
Adaptation in the Field: The British Army's Difficult Campaign in Iraq

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British operations leading the Multi-National Division Iraq (South East) (MND (SE)) Iraq were expected by many to be highly successful due to the British Army's long and distinguished history of successfully prosecuting counterinsurgencies around the globe. However, complacency and hubris, coupled with an inadequate understanding of the mission facing MND (SE) foiled British attempts to achieve success. It was only through a 'bottom-up' revision of the British Army's efforts, led by junior and mid-ranking officers, that significant reforms were made. These helped the British Army increase its effectiveness in line with US efforts, and allowed them to begin handing over control for security to their Iraqi counterparts.¹

The war in Iraq has been a painful learning process for the British Army.² Observers expected that British forces going into Afghanistan and Iraq, given their history of success in Counterinsurgency (COIN), would automatically be better suited to waging 'wars amongst the people' than their American counterparts. British officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) provided many layers of advice, from formal discussions in the Pentagon to attachments to American units and formations serving in the Sunni triangle and Baghdad in the summer of 2003.³ At that point in time and for a few years after, the British Army was considered the leader in COIN, and its forces were a sought-after commodity.

Meanwhile, the British Army, in practice, appeared to be losing its way in terms of practical application of key facets of COIN. Many officers and NCOs, while able to discuss 'tactical' approaches to COIN knowledgeably, were apparently unaware of important operational and strategic aspects of COIN that were having an immediate impact in Multi-National Forces Division—South East (MND (SE)). Some British officers, NCOs and soldiers demonstrated uncertainty about not only the environment in which they

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in the Summer 2009 edition of the *British Army Review*.

² What follows is the view of a military historian (who also acted as an advisor) of efforts in Multi-National Division—South East (MND SE). I have also had the opportunity to meet with, brief, debate and observe units and formations of the US Army and United States Marine Corps (USMC) in Iraq, where many of these themes were discussed in depth. I have been engaged in the COIN reform debate on both sides of the Atlantic (and beyond) since 2003. Bottom-up reform is occurring in the British Army; however, many officers, NCOs and soldiers want to make sure that it goes deeper into the Army's culture, in order to better prepare the British Army not only for Afghanistan but also for future COIN operations. I want to thank the many officers who read an earlier draft of this paper and offered some of their thoughts.

³ See Pete Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

found themselves in MND (SE) during 2003-05, but also their mission there, which was variously described as peace support operations, nation building and, sometimes, COIN.⁴ The overarching narrative for this mission was missing, and the lack of a coherent COIN strategy coming from Multi-National Forces—Iraq (MNF-I) in Baghdad during this period only exacerbated the situation.⁵

It was not uncommon during this period for officers of the Army to be unable to list the British COIN principles, define their meaning, or discuss past British successes in a meaningful way. Many were not familiar with the work of the key theorists such as Major General Sir Charles Gwynn, Sir Robert Thompson and General Sir Frank Kitson. Many within the Army have stated this was due to a lack of education in COIN, from Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) through to Staff College. One British officer commented, “personally, I feel that British doctrinal and historical knowledge of COIN is actually a bit of a myth”.⁶ Some criticised the validity of the 2001 Army Field Manual on COIN in isolation, with no consideration of whether its principles were actually being applied in theatre. The Army was not helped by a chorus of academics and civil servants who insisted that none of their previous COIN experience and doctrine was relevant to operations in Iraq. Most of these claims have since been debunked by the US Army, United States Marine Corps (USMC) and British Army’s recent successes.

The British Army has historically been considered at the forefront of military institutions learning from and adapting in various campaigns. This has been true in both conventional and unconventional warfare, from the forests and plains of North America in the eighteenth century to Sir John Moore’s reforms which enabled the Peninsula Army to perform well; from the colonial conflicts of the nineteenth century to the Second Anglo-Boer war; from the trenches of Flanders to the jungles of Burma in the Second World War; and from there to the jungles of the Malayan Emergency, the *jebel* of Dhofar and, finally, to the streets of Belfast and Londonderry.⁷ The history of British

⁴ See *Stability Operations in Iraq (OP TELIC 2-5): An Analysis from a Land Perspective*, Army Code 71844, for examples of some of the confusing messages.

