How did British colonial experiences shape the attitude towards the invasion of Iraq after 9/11?

This essay will be split into several parts, the first being, how British colonial experiences were not applied to the initial invasion either because they could not be applied (at least directly) or because they could have been but were not due to various reasons such as the leadership of the coalition. The second part shall look at how, despite the lack of preparation for dealing with the Iraqi Insurgency, lessons from British experiences have filtered down and are presently (or have) constructed a more coherent counter-insurgency policy in Iraq.

The major colonial experiences which are not mentioned in any significant detail except to answer the question are based primarily on 21st century examples, or more specifically post 1945, the most significant being Malaya, Kenya, Palestine, Cyprus, Borneo and Aden[1]. There are several important reasons for this selection, firstly as Nagl wrote passionately, counter insurgency lessons and experiences are part of an ongoing process and as such are constantly being revised and tested in new situations. In Malaya for instance there was a major revision of previous counter-insurgency strategies and tactics, which were considered outdated and not applicable.[2] Likewise before 1945 it would be exceedingly difficult to find lessons which have either not been absorbed into modern thinking or which proved to be anything other than obsolete with the advent of new technologies. Also to note is the focus of the American behaviour in Iraq and their reaction to the insurgency rather than the coalition as a whole. This is firstly because of their vast dominance in material and ideational terms within the coalition, fielding 5 division in 2003 compared with the 2 divisions by other partners [3] and the rather minimal effort played by other partners except perhaps the UK.

How lessons were not learnt initially

It may be prudent to discuss how the British colonial experience was firstly neglected, rather than assuming it was to begin with. There are a variety of ways how British lessons learnt were not or could not be applied to invasion, the first being the aims and objectives of the invasion itself. Not only did they have little bearing to colonial lessons or that of counterinsurgent operations but the very nature of the goal of removing Saddam and deposing the elite in Iraq was contrary to most of the colonial British lessons to begin with. In Malaya the objective of the insurgency was to overthrow the British elite, and later the Malayan government [4]and in Kenya for instance the local elite was used to gain a sense of legitimacy, stability and also to avoid the costs associated with having to train up a new elite with the infrastructure which the US promised in Iraq[5]. This resulted in many problems the coalition ultimately faced such as the failure to take into consideration the time and costs it would take to nation-build[6], to build up the security forces in particular, following the de-Ba'athification and the rising anger and hostile attitude. In fact the major criticism of the Coalition after the Iraq War was the inadequate planning and development stage of the operation, Cordesman echoes this point "The fact remains that the US government failed to draft a serious or effective plan for a 'Phase 4' of the war: The period of conflict termination, and the creation of an effective national building office"[7].

Another issue was the context of the invasion itself. As already stated the coalition's job was to remove Saddam Hussein from office and search for any Weapons of Mass Destruction through the use of force, this was significantly different compared with Britain which inherited its colonial problems either through mandates such as Palestine or had conquered or occupied the territory years before, and therefore had at least some stability or at least functioning

infrastructure to work with. The post invasion situation in Iraq on the other hand had a difficult task of piecing together a wrecked infrastructure which had, not only witnessed a multinational task force, but 10 years of economic embargoes and a chronic recent history of fighting both the United States and Iran[8]. Although the use of force could hardly be avoided, especially when faced with a significant regional power, it only highlights the failure to use the minimum of force, a lesson hard learnt from the British in Malaya and Kenya especially[9].

The nature of the invasion is also evidence of the irrelevance of the British experiences, such as those exemplified with the composition of the invasion forces. With the expectation of fighting a conventional war, the US fielded armoured and mechanised battalions which were light on infantry but heavy on M1A1/M1A2 Abram tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, not especially suitable for conducting and fighting an urban insurgency. Following the invasion, coalition members and especially America also used airpower extensively in an offensive role, compared with that of a logistical role in many British colonial examples. This stems in part due to value of preserving the infrastructure of the country such as in Kenya and Malaya[10]. Likewise the "cordon and search" operations were discredited and abandoned after experiences in Palestine showed the growing resentment towards the authorities because of the disruption to daily life.[11]

This was also prevalent after the invasion itself when according to Malkasian there was a general tendency for conventional-style operations and heavy handed tactics as was witnessed in operation Iron Hammer-which used extensive air strikes and sweeps to crush the insurgents.[12] David Guala in his book also pointed to the paradoxical nature of the use of technology and the success of a counterinsurgent forces.[13]

