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The British Army, 'Understanding', and the Illusion of Control

Key Words: Understanding, Doctrine, British Army, Iraq

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‘Understanding’ and the Illusion of Control

Over the past decade, Western military doctrines concerned with matters of irregular warfare and counterinsurgency have emphasised the requirement for properly ‘understanding’ the social, political and cultural environments in which those militaries may operate; the so-called human and socio-political ‘terrain’. This has led to a number of advancements and initiatives designed to facilitate the way that militaries may enhance that understanding. One of those initiatives has been the emergence from within the British military of a doctrine – JDP 04 ‘Understanding’ - designed for that purpose. Using that doctrine and other subsequent publications as a template, this article will examine the utility of ‘understanding’ for those commanders seeking to match military activities with political ends. It proposes that while any advances in understanding the operating environment are to be applauded, the ‘understanding’ of greatest importance is that relating to the feasibility of the strategic objectives at hand. If those objectives lack inherent feasibility, then the development of subordinate forms of understanding, particularly in relation to the socio-political dynamics of target societies, will likely only serve to slow the process of failure.

Introduction

‘Understanding’ is a word, and a concept, that has risen to prominence over the past few years in Western military thought.¹ The faltering steps taken by US and British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq allied to a prediction by those respective militaries, and others, of the fundamentally population-centric nature of future conflicts has led to an emphasis upon properly understanding the political, social and cultural environments that their armed forces might be projected into.² In particular the ethnographic composition of the countries or regions concerned; the structures and alignments of political and social elites; and the loyalties, needs and wants of local populations - the socio-political ‘terrain’, in other words. The recent emergence of corresponding doctrines, structures and educational programmes designed to engender and encourage the developments of such forms of understanding suggests that the intellectual thrust to properly comprehend the social and political dynamics of the ground-level environment will become an increasingly important aspect of modern military thought.

The extent to which this is the case is evident in the respective approaches taken by Western militaries over recent years. The US responded to the early difficulties encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan by formulating the anthropological Human Terrain System (HTS), recasting its entire counterinsurgency doctrine with a heavy emphasis upon cultural intelligence, creating new institutions such as a cultural ‘centre of excellence’ and, ‘[R]evamping pre-deployment training to

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¹ See Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (Hurst, London, 2009)

² Current British doctrine states, ‘We can assume that many future military operations will be amongst the people and under the glare of the global media’. See Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 3-11 *Decision-Making and Problem Solving: Human and Organisational Factors* (Ministry of Defence, 2013) Ch1, 1.

include instruction on the local population and its customs and practices'.³ Australian Army doctrine now speaks of 'complex human terrain', 'cultural competence and capability' and advocates the requirement for 'sophisticated societal, cultural and linguistic understanding', while its French counterpart recently advocated the need for, '[A] sense of where we operate...an understanding of the human environment and what the expectations of local leaders and populations are'.⁴ But the British military has pushed forward even further. The emergence in 2010 of Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 0-4 '*Understanding*' was significant insofar that it represented the first commissioning of a manual specifically devoted to the subject of 'understanding' in and of itself.⁵ The trend in this respect has been further bolstered by the publication in late 2015 of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) *Strategic Trends Programme: Future Operating Environment 2035* (FOE 35) advisory paper.⁶ In its attempts to forecast the likely character of conflict over the next two decades and beyond, this latest publication's stated aim is to inform future Defence 'capability development'. And central to that ambition is the primary importance of 'understanding' in enabling a more informed and effective employment of Britain's armed forces.⁷ Overseas engagement, further education and cultural immersion are just some of the ways in which this understanding will be encouraged.

But while doctrine publications such as JDP 04 and institutional think-pieces such as FOE 35 extol the virtues of understanding, knowledge, judgement, insight and decision-making in the military context, other non-formal publications provide additional food for thought in this respect. 2010, the year that JDP 04 first appeared, also saw the appearance of a largely unnoticed piece titled '*Talking to the Enemy: Informal Conflict Termination in Iraq*' in the pages of the in-house journal *British Army Review*.⁸ Authored by Iraq veteran Brigadier Sandie Storrie, the article dealt with the subject of the challenges faced by US and British forces in pacifying their respective areas of

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³ See Montgomery McFate and Janice H. Laurence (eds) *Social Science Goes to War* (London, Hurst and Co, 2015) ix-xi. The US doctrine referred to was FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency (2006), now revised as FM 3-24 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies (2014). The HTT program no longer exists, but as the authors' state in their introduction, any form of irregular warfare in the future will likely prioritize the understanding of human terrain.

⁴ For Australian doctrine see *Future Land warfare report 2014*, Directorate of Future Land Warfare, Australian Army, <http://apo.org.au/node/40925>. See also *Future Land Warfare Report 2014: Adaptive Campaigning: Army's Future Land Operating Concept*, 19, 37 <http://www.army.gov.au/Our-future/Publications/Key-Publications/Adaptive-Campaigning>. For its French counterpart see FT 01-ENG '*Winning the Battle, Building Peace: Land Forces in Present and Future Conflicts*' (Armée de Terre, 2007) 29.

⁵ JDP (Joint Doctrine Publication) 04. (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Shrivenham, Dec 2010). Presently undergoing revision prior to re-publication.

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/484861/20151203-DCDC_FOE_35.pdf. Published December 2015.