⁵ The Americans are aware of their shortcomings during this period and have attempted to deal with the issues internally and externally. They are aware that they allowed the British to detach themselves from the overall command structure at times, due to their own issues in the rest of the country, and realise that some of the blame for confusion in the British mission falls to them. However, many Americans remain perplexed that the British did not re-evaluate their strategy in the south following the change of strategy in 2007.

⁶ Conversation with a senior officer in 2007.

⁷ There are many books focusing on the British Army’s history of reform over the last 200 years, including Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and the War in the Americas, 1755-1763* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Raymond Callahan, *Churchill’s Generals* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007); David French, *Raising Churchill’s Army and The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890-1939*; Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front*; Paul Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*; Stephen Hart, *Montgomery and Colossal Cracks: The 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe*; Daniel Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign*; Thomas Mockaitis, two volumes on British

experience in creating, as well as living, fighting and dying with indigenous forces, is generally considered one of the British Army's hallmarks of excellence. Many armies have also expressed admiration bordering on awe at the British Army's ability to learn and adapt across the spectrum of conflict in modern warfare. Other militaries, including the US Army and the USMC, have undertaken research and interviewed British officers and NCOs in order to better understand its abilities to adapt. However, the larger question which persisted throughout the Iraq campaign and is still open to debate as the war in Afghanistan continues, is whether the British Army is capable of being a learning institution once again?

The British Army's campaign in Iraq, its overall impact, and whether it has been a success or failure, are currently topics of intense discussion in the UK press, military and government communities. The Chief of Defence Staff referred to Britain as having become "too complacent" and "smug" about its experiences in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and their application to operations in Iraq.⁸ Many within the Army do not dispute this, but I think the opposite viewpoint is also worth stating: that there were an equal number, if not more of officers, NCOs and soldiers who were *not* smug, and who actively sought to know more about how to reform and adapt their doctrine and tactics for the COIN campaign in MND (SE).⁹

Many officers and soldiers lay blame for some of the Army's bigger mistakes at the feet of Whitehall, citing the lack of a 'Comprehensive Approach', and they are correct to do so. Others blame limited public support for the UK Government's lack of strategy and resources. Whitehall was guilty of not providing the support, troops, and long-term mindset that were crucial to carrying out a successful COIN strategy in MND (SE). The British Army was not on the verge of defeat in 2007; but the Whitehall and Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) strategy was flawed, and close to failure. Many officers felt that the PJHQ was guilty of 'watering down' assessments. As one senior officer noted:

COIN; Tim Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare and The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War*, John Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*; Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944*; Hew Strachan, *From Waterloo to Balaklava, Politics of the British Army and Big Wars and Small Wars*; Tim Travers, *Killing Ground: The British Army, Western Front and the Coming of Modern Warfare*; and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson*, to name a few.

⁸ 'British Soldiers and their Discontents', *The Economist*, 29 January 2009, <http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13022177> [Accessed 20 February 2010].

⁹ This issue is not specific to being British. In the American military, there is concern that some American commanders with recent success in Iraq will become complacent; dismiss lessons from other operations; or fail to recognise that what worked in Iraq will not necessarily work in Afghanistan.

Many of us feel that, notwithstanding limited political and popular support for the Iraq campaign, too much military advice from theatre was watered down on the basis of perceptions of what the market would bear. In contrast with the US our people in Basra struggled to get their views over, as reflected in our lukewarm response to the Security Sector Reform (SSR) challenge right up to Charge of the Knights (CotK). Personally I point the finger at PJHQ who, in my view, filter straight up advice on our requirements. The whole construct lacks the dynamism and necessary tension that you see in the US relationships.

