easy to get too focused on names. Terminology is important but the issue is not whether a particular problem was ‘Maoist’ or not how the motivation behind it challenged governance and how it affected the population. I have looked at very many insurgencies around the world and their root causes, and it is surprising just how many exhibit very similar characteristics and behaviors against which so-called ‘Classical’ methods can be applied.

The central issue insurgency throws up is its challenge to governance. One of the principal reasons why an insurgency emerges is because of some failure or weakness in governance. Sir Robert Thompson and General Sir Frank Kitson focus on ways to re-establish good governance. Remember what Bernard Fall said, that governments are not generally outfought by an insurgency, but they are out-administered or out-governed. If we look at the case of Colombia, in countering the FARC, the remarkable achievements made by President Uribe were made by reestablishing territorial control of the Colombian government over its people. This meant putting police, mayors and governmental officials into every municipality across the country; in short, reconnecting the people of Colombia to its government. The Colombians built a large counterinsurgency army with all the capabilities you would expect in an army optimized for COIN: Special Forces, special police and an institutional focus on intelligence work. This reinforces the value of the approach now laid out in both the British and the American doctrines and drawn from hard-earned experience.

That said, the argument keeps being drawn back to ‘Maoism’ or post-Maoism when the issue should focus more on the relationship between the population, its government and security. The challenge of Maoist-inspired revolution has diminished but today’s challenges still involve the people, their government and security. Taking that line of approach, it is difficult to see where the theory of population-centric COIN has failed although there is a compelling argument to make that there have been issues in the application and resourcing of the theory. So, while it might be an attractive criticism to make, I think it falls short because its proponents don’t have a ready answer to how the counterinsurgent should deal with the patchwork of local needs and challenges, each of which requires a range of responses - political, military, diplomatic,

developmental, economic - in the way so neatly described by Robert Thompson, Frank Kitson and David Galula.

So I for one am not put off by terms like ‘Maoist’ or ‘Post-Maoist’ and if anyone wants to see why, I recommend they have a look at Thompson’s book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*. Read it and try to ignore the word ‘Communist’ and Vietnam and Malaya. It is interesting that once his theory is laid bare, it is much easier to see why it remains relevant to the insurgencies we face today. I suppose that should not be a surprise because insurgency has always presented a multi-faceted problem that requires a multi-faceted solution to counter it. And that is just what Thompson describes. In my view, I don’t think anyone has found a better way of analyzing, conceptualizing and then addressing the problem, and if they had, I am sure we would have heard about it!

There is a classical criticism to make against the COIN discourse that it “*doesn't take into account the strategic context, remaining locked into the operational level instead*”.

I don’t agree. Let’s go back to Thompson. He was most definitely a strategic thinker who wrote taking the strategic-level view and produced strategic, operational-level and tactical responses. He actually linked strategy to tactics. To Thompson, the military aspects of the campaign were, rightly, secondary to a government’s political and administrative responses. Thompson makes a clear point that without reasonably efficient government administration, no counterinsurgency program will deliver the results required. He emphasized the importance of effective governance, pointing out that government weakness and poor administration aid the insurgents. Assuming that the government has a plan, at the tactical level, Thompson then describes an approach of Clear-Hold-Winning-Won where intelligence-led operations seek to clear insurgents from an area, control is imposed over the cleared area to protect the population and isolate the insurgent, good government in all its aspects introduced to win and the area won at the point when control measures can be lifted. Although Thompson devotes chapters to tactical operations they are in the context of the overall strategy and the campaign plan that follows.

Both Thompson and Kitson have written with a “comprehensive approach” in mind. Is this philosophy of comprehensive approach meant to close the gap between the tactical and strategic levels in COIN?

I don’t buy into the idea that COIN is a tactic. Countering insurgency needs a wide range of measures to be planned, resourced, sequenced, applied and controlled at every level of the campaign. I repeat; COIN is not just a military affair. COIN requires much more than tactics alone, and as far as I am aware all current definitions of countering insurgency makes it abundantly clear that COIN is a whole of government approach which has to be applied at every level. Trying to deal with an insurgency through tactics alone, or at the tactical level only is probably going to drag the campaign out and I doubt if it has any prospect of reaching a successful outcome. And there is a further risk in defaulting to tactics. The campaign will start to be seen and defined in military and security terms alone. Not only does this allow focus to move away from the political issues which need to drive the campaign, it limits the campaign to treating symptoms and not the root causes of the insurgency.

Everything in COIN has a political dimension and politics are about governance and power. While the military focus must be to protect the general population, the campaign has to be underpinned by the re-establishment of effective political control and good governance and enabling an effective political process. Military operations may meet their military objectives, but if they are conducted without properly assessing their likely political effects, the overall outcome may well be unsustainable and entirely counterproductive. The key is for military commanders, development officers, diplomats and civil servants to ensure that their actions do not hamper the political outcome. In *Bunch of Five*, General Sir Frank Kitson highlighted that:

“there can be no such thing as a purely military solution because insurgency is not primarily a military activity.[once an insurgency] has taken hold, politics and force, backed up by economic measures will have to be harnessed together for the purpose of restoring peaceful conditions”.