⁷ Ibid. Indeed, FOE 35 states that the primary implication of the proposed Future Operating Environment 2035 is, '[T]he increased and vital importance of the 'understand' function' pp. 29-20

⁸ Storrie, A. J. S. 'Talking to the "Enemy": Informal Conflict Termination in Iraq'. *British Army Review* No 148 (Winter 2009/10), 13-27.

operations in Iraq 2007-8. While doctrine examines the intellectual basis and theoretical benefits of ‘understanding’, Storrie portrayed the glaring difficulties and counterintuitive consequences of actually trying to ‘operationalize’ that understanding on the ground. Between them, military theory in the form of JDP-04 and FOE 35 and operational praxis in the form of Storrie’s experience of southern Iraq intersect neatly upon the subject that this article seeks to explore further, namely the value and utility of ‘understanding’ in contributing to the success of military operations.⁹ For it is clear that the theoretical benefits of ‘understanding’ in its many forms in the context of the use of military force are exposed in reality as being highly fragile, with the potential to expose both practitioners and their political masters to unappetizing and unforeseen consequences.

On that basis this article confronts a number of issues that emerge in connection to the subject of ‘understanding’ in conflict scenarios, not only in terms of acquisition but also its instrumentalization, and focuses upon a series of key themes in the theoretical and practical aspects of the debate. The first part of the article examines some of the motivating factors behind the push for understanding among western militaries and the British Army in particular. But it goes on to identify the unhelpfully theoretical and highly reductive nature of a doctrinal approach to the subject and the limited ability of military education, particularly in the British context, to compensate. It then progresses to identifying practical hindrances to the cultivation and utilization of understanding. In particular it will examine the fragility of the concept as it travels through differing strategic, operational and tactical perspectives, the often problematic relationship between our understanding of target societies and the values that we as the West seek to promote therein, and the complexities involved when trying to employ that understanding in the context of the transformative change wrought by military operations. Finally, the article will focus upon the Anglo-US experience in Iraq 2006-2008 to illustrate precisely how a series of unintended consequences can result from these complicating factors, and some of the wider conclusions that emerge.

To be clear, this article does not dispute the notion that the acquisition of ‘understanding’ should remain a fundamental pursuit at all levels of war. Neither does it seek to discredit current doctrine. But the *need* for understanding is not the issue under debate. Rather, as this article illustrates, it is the inherently problematic translation of a theoretical good into a practical benefit that is of interest. The fact remains that both doctrine and habit present the acquisition or generation of knowledge and understanding as a uniformly positive process, i.e. as a fundamental component of success in military operations. Yet as this article will illustrate, ‘understanding’ generates actions and effects that are subject to precisely the same sort of unpredictable or

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⁹ The term ‘success’ in this context is taken to mean the ‘ideal’ use of military force for political effect i.e. the achievement of Basil Liddell-Hart’s ‘better peace’.

uncontrollable variables that are a fundamental consequence of the use of military force to achieve political objectives.

Why Understand?

Why seek to understand? A potentially ridiculous question except for the fact that, blithe quotations of Sun Tzu aside, the explicit drive for understanding in the context of military operations appears to be a markedly recent phenomenon. Rupert Smith's 2005 concept of modern war no longer being industrial in nature but of being instead a 'war amongst the people' lent initial impetus to this notion of a fundamental change in the paradigm of conflict, one that required the necessary adjustment in the way that militaries conceptualised the likely future battleground.¹⁰ And while the British doctrinal drive to understand the human dimensions of that battlefield has come to the fore relatively recently, the US military had, as stated, already moved to address shortcomings in that respect with the recruitment of anthropologist-staffed Human Terrain Teams to advise every Brigade, Division and Corps in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the aforementioned re-writing of its existing counterinsurgency doctrine to reflect a heavy emphasis upon socio-cultural knowledge and understanding.¹¹ As Montgomery McFate explains in *Social Science goes to War*, if the indigenous population is now the so-called 'centre of gravity' then this form of knowledge is perhaps the critical component of counterinsurgency and complex stabilisation operations.¹² With Western militaries now focusing upon such types of conflict as indicative of the future, and with past failures in mind, the motivations propelling the requirement for 'understanding' now and going forward are obvious.

Of course, the supposed newness of matters of culture and anthropology aligned to the use of military force is entirely ahistorical. Such intellectual concerns were fundamental to European imperial designs.¹³ And there were some truly sophisticated attitudes at play in certain quarters during the period of post-colonial Counterinsurgency too.¹⁴ But Imperial and post Second World War precedents notwithstanding, there is undoubtedly a recrudescence in modern military thought of this particular intellectual tradition. However there is a subtle difference between what McFate or

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¹⁰ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London, Allen Lane, 2005)

¹¹ Montgomery McFate and Janice H. Laurence, 'Unveiling the Human Terrain System' in McFate and Laurence (eds) *Social Science Goes to War*, 21.

¹² Ibid, 2

¹³ For more on Colonial era attitudes in this respect see Erik Linstrom, 'The Politics of Psychology in the British Empire 1898-1960' *Past and Present* no 215 (May 2012), 195-233, Toyin Falola and Mathew Heaton *The History of Nigeria*, (Cambridge, 1999), 70 -74, Stuart M. Persell 'Joseph Chailley-Bert and the Importance of the Union Coloniale Francaise' *Historical Journal* 17/1 March 1974, Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, 1996) and James Hevia, *Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire Building in Asia* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁴ See Kenneth Payne 'Social Psychology in Classic Counterinsurgency writing' *Defence Studies* 13/1 (2013), 80-98. For Vietnam, see Gerald C. Hickey *A Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock 2002).

certain colonial historians might refer to as ‘knowledge’, and what modern doctrine refers to as ‘understanding’. In the context of this article the former might be helpfully conceived as, ‘that which is known in a particular field or in total; and the facts and information thereof’.¹⁵ Indeed, facts and information are important. They were the stock in trade of the British frontier colonial officer, and the Human Terrain Teams (HTT’s) operating in Afghanistan a century later appear no different.¹⁶ But while the value of this sort of situational knowledge is not disputed in context, this article will illustrate that in doctrinal terms at least, ‘understanding’ is distinct from mere ‘knowledge’. It also observes that although the Anglo-US militaries in particular have chosen to emphasise the value of ‘understanding’, it begs the obvious question as to why, at the campaign level, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have to all intents and purposes been characterised by ignominious failure or unpromising quagmire.¹⁷ What exactly has the thrust for ‘understanding’ brought us?