The fact that the situation has been turned around is mainly due to the 'in-theatre' Army's credit. Despite this, all was undeniably not well within the Army, and many of those who have served on TELIC operations have not hesitated to say so.

Observations from TELIC

I had the opportunity to meet, brief, debate with and observe many British units in MND (SE), on each TELIC from July 2006 through September 2008. The following is a synopsis of my observations and discussions with units either preparing for deployment or already serving during this period. As an American military historian working as a COIN advisor who has extensively studied the British Army's record of learning and adapting in war, the Iraq campaign has presented an interesting, sometimes frustrating, but always an important case study.¹⁰

The successful British COIN campaigns of the last century have shared a list of key ingredients. This list has been used by some within the British Army as a benchmark, and within the US military as a guide, as even a cursory perusal of FM 3-24 and recent comments from MNF-I and Central Command (CENTCOM) demonstrate:

- Comprehension of existing doctrine
- Adaptation to local situations and learning from mistakes
- Risk-taking organisations
- Harmony of effort
- Small-unit approach

¹⁰ A variety of articles have recently been released analysing British experiences in MND SE. See the following recent articles for different perspectives: James Wither, 'Basra's not Belfast: The British Army, "Small Wars" and Iraq', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 20, no. 3-4 (September-December 2009); Warren Chin, 'Why Did it all Go Wrong', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Winter 2008); David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Orbis* (August 2009); Colonel Ian Thomas, 'Pointing The Way Out: The Utility of Force and The Basra Narrative January - August 2007', *The British Army Review*, no. 148 (Winter 2009/2010).

- Corporate memory within theatre headquarters
- Appropriate training
- Reconciliation amongst their enemies
- Ongoing education in COIN
- Population security
- Understand local perspectives—non-western metrics
- Raise, mentor and fight with indigenous forces (army/paramilitary police/local auxiliaries)

The necessity of nearly every one of these ingredients has been debated in my own discussions with officers, NCOs and soldiers from divisional level down. Many were open to the need for reform and hoped that the need would be recognised at all levels of the Army.

As the Americans began to adapt to deal with the insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq, they followed the British tradition of bottom-up reform. Many American officers at junior and mid-level rank began to educate themselves in an effort to understand the complexity of a type of warfare dramatically different from the one for which they had been trained. Officers and NCOs began to examine historical case studies from many countries, trying to find solutions for the problems they were facing. Even commanders of US Army Brigade Combat Teams, USMC Regimental Combat Teams and Divisions within Multi-National Corps—Iraq (MNC-I) and MNF-I in such places as Tal Afar, Al Qaim and Ramadi, started to self-educate, but, until early 2007, these initiatives were taking place at the tactical and operational levels in theatre.¹¹ This bottom-up reform was formally linked to higher levels by key generals, such as Petraeus and Mattis, who allowed—and encouraged—this change of mindset. The change of command which took place at the beginning of 2007, with Petraeus taking over MNF-I and General Odierno who was already in charge of MNC-I, reinforced this trend.

Some in the British Army began to notice that the approach in the American sectors was becoming increasingly 'population-centric', and decided that this was what was missing in the south. They embraced the concept, and began to agitate for equivalent changes, both to their own professional training and the overall strategy for MND (SE). Many British commanders were aware that the MNF-I COIN guidance issued in July 2007 was not being followed. It stated the following key goals, most of which the British Army could not

¹¹ See Brian Burton and John Nagl, 'Learning as we go: The US Army Adapts to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, July 2004-December 2006', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2008).

claim to be achieving in MND (SE) in the summer and autumn of 2007 and early 2008:

- Secure the people where they sleep
- Give the people justice and honour
- Integrate civilian/military efforts—this is an inter-agency, combined arms fight
- Get out and walk—move mounted, work dismounted
- We are in a fight for intelligence—all the time
- Every unit must advise their Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) partners
- Include ISF in your operations at the lowest possible level
- Look beyond the Improvised Explosive Device—get the network that placed it
- Be first with the truth
- Make the people choose¹²

