



Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam

John A. Nagl , Peter J. Schoomaker (Foreword by)

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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.

Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam Details

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From Reader Review Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam for online ebook

Josh says

I purchased this book on Audible. Somewhat of a mistake, though. The first and last chapter use the term "organization/organizational" too many times to count and it becomes quite a drag listening to it on audio! The Audible narrator is excellent, though, and for roughly 7.5 hours of the 8.5 hour tape you will find it very enjoyable.

With that aside, this is probably one of my favorite books on Counterinsurgency Operations (COIN) because Nagl does an outstanding comparative history of the British Malayan Emergency and the American War in Vietnam. I personally love comparative history and especially when someone does it so well. Nagl acknowledges the many differences—in longevity, intensity, and demographics—that affected how Britain and the United States approached each conflict. However, his central contention is that the British military represented a learning culture while the American Army was not. Therefore, the British success in Malaya and the American defeat in Vietnam is best explained by differences in the organizational culture of the two national armies—that is, the accumulated body of knowledge and practice that guides how each military (as an organization) functions and perceives its ideal role in prosecuting wars. In Malaya, the British confronted an insurgency and under the direction of Gerald Templar and Oliver Littleton the armed forces successfully improvised and adopted ingenious Psy-Op counterinsurgency tactics to dilute the Malayan insurrection. On the other hand, the American military establishment—especially the higher-ups in MACV MAG—were so thoroughly entrenched in the theory of conventional war that they consistently ignored the innovative ideas of their subordinates in the field. As Nagl summarizes in the concluding chapter: the United States possessed only a hammer and every problem in Vietnam began to look like a nail.

There's a lot to this fairly concise book and definitely more than I can cover in a brief review. Let it suffice that if you are interested in reading up on COIN I would recommend Nagl. You won't need a lot prior knowledge about COIN or either of the conflicts to follow along with Nagl's arguments.

Jesse says

Key read for military leaders to understand COIN and our own personal and organizational shortfalls in fighting it. Explains why the Brits are better suited to it than us...

John says

A snappy comparative military history with a fun name. I enjoyed it. Not the best audiobook narrator I've ever heard, but just fine.

Hans says

To some the lessons of this book may be obvious, but to most Americans, and especially those who understand American Military culture they are not so obvious. I find it very interesting that the author focuses on the undue influence of Antoine-Henri, Baron Jomini. I think that point more than anything else helps explain the origins of American Military Culture that has continued to influence Military thinking in the United States. The whole concept of fighting wars like it is a simple input-output mathematical equation on the use of force is very appealing to American sensibilities. His book was a text book at Westpoint for years, starting in the 1830's, and largely shaped the thinking of the American Civil War Generals. This left a permanent impression on Americans that large scale epic battles and European style of fighting was the only true way to fight a war.

This led to Americans disregarding lessons they had already learned about counterinsurgency from fighting Native Americans and the American-Philippines insurgency war of 1900-1903. World War I, II and the Korean War all only reinforced the idea of conventional war being the only way worth fighting a war. Then Vietnam happens and the U.S. tries to apply the exact same thinking to the problems their using massive firepower and trying to lure the enemy out to fight in giant standoff battles. Of course the VC and Viet Minh were smarter than this and instead engaged in a war of attrition knowing that they didn't have to win, only outlast the Americans.

A strange irony the author doesn't even touch on is the economics of Americans waging war. The massive firepower that the US Forces used in Vietnam made every casualty they inflicted on the enemy a very expensive one. This only further demonstrates the problem in American thinking at the time which tended to lean towards the most costly solution despite cheaper and better options being available.

Americans love of costly Technology and large budgets will continue to promulgate this thinking inside the military establishment until they simply cannot afford it any longer or until the establishment is shaken up by Military Mavericks. In my honest opinion I think the Marine Corps should have as its new *raison d'etre* Counter-Insurgency, only when an entire organization, like the Marines, have as their entire focus be counter-insurgency will Americans develop the capability of fighting two different styles of war.

John Carter McKnight says

Surprisingly, one of the best books I've read this year was this application of organization-learning theory to national armies fighting colonial insurgencies. A tight, compelling read, fascinating in detail and meticulously well-researched, in addition to being an outstanding academic work applying theory to case studies.

Probably the only academic book in the past few years I've read in lieu of a novel, staying up too late to get one more chapter in before passing out.

Very highly recommended for the general reader, as well as anyone interested in critical military history, organizational theory or learning theory.