Understanding, Doctrine and Education

‘Military mindsets seem to favour taking an idea or abstraction, turning it into very detailed doctrine and then requiring a dogmatic approach to utilizing it’¹⁸

Returning to the subject of British doctrine specifically, one obvious and entirely legitimate question is why wait until now to query an obscure manual that was first published over half a decade ago? The answer is twofold. Firstly there appears to be an increasing adherence in the British military, as indicated by the recent publication of FOE 35, to the notion of ‘understanding’ as being absolutely critical to the achievement of mission success. Secondly, both JDP-04 and FOE 35 are symptomatic of a problem that this article seeks to explore, namely the tendency to espouse the need for a capability without properly intellectualising the debate; something has become particularly apparent on this particular subject. But the fact that that the term has achieved sudden and accelerated prominence is unsurprising. The chastening experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, the evident failure of the Libyan intervention, and the byzantine complexity of the Syrian civil war have underpinned the notion of an exponentially more complex ‘future character of conflict’, and placed renewed emphasis upon the ability to properly comprehend the social, political and cultural landscape in

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¹⁵ www.oxforddictionaries.com

¹⁶ As one former HTT member stated, ‘Over six months I would get very tired of asking the same few things over and over again: “What tribe do you belong to? Is that part of such-and-such tribe? Is there a bigger tribe you are a part of? Is there a smaller sub-tribe below yours? How about below that one? Ted Callaghan, ‘An Anthropologist at War in Afghanistan’ in McFate and Laurence (eds) *Social Science Goes to War*, 105. The Frontier officer asked essentially the same questions. See Hevia, 114.

¹⁷ For the example of Libya, see Alan J. Kuperman, ‘A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO’s Libya Campaign’ *International Security* 38/1 (2013) 105-136

¹⁸ Steve Cornell, ‘The Operational: As Valid And As Dangerous As Any Other Abstraction’, *Military Operations*, Volume 3, Issue No. 2, (Winter 2016), 11-13.

which the country's armed forces operate.¹⁹ And because of its proximity to events on the ground, it is the Army which is most often to be heard exhorting the need to 'understand'. The irony being that it is not entirely evident that those making such utterances actually understand what they mean by the term 'understanding'. This statement is not meant to be patronising. It is simply a recognition that practitioners are trying to dovetail one of the most intellectually testing human concepts (understanding) with what may potentially be the most testing human activity (war and conflict), and two do not make comfortable bedfellows.

Importantly, both JDP 04 and FOE 35 see 'understanding' as existing not for the simple intellectual benefit of the individual or organisation, but as there to facilitate actions that lead to outcomes. In this context, understanding is instrumental. It is about providing the *insight* and *foresight* required for effective *decision-making* (author's italics).²⁰ It is the leveraging of varieties of information and knowledge on the part of those (military and non-military) concerned with planning and prosecuting military operations at a number of levels so as to afford the greatest chance of achieving the desired end state. By those terms, understanding societies or peoples is not simply about comprehension. It is also about the *accurate calculation of effect upon them*. This is an important distinction, for it is this calculation that that is the most difficult aspect of the equation to get right.²¹

The fundamental problem for any military doctrine that honours understanding is that it has to simultaneously honour uncertainty, ambiguity and dissent. And in the context of a collective and unified approach to matters, which is what doctrine ultimately seeks to encourage, these are unhelpful contradictions. Not that militaries are uncomfortable with the notion of uncertainty or ambiguity *per se*: Clausewitz's 'fog' and 'friction' are recognised as fundamental aspect of warfare and both are built in to any campaign plan. But where 'understanding' is concerned, both as a process and as a state of affairs, one is dealing with a phenomenon held by psychologists to be fundamentally individualistic, unique and personal. One person's understanding of a subject, a problem or an issue is not necessarily another person's understanding of the same. Yet for militaries, which operate by way of the chain of command, it has to be. The nature of military operations does not, as a rule, allow each and every individual within that chain the freedom to adhere to their own

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¹⁹ The Future Character of Conflict (FCOC) proposes that the future battle-space will be 'Complex, Cluttered, Congested, Connected and Constrained. DCDC Strategic Trends Program 'Future Character of Conflict' (Ministry of Defence 2010), 16. See also 'Building Stability Overseas Strategy'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-stability-overseas-strategy>

²⁰ See JDP 04, Chapter 2 'The Fundamentals of Understanding', 1.