One incident that illustrates this shift concerns the MNF-I COIN Center for Excellence (CFE), which was based in theatre at Taji, Iraq. At this school, incoming Regimental and Brigade Combat Team command staff spent one week receiving briefings on COIN and its application in their future Area of Operation.¹³ The structure of CFE was based upon a British in-theatre training centre, the Far East Land Forces Training Centre, Kotta Tingi, Malaya in the 1950s.¹⁴ A small group of us, including a handful of British officers, called for greater British involvement at CFE: as staff members; to attend the course to learn lessons from other areas; and to deploy incoming British commanders to the course. The US military staff at CFE articulated their willingness throughout 2007 and 2008 to support a British brigade deployment and course. Despite great interest from many within MND (SE), and efforts from a number of people, this British involvement only occurred in February 2008, and this is unfortunate. Both armies would have benefited from sharing important information and feedback.

¹² MNF-I COIN Guidance, July 2007.

¹³ See <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/mcclnewsletterfeb08.pdf>>, pp. 7-8 for more details on the course.

¹⁴ See Daniel Marston, 'Lost and Found in the Jungle', in Hew Strachan (ed.), *Big Wars and Small Wars: The British Army and the Lessons of War in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

British units and formations in and out of theatre have had visiting academics come and talk about current and past operations on their own initiative. These presentations were likely to spark debates about whether the British were actually carrying out a COIN operation in MND (SE). Young officers respectfully differed from commanding officers who asserted that the British were achieving success with the way operations were being run. Other commanding officers felt that Basra needed to be cleared, these areas held and the support of the government rebuilt, using both British and Iraqi soldiers. These discussions produced plans, some of which were carried out on operations, such as Operation Sinbad in 2006-07. Op Sinbad has been seen as an extension of some of the debates that were taking place across MND (SE) in the second half of 2006. However, Op Sinbad did not achieve clear, hold or build due to the lack of resources, from both Whitehall and MNC-I, and a lack of political will to see the operation through. The change of narrative to countering 'criminality in Basra' in January 2007 did not help the internal debate for a change of strategy in MND (SE).

Land Command personnel also took note of these initiatives, with the result that the Land Warfare Centre formalised a Counter-insurgency Cadre for all outgoing brigades deployed to Afghanistan.¹⁵ But here also, the institution's response was fragmented: many of these efforts initiated at the lower levels were stymied by a lack of support from higher up the chain of command and across Whitehall.

The rotation of divisional headquarters, brigades and battalions within MND (SE) occurred every six months.¹⁶ As is commonly known throughout the history of COIN, the British experience in particular, six months is not long enough to establish a true presence on the ground and to develop relationships with local leaders. This was seen as counterproductive by many commanders. Many divisional and brigades headquarters came in with their own concept of operations, and commanders commented repeatedly that successive TELICs were not joined up properly. An overall campaign plan for the south, shift to Provincial Iraqi Control and withdrawal, was lacking. The role of MND (SE) divisional headquarters was not fully established until TELIC 5, which exacerbated the lack of continuity for those operating in the region. Officers repeatedly cited previous command structures set up in Malaya, Kenya, Dhofar and Northern Ireland, and asked why MND (SE) was following a different pattern. Units fed back that continuity in terms of intelligence gathering, reconstruction efforts and working with indigenous forces was lacking throughout most of the campaign. As one officer stated to me:

¹⁵ The last Iraq-bound BDE was prepared, but did not deploy due to plans for withdrawal by summer 2009.

¹⁶ While some commanders feel that battalions can be rotated every six months, the deployment of brigade and divisional HQs should have been longer. Many feel that at least a one-year deployment should occur for these formations. This did not occur in MND (SE).