Michael Walker says

I did a research paper years ago on the counterinsurgency Malayan emergency way back when it was CAS3, so was very interested in John's work when years later I discovered it in 2008. Providentially, I had an instructor that also recommended the book, so being already familiarized, I did a formal JPMEII review that I think is still on file at NDU. Although not a SFer, I sure got along well with fellow SF planners and almost always asked if they had read John's book. If I could live life over again...

Time will tell but I'm pretty sure Nagl made a stellar contribution to the country in general, and in particular with a signature COIN approach developed or refined from lessons learned in previous communist insurgency operations. To this day, I reflect back on this book from time to time and highly recommend people getting it. I support John Nagl in a position of power and policymaking in our government.

Louis says

Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife takes its title from a work by T. E. Lawrence, who was the British advisor to the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Turks during World War One. Lawrence (known as Lawrence of Arabia) is said to have said he felt sorry for the Turkish officers who had to oppose the Arab forces he was advising. In Malaya and in Vietnam, the post-WWII British and Americans had their chance to be on that other side. As part of his Ph. D. work in at Oxford, John Nagl examined the British and American experiences in counterinsurgency. And while he finds that "I [Nagl] had the good sense to study something they [British] were good at and we [United States] were not" the real question is why. And here, Nagl looks at the idea that the institutional abilities of the British and American Armies to learn and adapt was part of the difference.

Going into the later half of the 20th century, both the British and Americans have a history of wars involving unconventional warfare. In fact, both actively engaged in this type of warfare as recently as WWII, in the China-Burma-India theater against the Japanese, and both in their history have 'won' such wars, both as the insurgent (or supporter of the insurgent) and as the occupying force. And Nagl finds that in opposing their respective insurgencies that both were institutionally focused on conventional war, having chosen to turn their backs on the experiences on the asian continent and looking toward continental europe as their reason for being. So Nagl then asks, how does an organization adapt when it finds itself in an environment very different than the environment it prepared for.

Nagl then provides a framework for measuring organizational learning. If an organization is a "Learning institution" than the following questions should be answered in the affirmative: (biased for a military example)

1. Does the army promote suggestions from the field?
 2. Are subordinates encouraged to question superiors and policies?
 3. Does the organization regularly question its basic assumptions?
 4. Are high-ranking officers routinely in close contact with those on the ground and open to their suggestions?
 5. Are Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) generated locally and informally or imposed from the center?
- And then Nagl has a second set of questions around the question "Did the Army Develop a Successful Conterinsurgency Doctrine?"

1. Victory - Did the doctrine adopted achieve national goals in the conflict?
2. Objective - Did the army contribute to the setting of realistic national goals in the conflict?
3. Unity of Command - Did the military accept subordination to political objectives?
4. Minimum Force - Did the military use the minimum amount of force necessary to accomplish the mission?
5. Mass - Did the military structure itself in an appropriate manner to deal with the threat at hand?

He then examines both the Malaya (British) and Vietnam (American) cases in both their early years as well as the years of ongoing conflict and evaluates them against both set of criteria.

With the value of hindsight, you almost expect that the conclusions are that the British started bad, then improved and became a learning organization, and the Americans were not. And it would be easy to write something that said "If the Americans were a little more wise they could have won it?" and to dismiss this work as something like that. But the questions Nagl asks are better and deeper than that and so this work becomes of use not just to historians, but for any organization who finds that they were in an unexpected environment. Not just if the British figured out that their ultimate objective was not the defeat of the communist forces, but an independent Malaysia, but when did they realize this? What was the mindset of the people who came to this conclusion? How did this group communicate this to their army culture, whose institutional memory was filled with images of tanks and planes crossing western Europe to clash against German armies, and were expecting to repeat this? How did this group of people communicate this fact to their political masters, who were far away and listening to a fickle media? How did this group convince the Malaysians, and even the Chinese that the communists drew their support from that their vision and future was a better one than the communists, and to take the British side was in their best interests?

Looking at the Vietnam example, there are many books that say how ignorant and close minded the American leadership was, but Nagl goes further? Why did the Americans not even follow the British example, when the architects and implementors of the Malaysia counter insurgency were willing and available to provide their expertise and even their presence in Vietnam? Was there anything in the American ethos that prevented their receiving this advice? Was there anything culturally that prevented American decisionmakers from realizing that what they were doing was not working and not making cultural and doctrinal changes to adapt?

He has numerous thoughts on this. Surprisingly, one of them is the American 'can do' attitude which encourages people to 'make it work' that is pervasive in the American officer corps. Competence in the face of adversity is a good thing, but this warning gives one pause and you understand that it can cloud the ability to make a proper assessment.

