

The British Army and Counterinsurgency: The Salience of Military Culture

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The British Army has excelled in small-unit, antiguerrilla warfare as they did in other aspects of counterinsurgency. History had given them an army that was relatively small and decentralized and, therefore, ideally suited to such warfare. Since Britain is an island nation, the navy and not the army has been its first line of defense. Distrusted and underfunded, the junior service was thus relatively unaffected by the revolution in size and organization experienced by continental armies during the nineteenth century.

—Thomas R. Mockaitis¹

HISTORICALLY, British Army culture has influenced its approach to counterinsurgency. The British Army's experiences in small wars and counterinsurgencies during the 19th and 20th centuries remain topical and salient. The U.S. military and its coalition partners, including Britain, are prosecuting counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere. An analysis of British military cultural predilections in the context of counterinsurgency is therefore germane because the U.S. Army is transforming while in contact, and a big part of Transformation is about military cultural change.

If U.S. military culture has traditionally exhibited a preference for a big, conventional-war paradigm, and if this preference has impeded its capacity to adapt to small wars and counterinsurgencies, then there might be something to gain or learn from examining the cultural characteristics of another army with a greater propensity for counterinsurgency. In short, military culture comprises the beliefs and attitudes within a military organization that shape its col-

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lective preferences toward the use of force. These attitudes can impede or foster innovation and adaptation. Military culture sometimes exhibits preferences for either small wars or big wars.²

On Small Wars, Asymmetric Conflict, and Counterinsurgency

That great powers can lose small wars when their opponents refuse to fight them conventionally seems axiomatic. How then do they adapt to successfully fight counterinsurgencies and small wars? Small wars are not force-on-force, state-on-state conventional wars in which success is measurable by phase lines crossed or hills seized. Asymmetric conflict, with its associated contradictions, is not a new concept either; it dates at least as far back as the Roman occupation of Spain, but the U.S. experience in Vietnam was the genesis for the first use of the term.

Asymmetric conflict usually sees an ostensibly superior external military force confronting an ostensibly inferior state or indigenous group on the latter's territory. Counterinsurgencies and small wars are subsumed within this category, and I use these terms interchangeably in this article.³ Asymmetry "in means" occasions insurgency and the use of hit-and-run small-unit tactics by irregular and paramilitary elements to harass, ambush, bomb, and disrupt outposts, checkpoints, or conventional formations' lines of communication. Practitioners of insurgency concentrate limited attacks against the critical vulnerabilities of regular military forces by using instrumental perfidy to undermine the overmatch of technology and the aggregate forces of their adversaries.

The Battle of Omdurman in 1898 saw both the culmination and the apotheosis of Britain's 19th-century style of colonial warfare. This battle in the Sudan witnessed a British rout of the Mahdi's indigenous army, which fought the British European-

style and “fled in utter rout, pursued by the Egyptian cavalry, harried by the 21st Lancers, and leaving more than 9,700 warriors dead and even greater numbers wounded behind them.”⁴ The British lost only 48 men. About the Battle of Omdurman, Mao Tse-tung observed that defeat is the inevitable result when native forces fight against modernized forces on their terms.⁵

The 20th century witnessed indigenous forces adopting Fabian/Maoist strategies fueled by nationalist and communist ideologies that challenged the colonial powers’ superior numbers and technology. In fact, the post-World War II historical record shows that military and technological prowess is an unreliable indicator for the successful outcome of small wars. In Algeria, Cyprus, Aden, Morocco, Tunisia, Indochina, and Vietnam, indigenous nationalist forces achieved their political objectives through armed confrontation against big powers that possessed overwhelmingly superior conventional military forces. For insurgents, asymmetric war is total, but it is inherently limited for the great powers because insurgents pose no direct or immediate threat to their survival. Full military mobilization is not politically possible or considered necessary. The disparity in military capabilities is so great, and the confidence that military power will predominate is so acute, that victory is expected.⁶

Small Wars: The British Army’s Core Role

During the Napoleonic wars, Britain faced a strategic dilemma: its navy was superior to that of the French, but not its army. The Royal Navy’s supremacy ensured the British Isles remained invulnerable to invasion, but Britain’s geographic isolation and the defeat of its European continental allies left Britain impotent on the strategic level. Britain could prick at the periphery of Napoleonic Europe, but it could not roll back Napoleon’s forces alone. This disparate situation on land, therefore, compelled Britain to adopt an indirect Fabian strategy against the French Army in Spain. The term “Fabian” connotes an indirect strategic use of force and stems from Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus who helped exhaust Hannibal’s forces during the Second Punic War by the avoidance of decisive battles.