There were also numerous factors which likely hindered a dominance of British experiences, the first and perhaps the most significant being the composition of the 'coalition' itself. While Britain's lessons in Malaya and Kenya among colonial examples were learnt, they were learnt in a context where Britain was the single most dominate actor or counterinsurgent. As Hoffman argues one of the most important factors which brought success in Britain's campaigns in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus was the recognition of how important political-military coordination was in waging an effective counterinsurgency. Authority was vested in a single British representative over the course of each counterinsurgency such as in General Sir Templer in Malaya who was cognizant and committed to political and military efforts against the insurgents[14]. This was a neglected aspect by the American forces in the build up and shortly after the invasion of Iraq, and has still not fully been overcome[15]. (This lesson can be seen with the behaviour of the 5 United States divisions reacting differently to the insurgent threat shortly after the invasion.[16])It also complicates the relationship, not only between the civilian and military aspects of counter-insurgency, but also with the efforts of other coalition members. Although American undoubtedly provided the most military support and the leadership behind the coalition, its failure to impose effective coordination between the coalition members has led to wide disparities of success and failure in Iraq e.g. Britain's areas of control in Basrah, An Nasiriyah and Al Amarah[17] .

Another issue, which although not strictly a colonial lesson was the use of intelligence, which of course was a fundamental aspect in Northern Ireland and in many colonial cases, which was not applied so vigorously in Iraq.[18] Hoffman points to the acquisition of actionable intelligence as essential to the effective application of force and is summed up by Kitson's quote of "If it is accepted that the problem of defeating the enemy consists very largely of finding him, it is easy to recognize the paramount important of good information" and Julian Paget who argued "that every effort must be made to know the Enemy before the insurgency begins". In Iraq this was this a key component in the failure to anticipate the escalating insurgency until it was a major problem, not only were there an insufficient number of case officers but the top priority on the search for Weapons of Mass Destruction meant there was a neglect for intelligence gathering on the insurgents. In fact it was not until late November when Guerrilla attacks rose to 40 per cent a day that intelligence officers were reassigned.[19] The failings in intelligence also had important implications on the effectiveness of regular troops whom were ill prepared for an insurgency in the midst of a conventional war.[20] Another important application of intelligence as shown in many British colonial lessons was the need for correct and detailed intelligence on potential members and leaders of the insurgency, in fact for the very reason of faulty intelligence mass arrests were stopped in Kenya by 1952 to save numbers of innocent persons being caught up in the net, except in exceptional circumstances[21]

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Lessons learnt

In fact one of the major lessons which can be drawn from British Colonial experience is the adaptation of the invasion force to the rising insurgency and the learning experience. But again this was not initiated until insurgency became a major concern, rather than one of the influencing factors in the first place for conducting the invasion. Likewise even this can hardly be considered a unique phenomenon as a result of colonial experiences but instead a willingness to learn from one's mistakes. John Nagl put this concisely by saying "The organizational culture of the British Army allowed it to learn how to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign during the Malayan Emergency"[22] which rather suggests that the innovation used during the Malayan example was the greatest lesson learnt rather than tactics, strategies and approaches used in the insurgency operation. This makes sense given the unique and individual context which can differ significantly between insurgency movements; again Nagl highlights the vast differences between Vietnam and Malaya. Stockwell understood this when he argued about the inherent dangers in theorizing and in transferring techniques and models from one situation to another[23].Similarly the US counterinsurgency doctrine-which I will mention in greater detail later also supports this point. Nevertheless an interesting and somewhat surprising argument by Hoffman is that maybe the handling of the Iraqi situation is not completely dissimilar from that of British colonial examples. Interestingly, despite the ability to formulate a series of responses which the British eventually did "they still repeated the same errors in judgement and organisation at the onset of each new insurgency".[24] However maybe this is not as unexpected as initially thought, after all David Galula pointed to the initial weaknesses of the counterinsurgent forming part of the pre requisite for a successful insurgency and if British lessons of counterinsurgency stopped a developing insurgent movement, in theory, there wouldn't be an insurgency.[25] A RAND report which examined Britain's counterinsurgency experiences also ended up at the same conclusion, arguing that the "Late recognition of an insurgency,…is costly, insofar as the insurgents have the opportunity to gain a foothold before facing any organized opposition"[26]

It is nevertheless important to understand the advances made in counterinsurgency in Iraq since the end of the invasion. It is also important to appreciate the influence of British counter-insurgency methods adapted from colonial contexts and campaigns. Even critics of the handling of the post-invasion reconstruction and failure of anticipating the insurgency, have widely agreed with the "considerable progress in the political or "hearts and minds" dimension of counterinsurgency which has been made in Iraq in recent months,"[27] a concept first used in Malaya by the British forces.[28] Likewise the influence of British lessons on counterinsurgency are becoming more readily accepted as the U.S. Marine Corps demonstrated when it consulted British officers about their experiences in Belfast before being deployed, these same lessons according to Hoffman have also figured heavily in the planning for post-war stability operations in Iraq.[29] Also in his article Hoffman suggested Marine officers are also aiming for more restraint in their use of force and intend to limit their use of heavy weapons as a last resort.[30]

