

## **The Owl of Minerva has crashed and died**

*Knife Fights:*

*A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*

John A Nagl

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**T**he rise and fall of the US doctrine of Counterinsurgency (COIN) took place over such a short time span that some of those intimately involved in originally propagating the doctrine seem still blissfully unaware that its moment has passed. John Nagl, for example, writes that his memoir is 'about counter-insurgency and its journey from the far periphery of US military doctrine to its center'. The reality is that after the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is not about to commit large ground forces to a protracted military occupation again any time soon. Even the rise of Islamic State has not changed this.

Nagl was a career officer who first saw combat during the 1991 Gulf War. This was more of a massacre than a war. As Nagl puts it: 'the Iraqi infantry had few weapons that could put a serious dent in an M1A1 Abrams tank'. Such one-sided affairs could be 'exhilarating and wild and intoxicating, every minute an adventure'. The biggest problem he seems to have faced in this war was his sergeant becoming over-familiar but he dealt with this by ordering him to write a 'counselling statement' acknowledging his mistake. The man had 'tears in his eyes' when he handed over the statement 'which I promptly rolled into a ball and told him to eat'. Suddenly 'fragging' becomes perfectly understandable!

At a time when attention was focussed on the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), the technological advances that had supposedly transformed the nature of warfare and ushered in an age of US military invincibility, Nagl was convinced that guerrilla insurgency was the most likely challenge that the US was going to find itself confronting. While the Gulf War had dramatically put on display America's overwhelming technological superiority, he was concerned

with how ill-equipped the US military was for counterinsurgency; for, as he puts it (borrowing from T E Lawrence) 'eating soup with a knife'.

Nagl's studies at Oxford, where he went on a Rhodes scholarship to 'learn the lessons of empire', resulted in a comparative study of the US experience in Vietnam and the British experience in Malaya that was to be eventually published in 2002 as *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. As he puts it in this memoir: 'Malaya is famous as the shining example of the "hearts and minds" school of counterinsurgency, the idea that the population must be protected in order to allow them to reveal the identity and location of the insurgents'. This was, of course, not an accurate account of the scale of the repression and of the overwhelming force that the British used in Malaya. Indeed he does acknowledge that Gerald Templer, the supposed architect of British victory in Malay, actually admitted that he had overseen 'the use of techniques that would be seen today as relying upon excessive force, including resettling entire communities in concentration camps'. His academic studies were to be given relevance by the US invasion of Iraq, America's perverse response to the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Nagl freely acknowledges the scale of the disaster that Donald Rumsfeld inflicted on the US military. He describes Rumsfeld as 'spectacularly bad', pretty much a unanimous opinion among the soldiers on the ground. The initial invasion force was 'just barely big enough to topple Saddam Hussein', but completely inadequate 'to secure Iraq's cities'. He describes the invasion and its aftermath as 'one of the least successful military operations in American history'. The policies implemented by the Coalition Provisional Authority (disbanding the Iraqi Army and de-Baathisation) played 'a huge role in incubating the chaos that erupted' and were 'a perfect recipe for an insurgency'. When Nagl was himself deployed to Iraq to fight the insurgents, his unit was 'completely unprepared for the war we were about to fight'. Quite remarkably, the Americans had managed to provoke 'a general uprising, not just of all Sunnis in Al Anbar, but also of the Shia in the rest of

Iraq’.

A brief digression is necessary here because the subsequent descent of Iraq into sectarian civil war has marginalised this ‘general uprising’. What aborted this development was not any action on the part of the United States, but the launching of a murderous war against the Shia by al-Qaeda in Iraq, very much against the wishes of Osama Bin Laden, who considered the Americans to be the main enemy, but almost certainly at the behest of the Saudis. Al-Qaeda’s atrocities were deliberately intended to provoke sectarian civil war, a methodology that is continued by Islamic State today. This inaugurated the proxy war with Iran that the Saudis have been waging in Iraq and later in Syria ever since. The extent to which the United States has found itself caught in the middle of this proxy war is the largely untold story of the current Middle East conflict.