Peninsular War. The first Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, used methods in the Peninsular War uncannily similar to the methods Nathaniel Greene employed in the Carolinas against the British during the American Revolution. Wellington

recognized Napoleon’s superiority too well to risk a decisive battle, so he indirectly used “pinprick” attacks to induce the French to concentrate against him while Spanish guerrillas consolidated control over the Spanish countryside, attacking French outposts and lines of communication.⁷

In the Peninsular War, Britain’s most significant effect was to aggravate the Spanish insurgency against French occupation and encourage the source of it. The British Expeditionary Force’s (BEF’s) presence facilitated success, but Wellington’s conventional battles were the least decisive part of his operations. The overwhelming majority of French losses were a result of Spanish guerrilla operations. Wellington was successful in harrying the French and making the countryside a desert where French forces could not sustain themselves, but he fought few battles during the 5 years of campaigning. The BEF’s initial purpose was for 26,000 British soldiers to distract 100,000 French soldiers from the main theater of war in Austria.⁸

Wellington’s biggest effects came through his demonstration of threats rather than through his attacks. Whenever his forces threatened a point, the French were compelled to draw off troops to concentrate at that point, thereby conceding to the guerrillas’ greater scope in other areas. Although French forces were far superior in numbers, they were unable to concentrate against Wellington’s combined Anglo-Portuguese force because Spanish guerrillas compelled the French to disperse in order to protect their vulnerable lines of communication.⁹

The British Army’s 19th-century experience of colonial wars significantly influenced British military culture into the 20th century. The British way of war, as embodied in the campaigns of Victorian heroes Garnet Wolseley, Frederick Roberts, and Horatio Kitchener, reflected essentially all the British people knew of war. The British way of war was in fact highly specialized, which contrasted sharply with war as fought between great industrial powers.

Small wars. The British approach emphasized small-scale instead of large-scale operations; the soldier rather than the system; and small casualties and easy victories instead of prolonged fighting and heavy losses. But small wars against savages really could not test an army, as evidenced by the British Army’s problems in the Boer Wars and its experiences in the world wars. These colonial victories created a dangerous perception in Britain that wars were “distant and exotic adventure stories, cheaply won by the parade-ground discipline of the British line.”¹⁰

One explanation for the British success in small wars was Britain's development of a military manning system that was exclusively tailored to such conflicts. In the early 19th century, British statesmen created a quasi-tribal regimental system in which officers and enlisted men served together over extended periods of time, rotating between overseas and home assignments. The regimental system provided an "emotional substitute" for the sense of public approval relied on by the U.S. military.¹¹

Another reason for the success of the British Army in small wars has been Britain's almost exclusive reliance on professional soldiers instead of draftees. The use of volunteer professionals to fight low-intensity but protracted conflicts also mitigated domestic political constraints because they were not unwilling participants. The years between the world wars reinforced the idea that big war on the continent was an aberration rather than a norm. During the interwar years, the British Army conducted imperial policing from Palestine to northwest India. What is more, the practice of counterinsurgency during the 1950s and colonial withdrawal during the 1960s shaped the careers of senior British Army officers still serving during the 1980s.

Counterinsurgencies. By the end of World War II, large numbers of British soldiers and colonial policemen were familiar with the actual conduct of guerrilla warfare. Many of the techniques involved in a politico-military insurgency, particularly



A rescue party of British and Malaysian soldiers works its way to a downed aircraft, circa 1955.