²¹ Interestingly, US doctrine does not provides a definition of 'understanding' *per se*, although the term is used repeatedly throughout its flagship Joint Publication (JP) 01: Doctrine of the Armed forces of the United States, its Joint Operational Planning Doctrine, and its Counterinsurgency doctrine . Indeed, it is mentioned 181 times in the latter.

personal comprehension or insight. Although information, insight and knowledge may flow from bottom to top, resulting orders, instructions or directions flow in one direction only; top to bottom. In layman's terms, the commander's understanding is his subordinates' understanding, such a process acting as the unifying element in what would otherwise be an uncontrollable mass of competing ideas and actions. But what does this mean, for example, for the western military philosophy of Mission Command?²² Based upon the recognition that local commanders have a better understanding of the problems facing them than their distant superiors, and hence should be allowed latitude as to how they fulfil their objectives, it encourages the development of multiple understandings of a particular problem at different levels. That might be helpful in fighting a mobile battle against a conventional enemy force, but how does it apply to the complex realm of political, cultural and societal understanding, with multiple commanders operating in parallel and in sequence?

So it is acknowledged that the authors of JDP 04 *et al* have a hugely difficult task. The fundamental complexities of dissecting a concept as complex and layered as 'understanding' can be easily imagined. Incorporating the fruits of three millennia of intellectual enquiry into tens of pages of doctrine and making it both comprehensible and functional is no easy task. But acknowledging that, and without even considering some of the more basic epistemological queries, fundamental questions arise. If we talk about understanding, what should we be trying to understand, exactly? Why should we understand it? How should we understand it? What or who should we use to help us understand it? When should we understand it? To what extent, and to what ends? The doctrine therefore seeks to impose a degree of relative simplicity. It commences with Sun Tzu's classic maxim, 'Know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril'.²³ Yet even this seductively straightforward observation demands the response: how easy is it to know oneself, let alone the enemy? How does a white, middle class, middle aged US Marine, or a working class 19 year old British private soldier, understand and compensate for the influences, biases and institutional experiences that shape his or her perception of the world around them? And how can they 'know' the Iraqi, Libyan or Afghan that stands opposite them, those who have been subject to radically different shaping experiences? These issues require thinking about. Hilary Cornish and Claire Duncanson, for example, in their feminist analysis of British counterinsurgency methods, explored the subject through the prism of gender.²⁴ They argue that rather than examining shortcomings in the British campaign in Afghanistan through the usual perspectives of strategy,

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²² *Principles of Mission Command: Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) Operations* (December 2010) Chapter 6, 12.

²³ JDP 04, iii

²⁴ Cornish and Duncanson, 'A feminist Approach to British Counterinsurgency' in Paul Dixon (ed) *The British Approach to Counterinsurgency* (London, Palgrave, 2012), 147-172

politics or resources one should instead examine the role of gender in explaining its dynamics. If military males tend to exhibit a preference for certain behaviours, i.e. speed, aggression, forcefulness, bravery and dynamism, then their inherent understanding of issues and problems are shaped in a way that allows these qualities and behaviours to come to the fore. In other words Cornish and Duncanson propose that the simple fact of being a man exerts an inexorable influence upon the approaches taken to countering insurgency. But if such behaviours are absolutely intrinsic how does one recognise and account for them? How does one build that sort of self-understanding into a campaign plan?

One might argue that such overblown academic considerations are irrelevant, or at least peripheral, but where does one draw the line? Doctrine might ignore the complications of gender as a determinant of an institutional or organisational approach to counterinsurgency, yet it does place emphasis on *culture* in explaining how and why others make decisions. Others cite alternative theories such as ‘the wisdom of crowds’, ‘prospect theory’, ‘anchoring’ or ‘reflexivity’.²⁵ Australian doctrine even refers to understanding the ‘metabolism’ of urban environments.²⁶ Yet commentators such as Patrick Porter have provided persuasive counterpoints that the role of culture or obscure academic theories of understanding and decision-making are of limited or at least overstated relevance compared to framing the problem through the notion of rational strategizing.²⁷ If he is correct then by focussing on the enemy’s cultural perspectives to explain their thinking, for example, we may well be failing to grasp the proper motivations for their actions. But some would argue that whatever our ambitions in this respect, they will always be flawed. If our understanding is designed ultimately to be instrumental, as militaries seek, then as Daniel Kahneman and Philip Tetlock argue, the significance of human agency in positively influencing future events is often hugely overstated. Kahneman, in examining the ‘illusion of understanding’, proposes that a combination of luck and non-events often play such a substantial but ultimately unknowable role that outcomes which might appear to have been under our control were never so.²⁸ In addition Tetlock holds that the ability to predict and thus direct events depends not upon deep expertise or understanding. Indeed he argues that such qualities bestow little advantage upon practitioners. Success in that respect, he argues, will be dictated by the inherent *predictability* of a given situation. Given the inherent *unpredictability* of conflict scenarios, this would appear to question the utility of deep understanding when compared

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²⁵ See Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motivations will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict* (Essex, Military Studies Press, 2011), 65-69

²⁶ Australian Army: *Future Land Warfare Report* 2014, 9.

²⁷ See Porter, *Military Orientalism* passim. See also by the same author ‘Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War’ *Parameters*, 37/2, (2007), 45 - 58.

²⁸ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (London, Penguin, 2011), 199.

to techniques of logical problem solving.²⁹ Whether they are right or wrong, or whether Porter, Cornish and Duncanson *et al* have utterly overcomplicated their analysis of matters is to some extent beside the point. The fact is that the debate is a complex and on-going one, illustrative of the lack of consensus over what it is exactly that we should be seeking to understand, and how we should seek understand it.