As for Nagl, he describes his tour of duty in Iraq as little more than an exercise in futility: ‘It was like pulling your hand out of a bucket of water and hoping that you’d made a lasting impression’. He goes on:

‘It was hard to argue that we’d won. In fact, in a final insult, the ammunition supply point at Taqquadom Airfield, from which many of us (including me) were scheduled to fly out.....was hit by a mortar round the night before our scheduled departure in what was clearly an inside job. The aim point was so precise that it detonated the entire ammo dump, raining down still-live munitions on the airfield and keeping us in Iraq for a week longer’.

There was a widespread belief at this time that the US actually faced military defeat in Iraq, that the insurgents might actually make the US position untenable. Desperate for an answer, the politicians and the high command turned to the advocates of a counterinsurgency strategy. Nagl’s moment had come.

*Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* was taken up and championed by Newt Gingrich who persuaded the publisher, Praeger, to bring out a paperback edition. Gingrich pressed a copy on the Army Chief of Staff, General Schoomaker, who, in

turn, gave a copy to the new US commander in Iraq, General Casey. By 2009, even the then Labour Defence Secretary, Bob Ainsworth, a man for whom mediocrity was merely an aspiration, admitted that he was reading the book.

More importantly, Nagl became one of a group of 'counterinsurgents', the so-called 'COINdinistas', associated with General David Petraeus. He was involved in writing the new counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 that became the bible of those advocating a counterinsurgency strategy. The Manual was published with considerable publicity by the University of Chicago Press in December 2006. Publication of a military manual by a university press was itself unprecedented and the book quickly became a best-seller. As Nagl proudly observes: it 'was downloaded more than a million times in the first month after it had been published. Ultimately copies were even found in Taliban training camps in Pakistan and it was translated and critiqued on jihadi Web sites'. No greater praise!

One of the great ironies of the Iraq War is that just as the Americans were embracing their understanding of the British school of counterinsurgency, the British themselves were suffering a humiliating political and military defeat in Basra. While the scale of the debacle has been successfully kept from the British people, the Americans were well aware of the extent of British failure. This lack of success was to be replicated in Helmand. Without any doubt, fear of a third defeat is one of the factors that make it very unlikely that British ground troops will be committed to fighting Islamic State.

How successful was the US turn to counterinsurgency? Nagl himself writes of the outcome in Iraq as being 'an unsatisfying and untidy sort of victory.....an unsatisfying return on the blood and treasure we poured in'. This was before the spectacular rise of Islamic State brought home the full scale of the US failure in Iraq. What about Afghanistan? Here he identifies Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan as one of the main reasons for failure, the other being 'the endemic corruption of the Afghan government'.

He consoles himself with the thought that this is 'an age of unsatisfying wars'. This is not good enough. The reality is that for all the success that Petraeus had at public relations, the counterinsurgency strategy was never actually implemented. Instead, it served as a sort of smokescreen, disguising what were no more than holding operations intended to allow the United States to escape from the disastrous involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan with as little loss of face as possible. A successful counterinsurgency campaign in either country would have taken years longer and involved a huge open-ended commitment of troops and resources without, moreover, any guarantee of victory. No US government was going to make that sort of commitment.

Nagl actually realises this, but refuses to recognise that it amounts to a repudiation of counterinsurgency. On the one hand, he insists that we still live in an 'age of counter-insurgency' which will last as long as 'insurgencies roil the globe'; but on the other hand he argues that the US 'should intervene in them with ground forces as seldom as possible, only when vital national interests are threatened, and only when she can be confident that the peace that will follow the conflict will be an improvement over the pre-war situation'. Using these criteria, he considers military intervention in Libya and Syria as not being in US interests. Instead, the US should follow 'a light-footprint policy of sending advisers and equipment in support of people fighting for freedom'. This is pretty much a repudiation of the counterinsurgency strategy whether he likes it or not.

With the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, what the US has reverted to is a strategy much more murderous and brutal than anything Nagl is prepared to acknowledge. Today, the US is trying to protect its imperial interests with proxy armies that it trains, equips and supports with CIA and special forces operations, aerial bombardment and drone attack. This is the age of the Dirty Wars, the age of a global Phoenix Programme.

*John Newsinger*

*A new, revised and expanded edition of Newsinger's British Counterinsurgency is out in October, published by Palgrave.*