Your points relating to rotation of commands through the 6 month tour structure is at the root of most of our problems from Basra and also now in Afghanistan. Not only does it work against our accumulation of knowledge and understanding of the situation, but it also ultimately undermines our reputation in the face of our US allies who think it's a joke that we scuttle back home after only 6 months in theatre. The extension to 9 months for Staff officers is an improvement but still doesn't compare to the American system. Collation of intelligence was dire when I was out there. It was clear that intelligence from the previous BG's in Maysaan had either been thrown away or never collected in the first place. We started on a blank canvas. My patrol reports were always praised for their level of detail, but there was never any follow-up, never any pursuit of some significant leads I uncovered when in lengthy dialogue with the local Sheikhs. I think this was inherent throughout the chain of command.¹⁷

Training and Mentoring of the Iraqi Army

Despite earlier successes with British Army battalions mentoring the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC), who had trained and operated alongside their British counterparts, by 2006 the British had taken a very 'hands-off' approach to the Iraqi Army. Many observers in MNF-I and MND (SE) found this strange, considering the British history of creating and training local security forces. MNF-I had made its own mistakes building up and transferring responsibility to the Iraqi Army too early, but they also created some excellent initiatives to enhance the Iraqi Army abilities, such as joint US/Iraqi operations in Tal Afar, Al Qaim and Ramadi. The 'surge' of 2007 was not, as is commonly believed, primarily about numbers, but really about how the Americans and the Iraqi Army deployed their forces in Joint Security Stations throughout contested areas in an attempt to protect the population. Ironically, many British commanders in late 2006 were thinking along the same lines. They spoke of embedding British units, such as companies, with Iraqi Army units together to fight and live together to clear, hold and build in Basra, and some even did it in Maysaan province. Unfortunately, at the end of 2006, this type of initiative was considered politically unacceptable in London, and became a major issue with the drawdown of troops.¹⁸

Despite this, British troops deployed with two battalions of the Iraqi 10 Division to Baghdad during the 'surge' in 2007. Observing this, many British commanders were perplexed and frustrated with the hands-off approach in general use in MND (SE) throughout 2007 and early 2008. As a result, by

¹⁷ Conversation with a British officer who has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is worth noting that, having absorbed these lessons, the British Army is trying to avoid this mistake by using a different structure in Afghanistan for divisional staff.

¹⁸ The numbers needed to properly embed with an Iraqi Division and the forces needed as 'quick reaction forces' (QRF) to support the MiTTed Iraqi Army units would be quite high. The US Army and USMC attached a nine-man team to each battalion and there was a company QRF in reserve to support the Iraqi Army battalion. The British drawdown would not allow for these numbers. PJHQ and Whitehall can best answer why they did not understand the need for the numbers. 'Commute to work' advising never could have sufficed; and even though this was well known by the end of 2006, PJHQ and Whitehall continued to promote a 'hands-off' policy.

February/March 2008, commanders within MND (SE) and 4 Brigade were ready to take a different approach as the Iraqi 14 Division prepared to clear Basra. This was reflected in an unofficial document agreed by the commander 4 Brigade, and which was presented to MNF-I. It became the starting point for a potential shift of strategy in MND (SE) in February 2008. While many battalion commanders agreed with this new approach, it would take the launch of Charge of the Knights (CotK) to truly facilitate the plan. This approach made the following points:

- General Mohan's (COIN) plan for the retaking of BASRA is a key development—14 DIV must win this fight and the British must support it in all aspects
- British assets in terms of 4 Brigade and future TELICs need to support this effort in many manners—this will provide a focus of effort for the British officers, NCOs and soldiers as well as playing a role in the future pacification of BASRA and BASRA province
- British officers, NCOs and soldiers can be embedded across many lines of operation within 14 DIV—from staff officers, ISTAR etc to platoon to coy embedded roles
- This future plan will need to be briefed to MNC-I and MNF-I so they clearly see a plan developing for this important area of IRAQ with major British support—which will be well received by many sceptics in BAGHDAD.¹⁹