An additional problem is that above the purely tactical level doctrine is tasked with reducing matters of tremendous complexity to a series of simple and comprehensible principles, observations or suggestions that are designed to be grasped by those possessed of a standard intellect.³⁰ But simple doesn't mean easy, or even feasible. It's simple enough, in the case of stabilisation operations for example, to define the concept of a cross-governmental approach, i.e. simultaneous lines of political, economic, military and diplomatic activity in-theatre that seek to deliver the same ends.³¹ Whether you are actually able to do any of that is anyone's guess. But neither is the drive for simplicity a bad thing, for the alternative is for doctrine to *fully* reveal the complexity of the subject it examines, which in the case of counterinsurgency, stabilisation and so-called hybrid warfare is potentially even more problematic than disguising it. Witness the Israeli theory of Systemic Operational Design (SOD) that emerged in the mid-1990's, authored by General Shimon Naveh and understood only by him, it would have appeared. In its determination to understand the (Arab) enemy and to provide appropriate conceptual approaches to defeating him, SOD forced its adherents to immerse themselves in the fields of psychology, systems analysis, and architectural (for the purpose of urban warfare), postcolonial and postmodernist theory.³² It was intellectually admirable but, as the 2006 war against Hezbollah revealed, practically incomprehensible.³³ Reflect complexity it may have done, but it was also functionally useless in defeating the enemy, a problem that should have been predicted when Naveh himself acknowledged that his doctrine was 'not easy to understand...not intended for ordinary mortals'.³⁴

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²⁹ See Kahneman, pp. 218-220. See also Philip E. Tetlock *Expert Political Judgement: How good is it? How can we know?* (Princeton, 2006).

³⁰ To clarify, this author considers themselves to possess a comparably standard intellect.

³¹ Stabilisation operations: A cross-governmental approach to rescuing those states entering, suffering, or recovering from, failure.

³² See Milan Vego, *The Case Against Systemic Operational Design* (Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington DC, 2009), 70-75. Although by 2006 Israel did not officially use SOD as doctrine, campaign planning methods were still heavily influenced by its language and ethos.

³³ 'Systemic Operational Design focuses upon the relationships between entities within a system to develop rationale for systemic behaviours that accounts for the logic of the system. This is accomplished through seven discourses, leading to a holistic design of an operation that will facilitate planning'. See *Systemic Operational Design: An Introduction* (US Army School for Advanced Military Studies, Ft Leavenworth, 2005).

³⁴ Vego, 73.

In some ways the British-centric JDP-04 and FOE 35 have a similarly difficult task. Namely that to be of any real use they require military commanders and their subordinates to apply complex theories of knowledge to matters of anthropology, sociology, psychology, culture and any number of aspects of human behaviour in a way that best serves the achievement of highly fluid political objectives through military means. More specific doctrines such as *JDN 3-11 Decision Making and Problem Solving: Human and Organisational Factors* seek to help by exploring the highly complex themes of cognition and psychology, but despite best intentions at less than 50 pages it comprises more a lightweight pop-psychology investigation of these subjects.³⁵ Even then, if such materials *are* to play an appropriate role in the process they must be consulted. Yet not only is there still much truth in Rommel's aphorism that the British write some of the best doctrine in the world but fail to read it, the problem is compounded by a perceptible strand of anti-intellectualism among those it is targeted at. Although the three services and the Ministry of Defence are able to draw upon significant intellectual horsepower from among their number, in general this author notes that the British military prefers on the whole to inculcate in its people those sorts of behaviours and preferences that win the physical battle.³⁶ Collective understanding, collective action, and speed of decision making are the primary qualities sought. And in order to forge an effective conceptual 'toolkit' to refine these behaviours and preferences, there is a strong instructional focus upon common adherence to process.³⁷ What there is not is an ingrained culture of independent thought.³⁸ Ultimately, there still remains a worrying mistrust of proper intellectualisation and academic enquiry.³⁹

The cause of the above is partly cultural and partly a consequence of the technical demands of the profession combined with the tempo of operational, training, command or staff appointments, all of which leaves precious little time for study. Even lengthy periods of education, most notably the UK Defence Academy's year long, postgraduate level Advanced Command Staff Course (ACSC) require the students to squeeze their academic studies into the narrow gaps left by

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³⁵ JDN 3-11 Ministry of Defence. (January 2013). It also uses potentially questionable case studies, specifically the Stanford Prison Experiment, to support its conclusions. See Section 3 (Groups and Teams Working Together), 4.

³⁶ This author has over a decade's experience teaching senior British and international military officers.

³⁷ The author acknowledges, of course, that in matters of staff work certain taught processes are vitally important.

³⁸ As a senior officer in charge of training and development in the British Army recently observed, 'There is little or no culture of publication in the UK military, hence no equivalent of the intense debate found...in the US military'. See Paul Newton, 'Adapt or Fail: The Challenge for the Armed Forces after Blair's Wars' in Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Huw Strachan *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, 319

³⁹ See Andrew Mackay 'Behavioural Conflict: From General to Strategic Corporal' in, *Britain's Generals in Blair's Wars* (Ashgate, Farnham 2013) 249-265. See also Newton, 297-327.

intensive staff training, leaving little time to grapple with obscure doctrine and academic theories.⁴⁰ It may also, in a broader sense, reflect a cultural preference for the sort of instinctive, practically informed intelligence advocated by Clausewitz rather than that based on theoretical book-learning. But then one still has to read Clausewitz to understand why he favours the former over the latter.⁴¹

One can immediately sense the problems at hand. If 'understanding' is to be achieved then beyond reminding practitioners that it is important it is unlikely that formal military education or doctrine can play any significant role in encouraging the process. The former is compromised by an inherent culture of instruction and by the limited amount of time available to properly explore complex concepts, while the latter can never really satisfy the twin requirements of being easy enough to comprehend while accurately reflecting the proper complexity of the subject matter it deals with. In addition, very few within the military have the time or the inclination to read it, and if the subject matter is one that theoretically affects cross-government activity, then it has to be acknowledged that if military officers are unlikely to be reading their own doctrine then it is even less likely that their counterparts across Government are doing so.