British Central Office of Information

guerrilla warfare, were merely adaptations of traditional rebel tactics against which the British had often fought in their imperial past. In addition to its experience in this area, "the British advantage [lay] in a tradition of flexibility, based upon the fact that throughout the colonial policing campaigns of the past they had been forced to make do with only limited resources."¹²

Worldwide responsibilities had dispersed a fairly small volunteer army thinly on the ground and prevented the maintenance of a strategic reserve. At the same time, financial frugality had made soldiers conscious of a need to conserve equipment and ammunition. Therefore, once the British were confronted with a revolt, they were more likely to make a low-profile response, using their armed forces

sparingly and searching for solutions that did not necessitate large expenditures of men or materiel. Moreover, "the wide range of threats to imperial rule and the different geographical conditions encountered, produced a constant need to adapt responses to fit local circumstances and avoided the development of a stereotyped theory of policing."¹³ Thus by 1945, as the British faced a host of threats to their rule and influence, they already exhibited three important characteristics for low-intensity conflict: experience, appropriate military skill, and flexibility.

The key to the British Army's success in counterinsurgency conflicts was its integrated civil-military approach. Civilian officials remained in control of emergencies and were responsible for the broader political strategy and for propaganda. The British Army operated under civilian control and accepted the requirement of employing minimum force. Moreover, even though it preferred large-scale operations in the early phases of its campaigns, the British Army tended to be flexible, adapting to meet local circumstances and switching to small-unit operations with decentralized control when it became evident that large-scale sweeps did not succeed.

A similar pattern emerged in the subsequent British Army experience in Northern Ireland. According to one study, "The civil authorities remained in control; minimum force was generally used; new tactics were constantly developed and tactical control devolved; close relations were established with the police; and finally the Army recognized that it could not resolve the conflict on its own, but that a broader-based political strategy was required."¹⁴

Thus, the British approached insurgency with the critical assumption that insurgency was not principally a military problem. If required, Britain would bring in soldiers to back up the police, but the soldiers would always be aiding civil power and would be obliged, just as the police were, to use only that level of force essential to restore order and to never exceed that level of force.

Close cooperation between the Army and colonial administrators who implemented reform and the police who maintained order was essential to the British approach to counterinsurgency. These operations required a degree of decentralization of command and control that "was further encouraged by the tendency of the insurgents to operate in small, highly mobile bands." British success in counterinsurgency is also attributable to British society, which had created an Army "ideally suited to counterinsurgency and to cultural attitudes about how that Army might be used."¹⁵ The cultural charac-

teristics of the British Army set it up for success in counterinsurgency operations.

Success in countering guerrillas requires the ability to deploy small units on an area basis and to decentralize command and control. However, conventionally minded officers and armies are usually averse to such dispersion because they have been taught to mass and concentrate their forces. The British, though, had a somewhat unconventional army, whose history of imperial policing made internal security operations the norm and conventional war the exception. Operating with a regimental system also facilitated decentralization because British Army units were accustomed to deploying smaller units for extended periods throughout the empire, which enabled those units to interconnect with the civil police and administration within an area.

After 1945, the British Army faced a new form of insurgency founded on a revolutionary political ideology and political indoctrination. By then, however, the British approach to small wars included observing what were the accepted counterinsurgency principles of military subordination, use of local resources, intelligence gathering, and the separation of insurgents from their local supporters.¹⁶

The British Army fought its post-World War II campaigns in the predominantly rural jungle conditions of Malaya, Kenya, Borneo, Guyana, and Dhofar to the desert conditions of Palestine; Muscat and Oman; Radfan; and Kuwait and was successful in small-scale and medium-scale operations. The British Army helped bring about favorable political outcomes for Britain. In almost every case of devolution, newly independent states allowed the British Army to retain facilities in their countries.

