The Validity of British Army counterinsurgency doctrine after the war in Iraq 2003-2009

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Abstract:
This thesis analyses whether the British Army’s doctrinal approach for countering insurgency is still valid in the light of the war in Iraq. Why is this important? Insurgency remains a prevalent form of instability. In the absence of a major conventional threat to British security, it is one which is likely to confront the Army for the foreseeable future. If British doctrine for counterinsurgency has been invalidated by the campaign in Iraq, this will have profound implications for the way the Army approaches, and is organized, equipped and trained for counterinsurgency in the future. If the doctrine is found to be valid, another explanation has to be found to account for the conduct and outcome of British operations in Southern Iraq between 2003 and 2009. Using historiographical techniques, the thesis examines the principal influences on extant British doctrine, developed in 1995. It analyzes the principal British manuals, the influence on doctrine of the campaigns in Malaya and Northern Ireland and the theories of Sir Robert Thompson and Gen. Sir Frank Kitson in order to distil a ‘British Approach,’ against which both doctrine and the campaign in Iraq are judged. It examines the course of operations in Southern Iraq to determine the validity of Counter Insurgency Operations, and uses the U.S. Army’s experience in developing and applying new doctrine in Iraq in 2007 and 2008 as a comparator. The thesis concludes that there was a dichotomy between theory and practice: British doctrine provided a valid theory for counterinsurgency, yet British commanders followed it only in part to achieve, at best, mixed results. Conversely, U.S. commanders applied their new doctrine, based on British theory, to great effect. While British doctrine may be valid, the issue was the extent to which it had been assimilated.

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