The alternative of course is for individual commanders to take the lead in equipping themselves and their subordinates with the intellectual armoury required for the purpose of 'understanding'. An example of this can be found in the actions of the British Army's 52 Brigade prior to their deployment to Helmand in 2007-8. Under the leadership of Brigadier Andrew Mackay, the unit's command group undertook concerted prior engagement with a variety of seemingly outlandish academic texts and theories relating to the subjects of understanding and influence. This was held by Mackay to be a fundamental component of the Brigade's subsequent success on operations.⁴² The problems with this approach are not difficult to identify however. Firstly, when trying to measure the impact of military activities upon a particular situation, how does one really distinguish between association, causation, and effect? How can one be sure that one's actions are definitely responsible for changes in the enemy's behaviours, and what exactly are the metrics for measurement in this respect? Secondly, unless the approach to learning is uniform then each successive Brigade (as an example of the most likely size of self-contained force on operations) will arrive in theatre with utterly differing degrees of intellectual preparation and may therefore pursue

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⁴⁰ Readers of JDP 04 are instructed to also consult NATO's AJP (Allied Joint Publication)-2 (Joint Intelligence, Counter Intelligence and Security Doctrine), JDP's 01 (Campaigning), 2-00 (Understanding and Intelligence in Support of Joint Operations), 3-00 (Campaign Execution), 3-40 (Security and Stabilisation: the Military Contribution), 5-00 (Campaign Planning), and 6-00 (Communications and Information Systems Support to Joint Operations) and JDN 3-11 (Decision-Making and Problem Solving: Human and Organisational Factors).

⁴¹ For a deeper examination of the British Army's intellectual traditions see David French *Raising Churchill's Army* (Oxford, 2001) and *Army, Empire and Cold War: The British Army and Military Policy 1945-71* (Oxford 2012).

⁴² One characterized by comparatively non-kinetic approach and culminating in the retaking of the Taliban stronghold of Musa Qala. See Mackay 'Behavioural Conflict', 249-265

radically different approaches, as indeed happened in Afghanistan. Lastly, sceptics might point out that 52 Brigade's less 'kinetic' and more 'political' approach on operations could have been replicated instinctively by any number of alternative commanders, should they have so chosen. That they did not asks questions not so much of their levels of understanding but of the qualities and attributes that soldiers and their commanders might seek to be judged by, particularly by their peers.⁴³

Strategic, operational and tactical understanding

Turning now from the theoretical to the practical aspects of the debate, one has to acknowledge that for the military its quest for understanding must commence not on the ground but in relation to those who choose military action as a viable policy option for the advancement of national interests. But while the subject of the political-military relationship and its role in determining the ends and means underpinning the use of military force is the preserve of a separate study, there are certain aspects of the subject worth considering in respect to this debate, particularly in application to the peculiarities of the British civil-military relationship over the past decade and a half.

One of the primary tasks of any nation's political-military interface - if it is functioning in the ideal sense - is to allow military commanders to understand and translate political strategic demands into operational realities.⁴⁴ This begins with the nation's political leadership choosing to use military force, progresses to the most senior levels of military command accurately understanding the political objectives and aspirations sought by the projected use of that force, all the way down to operational and tactical commanders 'on the ground' working to that end. Each step in the ladder feeds off the 'understanding' provided by the rungs above. Such an arrangement promotes the notion of a seamless transmission of political purpose from the national leadership downward through the military chain of command, and in return permitting the upward flow of military advice so as to help inform the political decision making process.

This political-military interface is vital, but under any system of governance there are a number of potential weaknesses. With respect to the downward flow of understanding, political language, behaviour and aspirations may be so vague that military commanders might struggle to understand the Government's perceived 'end' and how military force should deliver it. That problem can become exacerbated by the potential for military commanders to conduct the military planning process in isolation from broader political considerations, a potential dislocation of Clausewitzian

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⁴³ Leo Docherty, 'Harry's War: The Ugly Truth' *The Independent on Sunday* 2nd March 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/harrys-war-the-ugly-truth-790316.html>

⁴⁴ See Jonathan Bailey 'The Political Context: Why We Went to War and the Mismatch of Ends, Ways and Means' in *Britain's Generals in Blair's Wars*, 5-27

ideals.⁴⁵ Alternatively, the process of understanding and then translating political direction into action may lead to military commanders at various level falling prey to any number of damaging influences; bias, opportunism, flawed interpretation of their instructions, the pressures of peer judgement, their own professional career agendas, to name but a few. Or perhaps the modern military commander, acting within the framework of an alliance, will be unable to simultaneously understand and reconcile the interests of their own government, that of their allies', and potentially a host nation government too (not to mention the indigenous population). As one practitioner pointed out, it is almost inevitable that these multiple interests will not coincide.⁴⁶