The British were successful in small wars because they were willing to fight like their indigenous adversaries. For example, in Malaya and Borneo, the British Army fought the guerrillas by inserting small patrols that operated like the insurgents, not with air power and artillery. The Army used stealth and cunning. In the few instances when it employed bombers or artillery, it was remarkably unsuccessful.¹⁷

From 1939 to 1960, the British Army's social structure, values, and way of life survived with surprisingly little change. The British officer corps was still dominated by the "gentleman" and remained essentially a working-class Army officered by the upper classes. The continued power of regimental loyalties signified that the British Army had survived the social revolutions of the mid-20th century with its traditions intact.



Soldier, British Ministry of Defence

A member of the Staffordshire Regiment moves cautiously through Newry, Northern Ireland, with a patrol of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, 1994.

Counterinsurgency campaigns. The counter-guerrilla struggle in Malaya lasted from 1948 to 1960 and “ended with the only victory won by a Western power against practitioners of revolutionary warfare.”¹⁸ The British fought this war as their guerrilla opponents did—with limited resources and adapting to living and fighting deep in the jungle for long periods with minimum supplies. They outgamed and outsmarted the communist insurgents at their own game of camping, ambush, and jungle tracking. Notably, the Army undermined insurgents’ ability to live off the local population by resettling villagers in model villages under government protection. In fact, in all the operations during the British retreat from empire, the Army’s riot-control techniques avoided unnecessary shooting and the systematic brutality inflicted by other armies in similar situations.

The British Army’s campaign in Malaya was in many ways the archetypal counterinsurgency campaign, although it took several years to adopt a good counterinsurgency strategy and 12 years to ultimately defeat the guerrillas. Although regular troops, aircraft, and sophisticated equipment played no small part in defeating the insurgents, the British could not have achieved success without the support of the

Federal Army, the Home Guard, the Police Force, the Malayan Chinese Special Branch, and a preponderance of the civilian population. Military measures, emergency regulations, and winning hearts and minds defeated the communist insurgents. The British defeated the guerrillas in Malaya because the British Army was willing to beat them at their own game. All in all, in Malaya the British Army lost 509 soldiers and killed 6,710 of 12,000 insurgents.¹⁹

Except for the Korean and Falklands Wars, almost all the campaigns the British Army fought during the Cold War were counterinsurgencies. The British Army’s experiences in small wars had been gained over a long period when the Empire was established, maintained, and devolved. The strategic focus on Europe after 1967 and the shift to a maneuver-oriented doctrine in the 1980s notwithstanding, the British Army’s cultural predilection for operations other than war continued unabated.

Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland commitment pulled manpower toward the imperial policing mission, with tankers and artillerymen functioning as infantry because there was no one to take their places. In August 1969, the British Army was called in to give military aid to the civil power in

Northern Ireland. The troops' initial task was to protect the Catholics in Londonderry. However, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) aimed to kill as many British troops as possible to influence British public opinion to force the British Government to pull its troops out. The Provisional IRA adopted a mixture of terrorism and guerrilla warfare; tactics so successful the Traditional IRA decided to join the shooting, ambushing a British Army patrol in May 1971.

The British Army's nadir in Northern Ireland occurred on a Sunday early in 1972, when the Parachute Regiment killed 13 men and wounded 13 others in what came to be known as Bloody Sunday. The British Army in Northern Ireland subsequently improved intelligence methods, tactics, and training so that by 1975 it was successfully managing the Troubles with improved tactics and more sophisticated intelligence operations. As a result, the British Army gained unique experience in urban patrolling, covert surveillance, and bomb disposal.²⁰

British military culture "would suggest certain continuities in the underlying approach between colonial insurgency and Northern Ireland because of deep-seated beliefs and attitudes held by the Army as a result of its historical experiences, despite the different pressures unique to the Army's role in the province."²¹ Experiences gleaned from myriad small wars provided the British Army with exceptional insight into counterinsurgency warfare.

Although the halcyon days of British counterinsurgency operations came to an end with the Malayan Emergency in the 1960s, the examples of Northern Ireland and Oman indicated that the principles on which its approach to counterinsurgency was founded are as valuable now as then. Succinctly stated, the British principles for counterinsurgency are minimum force; civil and military cooperation to win support of the population; and decentralization of command and control supported by a regimental system that creates initiative in junior leaders.