But Kitson also pointed out the fact that:

“it cannot be said too often that countering insurgency involves a wide range of government activity and operations by the security forces only help matters if they are conducted within an overall framework that ties the whole programme together.... insurgency can only be successfully countered by a government programme in which the activities of the country's security forces are closely tied into an overall campaign consisting of political, economic and psychological measures”.

It is difficult to avoid the obvious conclusion we can draw from a wide range of campaigns - success in countering insurgency comes through very carefully coordinated cross-government action based on a well understood framework. The term in use in NATO today is ‘the Comprehensive Approach’. The difficulty is that today’s comprehensive approach is one reached by consensus, not by the sort of clear direction laid out in a unified strategy developed and used in Malaya in 1950 and then again in Baghdad in 2007. Some argue that it is impossible to have an effective COIN Comprehensive Approach today because past British ‘successes’ depended on some form of colonial or post-colonial administration. I have a difficulty with this argument because it fails to take account of, certainly in the British case, the nature of the colonial administration and what it meant in practical terms at the time. True, it helped Sir Harold Briggs in April 1950 that there was a small group of British officers, policemen, diplomats and administrators across the Empire who had learned the hard way in successive campaigns. And it certainly helped that London could flex its muscles when needed, for example surging British battalions out to Malaya to deal with the increasing violence. However, unless I have completely misread history, the campaigns that still capture the imagination today were fought many thousands of miles away from London, in very remote and challenging circumstances, by colonial administrations under great pressure from an insurgency. Reductionists who like to boil down the Malayan campaign to the bare essentials to argue it was easy really ought to read Briggs’ account of what he found and the immense challenges that he then had to overcome in Malaya in 1950 when he was appointed Director of Operations. Not one account I have read said something like “thank goodness for a British-run administration; it really made things so much easier.”

The challenge today is that of multinational, alliance-based expeditionary operations. None of these characteristics invalidate the concept of adopting a comprehensive approach. On the contrary, they underline its importance. Unity of effort is essential in order to overcome inter-departmental and multinational boundaries and to harness the considerable resources and skills an alliance generates. And all of this effort needs to be harnessed in support of the host government. True, each boundary is a potential source of friction but a comprehensive approach which harmonizes and applies the ends, ways, and means - in other words a strategy - is the only effective mechanism by which a campaign can be run.

Why, in any COIN campaign, should all energies be directed at gaining and maintaining control over the population and winning its support? There are a lot of critics, such as US Army Colonel Gian Gentile, who believe that COIN is a *strategy of tactics*: “*when we make by rule the population as the center of gravity for any COIN, then we are trapped in the tactics of population centric counterinsurgency*” ignoring strategy.

The accusation of being stuck in a “strategy of tactics” is another attractive headline grabber, and it is not one I agree with. However by raising it, it does draw attention to one of the inherent dangers of not developing a comprehensive approach to strategy. And, given today’s media coverage, it is all too easy to focus on what the military is doing. Images of soldiers conducting operations seem to be more compelling than, say, politicians involved in politics. The weakness of the argument is that a COIN strategy needs effective tactics and, as I have already explained, those tactics need to be set in the context of a broad campaign plan, itself nested within an overall strategy. Without these last two components, strategy will undoubtedly become a slave to tactical outcomes. The answer cannot be anything other than a strategy, a campaign plan and the tactical responses - political, security, information and development - needed to reach the operational and strategic outcomes.

The second aspect of the question is that of population-centric COIN. *Why secure the population? Why bother with all this complicated comprehensive approach business if it is so difficult? Why not cut to the chase and deal with the insurgent?* The short answer is chasing insurgents, necessary though it is, only deals with one symptom of the problem and does not address the root causes that created it. Insurgents tend to live among the population, and they need people to provide support in its many forms. The people may not want to provide that support voluntarily but may well have to if the government cannot protect them. Hence my point about the importance of extending effective governance back across the population. The population is central to the eventual outcome, whether the insurgents prevail or the government succeeds, and experience backs this up. Security of the population and good governance of it are essential if political processes and conflict termination and resolution are to be instigated.

Population-centric COIN places the population as the vital ground, which means that COIN responses need to be centered around and focused on the population. This means the main effort has to be among the local population with a constant presence of soldiers and police out on the ground, protecting the people where they live and work. Careful work which places the population first helps to make that all important link between the population and its government. In this sense, without wishing to stretch the point, COIN is all very Clausewitzian. Hence my earlier point about COIN being warfare. COIN *is* warfare and is very much the extension of

politics by the introduction of a wide range of means. As Kitson said “*the aim of the government when trying to counter such a campaign is to regain and retain the allegiance of its people*”. And this is central in both Iraq and Afghanistan. If you want a counter-balance look at the underpinning logic of the Colombian strategy to deal with the FARC. It was to link the population back to its government. There are other similar examples, such as the 1970-1976 Omani campaign to deal with Dhofari Communist insurgents in which the Sultan, assisted by a meager British support was able to connect its government back with the people and to deal successfully with the Communist inspired insurgency.