But there are also problems with the *upward* flow of understanding. In the worst case scenario it may not even happen due to political leaders simply choosing to marginalise or even, *in extremis*, ignore military advice.⁴⁷ Alternatively, military advisors may choose to 'positively' distort politicians' notions of what is possible in military terms, an observation that may fall flat in application to other militaries but one that has certainly been levelled at the British Army.⁴⁸ The latter's ambition for prominent roles in given situations, notably Helmand 2006-9, has led to accusations that senior military personnel sought to disguise the true 'art of the possible' or at least refrained from trying to disabuse their political masters of the wisdom of their grand designs.⁴⁹ Not only did this cause politicians to misunderstand the extent to which a limited military solution was a suitable way of addressing the problems faced, so leading them onward to unwise policy decisions, but it also detrimentally affected the ability of those military commanders to then deliver upon their promises. In other words, the military can become complicit in generating a corrupt form of

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⁴⁵ See Michael Brennan and Justin Kelly, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy* Strategic Studies Institute, (SSI, 2009). The authors identify the 'Operational' level of war as an artificial construct belonging to the military which risks separating political leaders from the planning and prosecution of military campaigns. Alternatively, an analysis of the US context prior to the invasion of Iraq blames inherent 'cognitive constraints' on the part of political leaders which, by their unwillingness to devote attention to the detail of post-war planning, impacted the ability of military commanders to provide appropriate advice and thus helped create the conditions for an insurgency to prosper. See A. Rapport, 'The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders' assessments of "Postwar" Iraq, *International Security* 37/3 (MIT Press, 2012/13) 133-171.

⁴⁶ Bill Rollo, 'Campaigning and Generalship: Iraq 2008' in *Britain's Generals in Blair's Wars*, 183

⁴⁷ Recent revelations have identified Prime Minister Tony Blair's conduct in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq as a stark example of such behaviour. See Tom Bower, 'Deceit, Narcissism and Chaos from the Charmer that Trashed Britain' *Sunday Times, Review*, 6 March 2016.

⁴⁸ Deborah Haynes, 'They Went into Helmand with Eyes Shut and Fingers Crossed' *The Times* June 10th 2010. See also Stephen Grey, 'Helmand: Anatomy of a Disaster' *Foreign Policy* June 15 2010

⁴⁹ A notable exception to this was Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, who as Chief of the Defence Staff at the time of the lead up to the Iraq War of 2003 sought to dissuade Prime Minister Tony Blair of the wisdom of military involvement in Iraq, specifically the intention to pursue regime change. His tenure ended abruptly, at the conclusion of the invasion. See Bower, 'Deceit...'

understanding in the first place, one that then plays out over time to their own detriment; another accusation that has been levelled at the British army.⁵⁰

The point to be made (emphatically) here however is *not* that militaries, and the British military in particular, are inherently corrupt in the way that they choose to understand political direction or indeed in the way that they might seek to influence their political masters. Simply that the military-political interface is inherently *corruptible* due to inherent flaws that are prone to exposure in times of uncertainty, confusion or institutional stress. Ultimately, it is all part of the friction that one can expect in the strategic direction of war. But it does illustrate that at the highest levels, the two-way process of understanding enjoyed between political leaders and their military commanders can be a fragile commodity. Particularly if, in the British case, senior personnel are not only hardwired to adopt an institutional can-do attitude but are also under pressure to advertise their own capabilities, as well as the capabilities and relevance of the forces under their command.⁵¹

On the ground itself however *all* militaries are affected by one particular aspect of the politico-military relationship, notably the uneven relationship between tactical and operational perspectives and the wider preoccupations of those with their hands on the levers of national strategy. The primacy of the latter often creates a scenario whereby understanding at ground level in particular can become highly developed but essentially irrelevant because it offends other much more important considerations. In retrospect, one sees that British forces in southern Iraq 2003-11 were placed in an invidious position. The twin demands of the Anglo-US security alliance post 9-11 on the one hand, and an unsupportive and disillusioned domestic electorate on the other meant that while the British Government was interested in many things to do with Iraq, what was actually happening on the ground in Basra was not necessarily one of them.⁵² Ergo ‘understanding’ at the tactical and operational levels in southern Iraq only mattered if it coincided with the interests of a distracted and distant political leadership in London.⁵³

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⁵⁰ For accusations that the British Army’s keenness to become involved in Iraq backfired by damaging its relations with US commanders, see Patrick Porter ‘Last Charge of the Knights: Iraq, Afghanistan and the Special Relationship’ *International Affairs* 86/2 (Mar., 2010), 355-375

⁵¹ Desmond Bowen, a former MOD policy director, states that the despatch of an entire Land division to Iraq in 2003 was primarily a military motivation. “It would be wrong to believe that the political demand was for that size of force”, he observed. See Bowen, ‘The Political-Military Relationship on Operations’ in *Britain’s Generals in Blair’s Wars*, 277

⁵² The noted counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen states that in 2006, in conversation with a senior British official, the latter stated that British support of US forces in Iraq simply a matter of alliance politics. See *The Accidental Guerrilla*, (Hurst and Co, London 2008) 280.