One of the unique things about this work is the stage of life Nagl was in when he researched this. He was in the first Gulf War as a Lieutenant in the U.S. Army commanding a platoon of tanks. Then he did his Ph.D. at Oxford, where this was written. And after that, he was the operations officer of an American armor battalion, participating in the Iraqi invasion, where the opposition was to be the Iraqi armored divisions, much like the Soviet armored divisions the British officers in Malaya and the American officers in Vietnam were trained to face. And like those officers in Malaya and Vietnam, he found himself facing an insurgency, only this time he had the 'benefit' of a Ph.D. in the subject. In his own view, he was completely unprepared. Did he adapt? Yes. Well. Maybe. He has returned the U.S. and after a tour of duty in the United States he is preparing to return to Iraq. As a battalion commanding officer where he makes decisions and is responsible for the consequences for the Iraqis and his own troops. And he, and the rest of us, will learn if that Ph.D. was of any use.

Maria says

Nagl compares the organizational behavior of the US Army in Vietnam and the British Army in Malaya, specifically if it was a learning organization. He compares their codified doctrines, their informal passing of information and their ability and willingness to work with civilian leaders.

Why I started reading this book: Vietnam is my black hole. I have only read a few books about it, and I was eager to learn more about counterinsurgency, especially considering our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Why I finished it: Quick book, engaging but also extremely focused. Helpful for anyone who works in or for a large company. It is surprising how hard it is to change a large organization even when there is an obvious problem. I would recommend this to business students and managers in addition to military personnel eager to learn the lessons of the past.

Billy says

Organizational culture is central to John Nagl's comparative study of counter-insurgencies. Born out of his dissertation, Nagl's title borrows from T.E. Lawrence, who noted that fighting guerilla warfare was slow and difficult—like “learning to eat soup with a knife.” Both the author's historical research and personal experience in Iraq confirm this idea. Nagl compares British and American experiences with counterinsurgency—in Malaya and Vietnam respectively—and discovers that flexibility in organizational military culture makes a difference. American forces in SE Asia approached insurgency with tried (and until then true) methods of total war. By relying heavily on firepower and tactical intelligence, American forces blasted away at an enemy that never relented. Conversely, the British in Malaya succeeded in a situation very similar to America's quandary in Vietnam. The British were victorious by employing a political campaign to win the hearts and minds of Malaysians. In short, fighting insurgency is a political as well as a military campaign. Nagl implores military leaders to give locals reasons to want democracy and stability; in time they will quit supporting insurgents.

Nagl is a true student of military theory and history, one that has taken Clausewitz's dictum that war is an extension of politics. *Learning to Eat Soup* has a clear political message. It implies that the United States needs to reflect on its failures in Vietnam, no matter how painful. The American military must learn from its mistakes—as well as British military history—to have any chance of successfully stopping insurgents in modern day Iraq. Although Nagl contends that military culture is slow to evolve, his work should be scrutinized by a U.S. Military staff that currently finds itself in quite a quandary. Nagl's book, however, never speculates beyond the technical and organizational levels of warfare, and certainly the American military's current state of affairs in the Middle East has something to do with Grand Strategy. While the initial military thrust into Iraq was extremely successful, for any long term stability to take hold in the region policymakers must think beyond the almost certain successes of conventional warfare.

Nagl's arguments could be bolstered by some cultural analysis. Bridging the divide between counterinsurgents and civilians—a central point in Nagl's argument—requires more nuanced understanding of a region and people's continually torn apart by imposed nationalistic borders and neo-imperialist designs. Regardless of the U.S. military's good intentions in Iraq, it must be difficult (if not impossible) for those living in war-torn Iraq to view the actions of the western military powers as altruistic. In short, Nagl's book

is a must read for those on the ground dealing with insurgents, but should also be read by policymakers who need to consider the time, resources, and historical understanding needed to fight insurgents successfully.

Ciprian Pirv says

It's a very well documented book, but if you are looking for management lessons, those are scarce. For someone with interest in military operations, might be a gold mine.

Fred says

Simply put, possibly the best book on Counterinsurgency written. Either before or after you read this, you should make sure to pick up the official US Army FM on Counterinsurgency, but that makes for some very dry reading. This is a fantastic book that should be required reading for all NCO's and company grade officers. What it essentially boils down to is the difference in mindsets between British and US forces and how that led to a difference in tactics between Vietnam and Malaya. The British are generally much more willing to learn from their mistakes and more likely to flow along the path of least resistance, while the US tends to try to force the environment, the natives, and the world itself into conforming to what shape we want it to have.