However perhaps the biggest development in terms of United States counterinsurgency thinking, has been the creation of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual.[31] The manual which has been part of the effort to revise the training programmes in the United States Army and Marine Corps services which was sponsored by Petraeus , the commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) between 2007-2008[32]. Other developments include the configuration of the exercise programmes in Twenty nine Palms and the US Army's National Training Centre at Fort Irwin from testing units against Soviet-Style conventional opponents to testing against insurgents.[33] There are also efforts to institute lessons learnt since mid-2004, such as the establishment of the counterinsurgency academy at Taji, where efforts were made to filter strategic visions down the chain of command.[34] Furthermore according to Malkasian, additional lessons were incorporated from the Counterinsurgency Field Manual more effectively by Petraeus by 2007; such as the protection of the people within Baghdad that had not been carried out previously. Serious effort has been made by the United States to adapt to issues in Iraq, especially with regards to the subordination of military offensives to political priorities.[35]

Nevertheless despite the progress in Iraq, the situation is far from successful as some of the British colonial experiences-mainly in terms of the gradual reduction in the military troop numbers and the dwindling number of both Coalition troops and partners. [36] Likewise the failure to create an effective Iraqi Army which could deal with the insurgency has still failed to materialise, a crucial lynchpin to the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq.[37] Furthermore with the election of Barack Obama has come the increase in attention to the Afghanistan conflict[38], which has

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downplayed the effort in Iraq. Furthermore increased troop levels have been perceived as politically unfeasible even before the end of the Bush Administration, as demonstrated with the 'unpopularity surge' in 2007[39]. In terms of policy objectives or the two pillars of US strategy-democratisation and the building of a national and integrated Iraqi Army, these have yet to materialise. Even today they have not met according to Malkasian the sectarian realities of Iraq.[40] The political legitimacy inside Iraq and internationally has also been somewhat compromised by the perceived legitimacy of the Iraq war to begin with. This has led much of the support for the insurgents to overthrow the 'invading force', again the slow formation of the Iraqi National Army has further hampered this legitimacy since Coalition forces still continue to be perceived as occupiers.[41]

Other problems have included the focus on mechanised sweeps and air assaults by some commanders. This further hampers stability operations, where major efforts are made to reconstruct the host nation and which are undermined by the further destruction caused. This type of operation is according to Gregg 'the most difficult stage in long-term success in COIN because they are the point when the military and civilian responsibilities meet and the military should, in theory, hand over most of the non-military capacity-building responsibilities to civilians". This is an area which will need further improvement in Iraq, if the counterinsurgency is to be successful in the long term. [42] Furthermore it is an important necessity of successful counterinsurgency that the military is able to demonstrate its subservience to its own needs and to that of its political goals, as is demonstrated in the common coined phrase of counterinsurgency – needing 80 per cent political and 20 military solutions.[43] Another problem has been the use of some battalions operating out of US bases rather than actively patrolling urban areas which have led to disengagement with the population.[44] An important part of counterinsurgency operations which cannot be neglected[45].

However perhaps the biggest deciding factor for successful counterinsurgency facing the Coalition and the United States in particular is that of political will. Bush after the invasion saw that the United States faced a "massive and long-term undertaking" in Iraq. Salehyan states in his work that the United States and its allies will at least be challenged by the insurgency in Iraq for a minimum of a decade.[46] Furthermore public opinion is somewhat unclear about the levels of troops which can be committed in the future, which would have major consequences in Iraq[47]. This is somewhat different to many of the colonial examples, where despite the initial short term goal; the British presence was able to be sustained over a significant period without much negative public opinion, such as in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Borneo and Aden[48].

Conclusion

To conclude it can be easy to argue that there were more differences than comparisons between that of British colonial experience and that of Iraq. However this somewhat redundant since the goal of the invasion could not be applied, due in part to the difference of the conventional warfare context of the Iraq war, the aim of the war, the unique context of Iraq, the composition of the Coalition forces etc. Given the success of the initial invasion by the Coalition and the lack of ways colonial lessons could be applied to the situation the Coalition only failure was not anticipating the insurgency following the aftermath of the Iraq War. However as explained this is maybe too harsh a view, since most colonial insurgencies were the cause of British lack of foresight into anticipating an insurgency.

Since the occupation of Iraq, there have been significant improvements in the counterinsurgency strategy used primarily by the Americans. These have incorporated lessons learnt in British colonial experiences, such as the minimisation of the use of force. Much of this was not unique to previous colonial experiences but which were highlighted because of these cases e.g. role of tactical innovation and the concept of 'hearts and minds' from Malaya. Nevertheless despite these improvements, there are still problems which need to be overcome such as increasing the effectiveness of the Iraqi army and educating the US officer corp in the values of counterinsurgency, before the Iraq case can be judged as successful counterinsurgency.

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