The CotK operation occurred earlier than anyone within MNF-I, American or British expected, on 25 March 2008.²⁰ There were many reports of the 'five-day' delay to support the efforts of the Iraqis. The timeline for the CotK and the British involvement is a little bit different; there was a delay of only three days after the 14th Division attempted to clear the city. The first reinforcement of Iraqi units from the 1st Iraqi Division began to arrive on Sunday and the first US Military Transition Teams (MiTTs) arrived on Monday. The first US MiTTed Iraqi Army units went into Basra late Monday/Tuesday. General Mohan requested British MiTTs for the 14th Division—a major reversal of his previous position. The 1 SCOTS MiTT went in to support the Iraqi 14th Division on Wednesday evening, earlier than expected in London. The British commanders on the ground made the decision to commit earlier than expected. (According to some sources, the unofficial document helped commanders shape what was needed, when

¹⁹ The author helped to draft the document discussed here, and presented it to General Petraeus' staff in February 2008. General Petraeus' staff responded with ambivalence: they were pleased to hear that officers were thinking about a different approach to the mission in MND (SE), but pessimistic about the PJHQ and MOD response.

²⁰ The offensive was not supposed to begin until July 2008, after which the 14th Iraqi Division would have been properly trained for the following offensive.

restrictions from PJHQ and Whitehall were lifted.) Contrary to many press reports, the British were not embarrassed by the CotK; on the contrary, they welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their professionalism and their ability to utilise the key ingredients in COIN warfare, learning and adapting, in a joint effort with the USMC and US Army MiTTs and the Iraqi Army 14th Division to clear the city of Basra. Reporting on CotK has largely failed to note the efforts of the GOC at the time to support the forward headquarters of XVIII ABN Corps, as it came south to help direct the operation.

While MND (SE) and 4 Brigade (and, later, 7 and 20 Brigades) as well as personnel from the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps enhanced the effort with proper embedding of training teams amongst the Iraqi 14th Division and Basra Operations Command,²¹ they were not the first to recognise that the change was needed. Many other officers from earlier TELICs felt the same way, and it happened that these three brigades were on the spot and had the capability and willingness to do what was needed. Adaption within MND (SE) continued as British MiTTs travelled around in Iraqi Army vehicles, which helped create more trust within the advisory mission.

Recent efforts, dating from March 2008, have helped to foster the establishment of a properly trained and led Iraqi 14th Division. This initiative was preceded by extensive debate about the role of the British Army in building up the Iraqi Army. In the course of this debate, many useful lessons from past British experience of training indigenous forces were brought up, only to be rejected.²² This, I feel, was a mistake. If the end goal of this initiative was to withdraw and hand over to the Iraqi Army a reliable force capable of dealing effectively with insurgents in MND (SE), the way in which the advisory mission set out to achieve this was disjointed, to say the least.

The British Army cannot turn its back on a difficult campaign and disregard the lessons, some of which are admittedly very tough to swallow. It must delve into its own experiences and extract the lessons that it can take forward for operations in Afghanistan and beyond. As one officer noted: "We are putting domestic military considerations ahead of campaign success; and it will cost us more in the long run. Again it is about remaining true to our history and COIN experience."²³

²¹ Basra Operations Command was the overall Iraqi security HQ in Basra with command over all army, police and border guards. It was mentored by British officers from ARRC, who helped design the eventual COIN campaign that brought success.

²² These included case studies and systems that had been created in the past to select the correct officers and NCOs for specific roles, as well as aspects of support provided to the missions. Another key factor from past operations that was discussed was risk. Many British models of working with indigenous forces were predicated on a certain level of risk acceptance, something that has been missing for many commanders when they discussed the past as well the evolving US Army/USMC approaches with their MiTT mission.

²³ Correspondence with a senior officer.