The low-intensity function of the British Army remained central even after the decision to withdraw the British military from east of Suez. Although this decision was thought to have settled the dilemma between Europe and the empire in favor of the continent, colonial legacies remained. British Army institutions have been influenced far more by colonial continuities than by the intense but infrequent periods of continental warfare. Moreover, the periods between major European wars have not been characterized by peace, but by continuous fighting in imperial wars.

The influence of Northern Ireland in perpetuating the British Army's experiences and attitudes about low-intensity conflict is also salient. In spite of subsequent diversions like the Falklands War and the Persian Gulf War, one cannot overstate the deep influence of the Ulster experience on British Army culture. The Northern Ireland commitment greatly influenced the British Army's training, movement, deployment, logistics, and morale and shaped British soldiers' lives.²²

The British enjoyed notable successes in counterinsurgency during the 20th century, successfully defeating communist insurgents in Malaya, the Mau Mau in Kenya, and the EOKA (National Organization of Freedom Fighters) in Cyprus. The British Army also was involved in two postimperial campaigns. From 1970 to 1975, British soldiers advised the Sultan of Oman's armed forces against Dhofari nationalists, and from 1969 to 1995 British soldiers conducted internal security operations in Northern Ireland. Lessons derived from the British Army's earlier campaigns helped influence its response to these more recent insurgencies. In fact, General Frank Kitson successfully applied insights he gained during the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya to Belfast during the early 1970s, where he commanded British troops.²³

British Doctrine and Principles

Although much of the official British doctrine was not formulated until the last quarter of the 20th century, it built on experience gained doing imperial policing in the Middle East, India, and Ireland. Even during the Napoleonic wars, the British Army found itself as an inferior force in an asymmetric conflict and was therefore compelled to combine a Fabian conventional strategy with the use of indigenous guerrillas to disperse and overextend the French. The British Army viewed counterinsurgency and small wars as the norm.²⁴

History and an insular geography have helped shape a pragmatic, indirect British approach to strategy. Imperial policing, intrastate security, and counterinsurgency have been considered normal roles for the British Army. Stability operations have dominated the British Army experience, and it has embraced them as central to the institution. Although the British Army has been successful in most conventional wars, for most of its history it has viewed its expeditionary role to fight on continental Europe as aberrant and peripheral. Imperial policing and, subsequently, internal security/counterinsurgency have been the mainstay of British Army operations.

The regimental system adapted to the exigencies of intrastate operations, but imperial policing and the regimental system were impediments to preparing for conventional conflicts on the continent.

Years of experience in small wars and counterinsurgencies have over time imbued the British Army as an institution with certain principles about the use of force in such operations. As a result, the British have wholeheartedly accepted that they should use minimum force, but only when required. The British also seem to exhibit more patience when it comes to protracted internal security problems, which is probably attributable to a tradition of operating in small, autonomous units in isolated and far away places. Moreover, the British approach to casualties is best described as a stiff-upper-lip attitude. A history of taking a limited number of casualties in remote places for unclear reasons has made the British tolerable of casualties. The British Army does not try to avoid casualties, and it does not seem to be averse to taking them. Also, due in part to a history of limited resources, the British Army does not overrely on technology as a be-all and end-all solution.

Britain's small-war army principally comprised light infantry, light cavalry, and light artillery units, with the agility and logistical austerity to enable them

to operate effectively in remote and varied operational milieus with a decentralized command structure and the encouragement of junior officer and junior noncommissioned officer initiative. Because the small-war environment (counterinsurgency) seems likely to be prevalent for the foreseeable future, one military expert's observations about the British Army are germane: the promotion of the values of decentralization, lightness, quality of training, and unit cohesion are no less important for the small wars of the future than they have been for the small wars of the past.