James says

Absolutely brilliant - Colonel Nagl should have been a senior general, and I hoped that one day he would be, but he wound up retiring as a lieutenant colonel. He would be a valuable choice as a national security advisor, too.

The gist of the book is a heavily researched and deeply insightful analysis of the factors that govern an army's success or failure in learning as an organization. In that respect, it will be a worthwhile study for leaders and managers in organizations of any kind. The author offers checklists for self-review by an organization; he focuses on openness to new ideas and experimentation, actively seeking the learned wisdom of the junior folks - privates, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, or assembly line and warehouse workers, line managers, or their equivalent in any other organization - and then spreading the things that work throughout the organization, and not mistaking the 'how ' for the 'what', i.e. keeping the ultimate desired end state in mind and not being locked into one particular way to achieve it.

Anyone interested in military history, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency in general, or organizational systems theory will find this one of the most enlightening and useful books he or she will ever read.

John says

A very good account of the differing tactics and thus results of the successful British counterinsurgency

efforts in Malaya and of the mixed outcome of the Americans in Vietnam. Nagl's central thesis is that the British responded to challenges in Malaya by innovating and seeking alternative solutions through rigorous internal debate and problem-solving. That is contrasted with the American failure to innovate on a large scale, and the American military's internal resistance to both policy directives from above and innovation and suggestions from below. The results speak for themselves. Nagl is a very good writer, and is extremely judicious in his praise and critique. There is much to glean about culture, innovation, and leadership in this book.

Liam says

While I do not necessarily agree with all of Dr. Nagl's conclusions, this is a well written and extremely thought-provoking study. In addition, the bibliography is fairly extensive and quite useful, despite the author's having relied largely on interviews, oral histories, official documents, etc. I look forward to comparing this book with those written on the same topic by Sir Robert Thompson, Sam Sarkasian, and others.

Phrodric says

If you are looking for the one book that is going to make it all clear; LCOL John Nagl's Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife is not it. It is, however an important addition to a larger reading list. Learning to Eat Soup will be an easier read than most of your more valuable selections. To the degree that it points to specific methods to make an army into a "Learning Organization" it is more than worth your time.

At the time LCOL Nagl was writing this book (it was originally part of a doctoral thesis) American strategy in Iraq at devolved into "driving around until you find an IED". A result of this book in conjunction with a number of people working from outside of the then existing army decision-making structure was that what became known as "the Surge". The Surge would provide an acceptable method for America to end its combat engagement in Iraq.

On a side note: some will argue that the Surge constituted an American victory. It is my opinion that a military situation that ends when one side leaves the field at a time and under conditions of its own choosing it is legitimate to call that a victory. In this case I temper the claim of American victory with the observable fact that Iraq remains a bleeding ground with no reason to expect the emergence of a stable pro-Western, pro-American government.

It is worth noting that LCOL Nagl was a combat officer and commander of an army battalion in operation Desert Storm and therefore can include significant front line and operations experience along with his academic qualifications. All of these experiences are evident in this book.

The central thesis of Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife is that armies can either promote and develop the skills needed to be a Learning Organization or expect to suffer needless losses while hoping to stumble into victory. The classical cliché; is that armies routinely prepare to fight the last war. Whatever truth there may be in this cliché, most Army leadership is aware of it. Meaning that it is hard to find senior officers inflexible to the needs to adapt battle plans to existing battlefield dynamics. In promoting the concept of Learning Organizations I suggest that the author was expressing frustrations based on a command structure that had achieved success in the field but had not planned for an exit.

To simplify the concept of Learning Organization, it is one wherein the culture is constantly open to new ideas especially those based on an analysis of existing conditions and alternate methods to improve on those existing conditions. That is the organization cannot be satisfied with where it is and must promote problem solving based on finding paths forward.

The quote learning to eat soup with a knife is part of a larger quotation from British Col. TE Lawrence aka Lawrence of Arabia. The point of Col. early Laurence's aphorism is that fighting a counterinsurgency operation - COIN is messy and slow. As we turn from the LCOL's. central thesis to his effort to apply it to specific examples in the history of COIN, there may be problems with his examples and his cherry picking history.

It is for this reason that I am going to encourage reviewers of my review to spend some time with the longer reviews among the one and two star posters. With virtually all published history there is going to be dissension and debate. I am not going to claim for myself sufficient expertise to judge LCOL Nagl's read of events in Malaysia 1948 1957 or in Vietnam 1950 to 1972. I raise this point and invite you to read some dissenting opinion because the issues raised in this book are too important. It is also for this reason that I strongly recommend that Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife is essential reading but only if it is part of a larger study of modern military issues and events.