Whitehall, and also some senior officers, failed to understand the nature of the growing insurgency in the south, and as a result they failed to implement a COIN strategy until the eleventh hour. This failure is all the more strange because, while some senior officers and civil servants in Whitehall were asserting, as late as 2007, that there was no insurgency in MND (SE),²⁴ the *Army's Stability Operations in Iraq (OP TELIC 2-5): An Analysis from a Land Perspective*, published in 2006, which specifically refers to insurgency and the need for a COIN approach throughout, was in circulation within the Army.²⁵

The war had been changing in Iraq since the beginning of 2007, and many within MND (SE) recognised early on that different approaches might be needed. Some British commanders expressed concern that the 'withdrawal' strategy from Basra to the Contingency Operating Base would cause major splits with MNF-I. Some even feared a US Army Brigade Combat Team or USMC Regimental Combat Team coming south to clear the city, underscoring their inability to do so. The decisions taken in Whitehall in 2006 and 2007 promoting Provincial Iraqi Control and handover, as well as withdrawal to the Contingency Operating Base, were not linked to the eventual success of the CotK; they could not have been, since the CotK was not part of this strategy. In some significant ways, they were two different campaigns.

British officers, NCOs and soldiers performed their duties throughout TELIC professionally and with courage, and they can be proud of their efforts. US forces have made no criticism of the British Army's fighting abilities; the issues for many, on both sides of the Atlantic, stem from the lack of a coherent strategy for MND (SE): one that was closely linked into the rest of MNC-I and MNF-I, and that would take account of the changing conditions in the whole of Iraq, especially in 2007-08.

What Should Happen Next

The British campaign in MND (SE) was not a glowing success, as some within Whitehall and PJHQ may try to claim. The fact that it ended on a fairly

²⁴ There are numerous articles from 2004 discussing the insurgency in MND(SE) as an accepted fact; the following are some good examples:
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/aug/18/iraq.military>>;
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3549600.stm>;
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/oct/12/iraq.iran>>;
<<http://spectator.org/archives/2005/11/01/the-battle-for-basra>>;
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1532800/British-to-evacuate-consulate-in-Basra-after-mortar-attacks.html>>; <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/feb/21/iraq.iraq3>>;
<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article1878705.ece>>;
<<http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/08/19/europe/EU-GEN-Britain-Iraq.php>>;
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1567603/Message-from-Basra-%27get-us-out-of-here%27.html>>.

²⁵ There were many commanders in theatre who called the campaign in MND (SE) a COIN campaign, from 2004 on.

positive note, in the summer of 2009, had more to do with bottom-up reform within units and formations in theatre, and less to do with planners in Whitehall and PJHQ. The British Army's experience in Iraq needs careful critical analysis from within its own ranks as well as from outside, in order to draw out both negative and positive lessons. The Army needs to understand why Iraq was a difficult campaign; and to recognise its own fundamental role in changing strategy, policy and ultimately, the final outcome in MND (SE). The campaign in Basra has ended differently than many in MNF-I, myself included, expected in late 2007. Among other things, it is part of the Army's role to ensure that the British Government, the higher echelons of the MoD, and the British press and population better understand its responsibilities and challenges. The next major debate that needs to occur focuses on the lessons from this campaign. Some of these will be difficult to process and apply. As many know, COIN campaigns require resources, funding, boots on the ground, specialists from across government, time, a clear understanding of COIN across government and the support of the people, both at home and in the theatre of operations. Will Whitehall and PJHQ be willing to take the lessons on board, and do something to make sure that these mistakes are not repeated in Afghanistan and future COIN campaigns?

The Army cannot, and should not, simply dismiss the valuable lessons of the last six years as they 'move on' to focus their attention fully on the COIN campaign in Afghanistan. Many British officers with whom I have met have questioned why the Americans turned their back on their Vietnam experience when there were so many excellent lessons to be learned. The answer is that they did so because the campaign was difficult, complex, and ultimately unsuccessful. As a result, the American military has lost many lives in Iraq and Afghanistan trying to learn lessons, some of them from Vietnam, that they had not previously troubled to absorb. As insurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq grew in strength and intensity, a significant number of American officers, NCOs and soldiers discovered that the doctrine and tactics they were using were not bringing the results they wanted. So they sought to reform their own military systems to adapt to the wars they found themselves engaged in, delving into others' experiences, many of them from British Army campaigns. The Americans are the first to admit that there is still much work to be done in this area. Learning and adapting are, and should be, ongoing tasks. All of this is applicable to the current debate within the British military.