As the 20th century ended, the British Army's experience in the Balkans had more in common with its colonial past than with its commitment to war on the plains of Europe, and the persistent low-intensity conflict in Northern Ireland was viewed as the last stage of imperial withdrawal.²⁵ Nationbuilding and counterinsurgency in difficult terrain and amid former enemies also argue for specialized, elite, light, cohesive, and tactically versatile forces. The ongoing military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere where U.S. Armed Forces, with their coalition partners, are conducting protracted counterinsurgency wars underscore the salience of this observation.²⁶ **MR**

NOTES

1. Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-60* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 146.
2. For studies on organizational and military culture, see Edgar Schein, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist* (February 1990): 111; Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France Between the Wars," *International Security* 19 (Spring 1995): 66; Yitzhak Klein, "A Theory of Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 10 (1991): 5-6, 10, 13; Alan Macmillan, "Strategic Culture and National Ways in Warfare: The British Case," *RUSI Journal* 140 (October 1995): 33; Carnes Lord, "American Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 5 (Fall 1985): 273-74; Robert M. Cassidy, *Peacekeeping in the Abyss: British and American Peacekeeping Doctrine and Practice after the Cold War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 7.
3. The term asymmetric conflict appears in 1974 in Andrew Mack, "The Concept of Power and Its Uses in Explaining Asymmetric Conflict," London, Richardson Institute for Conflict and Peace Research, 1974.
4. Winston S. Churchill, *The River War* (London: Prion, 1962), 218.
5. Daniel P. Bolger, "The Ghosts of Omduzman," *Parameters* (Autumn 1991): 28-31; Mao Tse-tung, cited in E.L. Katzenbach, Jr., "Time, Space, and Will: The Political-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung" in ed., T.N. Greene, *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 14-15.
6. Mack, 126, 132.
7. David Gates, "The Transformation of the Army 1783-1815," in *The Oxford History of the British Army* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 157-58; B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 26-27. Also see Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 97.
8. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 110-11, 114-17; David French, *The British Way in Warfare: 1688-2000* (London: Unwin-Hyman, 1990), 111. In 1810, the French deployed 350,000 troops to Spain but could only use 90,000 of them to invade Portugal. The rest had to be used for counterinsurgency and to guard lines of communications. By 1810, Wellington's force comprised 50,000 troops.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army: 1509-1970* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), 324.

11. Eliot A. Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," *International Security* (Fall 1984): 172-73.
12. John Pimlott, "The British Army: The Dhofar Campaign, 1970-1975" in eds., Ian F.W. Beckett and John Pimlott, *Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1985), 16-19.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Colin McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War: The British Army's Way in Warfare 1945-1995* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1996), 182.
15. Mockaitis, "Low-Intensity Conflict: The British Experience," *Conflict Quarterly* (Winter 1993): 8 and 10; Mockaitis, "A New Era of Counter-Insurgency," *The RUSI Journal* (Spring 1991): 75.
16. Mockaitis, "Low-Intensity Conflict," 11; and Beckett, "The Study of Counter-Insurgency: A British Perspective," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (April 1990): 47-49. For example, see Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars: The Principles and Practice*, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 125-49.
17. Michael Dewar, *Brushfire Wars: Minor Campaigns of the British Army Since 1945* (London: Robert Hale, 1990), 180-81.
18. Barnett, 487-89, 484-85.
19. Dewar, 43-44.
20. *Ibid.*, 15; John Strawson, "The Thirty Years Peace," in eds., Chandler and Beckett, *The Oxford History of the British Army*, 350-52.
21. McInnes, 149-50; Gavin Bulloch, "Military Doctrine and Counter-Insurgency: A British Perspective," *Parameters* 26 (Summer 1996): 4; Mockaitis, "A New Era of Counter-Insurgency," 75-76.
22. Hew Strachan, "The British Way in Warfare," in eds., David Chandler and Ian Beckett, *The Oxford History of the British Army*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 408-409; Strawson, 348.
23. Insurgent George Grivas called his underground organization on Cyprus the Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Organiston (National Organization of Freedom Fighters).
24. Mockaitis, "A New Era of Counter-Insurgency," 75.
25. Strachan, 404-405.
26. Jeffrey Record, *Beyond Military Reform* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), 84-85.

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