It is usually said that the Golden Age of the British COIN is the Malayan Emergency. Which are its key lessons for current doctrine?

The point to make first is that every insurgency is different and each set of circumstances differs to one campaign to the next. But this doesn't mean to say that there aren't some good ideas that if applied sensibly would fit either present or future campaigns. The golden lessons of Malaya were; first, you need a comprehensive plan that deals with the political, military and developmental issues. Next, you need unified leadership and a unified chain of command right down to the lowest possible level - to the joint security post, for example. In Malaya, the key to success was the Briggs Plan which General Templer eventually galvanized when he took command of the operation in 1952. The Briggs Plan required full civil-military co-operation under a unified command structure through a system of joint committees from national to district level. It was very much a comprehensive approach. On the security side, the police force - once it had been rebuilt - had the task of securing the population and gaining information while the Army was to operate in the jungle to locate and destroy insurgent gangs. Under the Briggs Plan the administration's role was to extend good governance to the whole population.

The difficulty with Malaya is that, as I mentioned when we talked about the British colonial administration, it has developed an overly simplistic mythology. One aspect is that of 'Hearts and Minds', which is interpreted as soldiers treading carefully and being very conservative in the use of force. *Nothing could be further from the truth*. Sadly, there are some well-documented cases where human rights were ignored and violated, and some soldiers were rightly court-martialed as a result of what they did. The reality is that it was an incredible brutal campaign. 'Hearts and Minds' is a comfortable, but ill founded mythology which hides the reality of the campaign.

Professor Ian Beckett once said that Malaya created an obsession within the British Army that determined its institutional memory well into the 1980s. This was due in part to Thompson's influence through *Defeating Communist Insurgency* and the principles he laid out, but also because it was because Malaya was a success. Not only did we eventually get it right - don't forget that it took two years after the Emergency was declared for things to fall or more accurately be forced into place - but it was a transferable model. The British response in Kenya and Borneo was very much shaped by what was seen to be a workable solution in Malaya. One can have too much of a good thing and I agree with Beckett that Malaya's institutional effect waned in the 1980s. This was due, I suspect, to the emergence of Dhofar as a case study *par excellence* particularly at the Army Staff College, Camberley, and coincided with the arrival at Camberley of Major General John Akehurst who was the British commander when the campaign

was won. I think that helped cement Dhofar's position as a first-class case study and that helped ensure it remained the principal campaign taught to Army staff officers until Camberley closed in 1996.

The British Army's latest COIN doctrine, published in January 2010 and for which I was the lead author, explains why and how efforts must be focused on securing the local population and gaining and maintaining popular support. This is a task for the host nation, its security forces, and British forces and their allies, in concert with their partners across government. The doctrine explains why, as experience has proven, this is not simply a military undertaking. Instead it is a battle of political wills against the insurgent and his supports, all of which requires a multifaceted response which is coherent and coordinated. It should be self-evident that security forces of all types lead in creating an environment sufficiently stable to allow the other instruments of governance can be brought to bear to improve the lives of the local population. As we have seen over the last eight years alone, providing effective security is a complex, dangerous, and bloody business; it takes time and resources, and it tests the resolve of all involved. As every COIN campaign has shown, these are enduring characteristics of counterinsurgency.

Which was the winning formula, the winning mind-set that in the end defeated the insurgency during the Dhofar campaign?

Despite Beckett's comments about Malaya and its influence on British thinking, the campaign which was actually taught to staff college students was Dhofar. Dhofar is a fascinating campaign and has many valuable lessons for today. The first key point is that it was a COIN campaign outside the 'classical' model. Oman was not a British colony, so everything that needed to be done had to be done 'by, with and through.' Next, Britain had withdrawn strategically from East of Suez and there was no appetite in Whitehall for a major campaign. As a result, resources were deliberately constrained. This had the effect of magnifying the importance of 'by, with and through.' The ultimate objective was to connect the new Sultan and his government with the Dhofari tribesmen, and this was achieved in textbook manner, and very quickly. British military support was limited to a handful of British officers seconded to the Sultan's Armed Forces who fought shoulder-to-shoulder, and Special Air Service soldiers who raised local forces from the tribesmen and surrendered enemy personnel. The military action was backed up by civil action plans to improve village life through agricultural and veterinary services, shops, civil centers and a comprehensive and imaginative information campaign. The insurgents were eventually defeated politically, societally (because they could not connect with the traditional life-style the Dhofaris wanted to lead), and militarily. No wonder it has been described as the textbook example of COIN.

Colonel Alexander Alderson set up the British Army Land Forces Stability Operations and Counterinsurgency Center in 2009 and is now its director. He was the lead author for the British Army's Counterinsurgency Doctrine (November 2009) and his operational experience includes Iraq, Bosnia, Northern Ireland and the 1991 Gulf War. He holds a Ph.D. in Modern History and is a senior visiting research fellow with the University of Oxford and at King's College London.

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