This exercise needs to avoid the 'blame game' that often happens in such internal debates. The US military is attempting to avoid this in its own assessment of failures and (more recently) successes in Iraq, and such finger-pointing is detrimental to the honest discussion and analysis that are critical to the effective conduct of current and future operations. Any analysis that the British military undertakes should be at pains to neither blame nor commend specific people, whether in theatre or in Whitehall, but

focus instead on evaluating operations and results, including admitting that mistakes were made, and learning lessons from them.

Recently, in January 2010, the British Army Land Warfare Studies Centre sponsored a two-day 'lessons learned' period for many officers who served in Iraq from 2006 until the end of the campaign. While it was an important venue, it is only the beginning of trying to look at the campaign as a whole as well as where the British campaign fit and did not fit into the US campaign plan. There is a need for an ongoing discussion within the Army regarding the many negative as well as positive lessons. Outside academics from both sides of the Atlantic should be brought in as well as part of the critical analysis debates that need to occur.

In discussing how best to analyse and learn from the British campaign in MND (SE), a number of interested parties have echoed, knowingly or not, General Sir Frank Kitson's famous quote about the role of the military in promoting understanding of the realities of insurgency and COIN:

We have seen that it is only by a close combination of civil and military measures that insurgency can be fought, so it is logical to expect soldiers whose business it is to know how to fight, to know also how to use civil measures in this way. Not only should the army officers know about the subject, they must also be prepared to pass on their knowledge to politicians, civil servants, economists, members of the local government and policemen where necessary. The educational function of the army at these critical moments is most important. Amongst senior officers in particular, ignorance or excessive diffidence in passing along such knowledge can be disastrous.²⁶

Over the last few years there have been signs of improvement in COIN education across the British Army, with revised modules for RMAS cadets, an expanded and updated Module C for captains and the introduction of lectures from both US and UK practitioners for junior to mid-level officer corps at RMAS. This cross-pollination has extended to brigade and division level headquarters seeking to share information with US Army and USMC mid- and senior-level officers. There are also indications of reforms at Staff College, and some officers have expressed a desire for greater linkage between courses run by RMAS, those run by the Staff College and other potential education initiatives that may take place. The system is by no means perfect, or complete, but the will to continue learning and adapting, in the educational as well as the operational sphere, has been established. British officers, NCOs and soldiers have realised that COIN is about more than training. There is ample evidence still that there is not enough linkage across the various 'fiefdoms' to properly join things and create building

²⁶ General Sir Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 300.

blocks to better prepare soldiers, NCOs as well as officers. However, many within the Army are aware of the present shortcomings.²⁷

Lessons from Iraq have resulted in some demonstrable progress. The handling of deployments and support for Afghanistan operations (HERRICK) are currently being debated, with positive progress being made. The fact that the British Army has stated that it is on a 'campaign footing' has helped shift the discussion. The British Army has published its updated version of the COIN manual, which includes important lessons from Iraq from both the US and UK perspectives. The British 6 Division headquarters, as CJTF-6, is serving for a year to allow for better continuity of effort. The outgoing brigades are being briefed and are debating many of the important lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, from both the British and American perspectives. The British Army is developing an organisation equivalent to US Army Training and Doctrine Command in an attempt to tackle many of the shortcomings that became apparent in the campaign. Finally, an Afghan COIN Centre has been established, to help co-ordinate all the efforts of training, education, lessons learned and other pieces for the Army. This is a good start, but these efforts need to be properly resourced and co-ordinated to have an impact on the Army. And for many in the Army, the most pressing need is for these reforms to go deep and long, and to help join up disparate groups within the Army who are trying to reform independently.

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²⁷ This was confirmed in meetings in the United Kingdom in late February 2010.