⁵³ See Justin Maciejewski, ‘Best Effort’: Operation Sinbad and the Iraq Campaign’ in *Britain’s Generals in Blair’s Wars*, 157-175

Understanding and ‘Values’

Both Britain and the United States’ 2015 National Security Strategies speaks of a ‘values’ (western, liberal) driven foreign policy.⁵⁴ Indeed, chapter one of the British version is titled ‘Our Visions, Values and Approach’, and the word ‘values’ appears a further 32 times in the document.⁵⁵ The United States’ places a similar emphasis upon such sentiments.⁵⁶ The argument is a well-worn one; governments and societies that abide by such values tend to be peaceful, have happier and more productive populations, and are less disruptive members of the international community.⁵⁷ Thus the spread of these values encourages peace and stability and advances basic human interests. Of course, while the theory is admirable the practice is rather more troublesome. Target regimes are often highly resistant to soft power while the inherent contradiction of *imposing* the values of freedom and democracy at the point of a gun isn’t difficult to identify. But the politics of liberal intervention to one side, significant problems arise when forces deployed by the liberal West engage with a host nation’s own societal values. Afghanistan 2001 onward has illustrated the problem well. In order to generate continued domestic support for the intervention, much was made by the US and Britain of their enlightened intentions; a strong, central and democratically elected Afghan government, the emancipation of women, the elimination of corruption, the destruction of the opium industry and the overall enhancement of life prospects that would render the Taliban an irrelevance. Unfortunately, Coalition forces came to understand that what worked best in most cases was a weak and almost irrelevant central government supplemented by strong (read ‘violent’) local actors; the perpetuation of conservative cultural values that continued to repress women; the permanence of corruption as a fundamental component of local patron and kin systems; the value of continued opium cultivation as a way of avoiding provocation; and a general adherence to a way of life that was essentially medieval and entirely counter to the values that western democracies hold dear. Afghanistan thus became a place where it was understood that a corrupt and murderous paedophile might in fact be the most suitable appointment as local chief of police, where the continued cultivation of drugs was politically desirable, and where Western Governments speaking the mantra of women’s rights sought to maintain the authority of an Afghan Government that had chosen to legalise rape.⁵⁸ All of which was, unfortunately, the only logical way of ensuring even a modicum of success. But it was also evidently counter to the justifications given for the continuation

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⁵⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>

⁵⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁶ https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf. The word ‘Values’ appears 28 times

⁵⁷ Some might legitimately dispute this rather rosy interpretation of the way in which the ‘West’ sees itself.

⁵⁸ ‘Hamid Karzai provokes international outrage over ‘legal rape’ law’, Daily Telegraph, 3Apr. 2009. See also ‘US Soldiers told to ignore sexual abuse of boys by Afghan Allies’, New York Times, 20 Sep., 2015

of the campaign, which meant that a western public (and domestic political opponents) soon grew weary of the evident contradictions emerging in front of their eyes and support for the campaign rapidly dwindled. In this way the Afghanistan intervention illustrated two pertinent points. That values are, in the end, a value judgement in themselves, and that the understanding generated at ground level may not always be positive in its identifications and recommendations. While perhaps ensuring that things actually function, it can ultimately have a highly corrosive effect on the public legitimacy of one's strategic designs.

The Transformative Nature of Military Operations

Expeditionary military operations are often the crude equivalent of the 'observer' effect found in the physical sciences; the phenomenon whereby the measurement of certain systems cannot be achieved without inherently affecting those systems. In a comparable way, armed intervention and/or regime change can destroy existing systems and facilitate the emergence of new and unknown ones in their place, rendering any pre-existing knowledge irrelevant. The application of Western military force in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, for example, shattered political structures, completely re-ordered certain social hierarchies and delivered highly unpredictable criminal and political elements into the equation, elements whose dynamics were and are often subject to constant and confusing change. This creates an automatic intelligence/information gap that requires the time consuming accumulation of fresh knowledge. So time consuming in fact that the subsequent period of uncertainty and ambiguity may be measured in years. 'Understanding' in this context renders the task of tailoring initial efforts on the ground to deliver appropriate political effect all the more difficult, as the 'ends' of any 'ends-ways-means' dynamic soon become a constantly moving target on account of having to cater for the emergence of highly unpredictable actors with any variety of political objectives of their own.

History provides a telling example. Traditional western understanding of the Afghan revolt of 1841 is based upon a long-established narrative that frames the event as a xenophobic objection to the British occupation of Kabul. It explains that insurgent leaders and followers instinctively disputed British imperialism and responded by way of armed resistance.⁵⁹ In fact objections to the British presence had their roots in complex economic and political developments that followed the occupation. The attempted formation of a national Afghan army and the subsequent destruction of the traditional patron-client relationship between warlords and their followers was compounded by an inflationary bubble centred upon Kabul that was driven by the presence of a British garrison

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⁵⁹ For common adherence to this trope, see Jules Wilson *On Afghanistan's Plains: the Story of Britain's Afghan Wars* (IB Tauris, London 2012)

there. The subsequent enrichment of certain segments of the merchant community at the expense of traditional wealth-holders combined with the cessation of subsidies to certain important personages resulted in the degradation of established social orders. These were all hugely powerful stimuli for revolt. In other words the insurgency was less an instinctive anti-imperial spasm than a natural consequence of the British military intervention altering the fabric of traditional Afghan society.⁶⁰ The invasion of Iraq and the toppling of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 followed similar narratives. The insurgencies that followed both were not simply a response to the presence or actions of Western forces *per se*. They were as much a response to the dismantling of structures and social orders that had provided the sort of rough stability that underpinned those respective regimes; regimes that may have been repellent, but which were comprehensible in form and function. In both instances military action by western forces removed that which was repellent but it also removed that which was previously known, and comprehensible. In the place of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi emerged a vicious, swirling, directionless mass of competing ethnic groupings, tribes, sects, gangs, militias, warlords, terrorists and foreign elements, each with their own peculiar local, regional, national and transnational allegiances, alliances, economic interests and political aspirations. Western forces suddenly transformed the known into the unknown and, in certain instances, the unknowable. This has obvious implications for those who believe that pre-knowledge of such environments will suffice.⁶¹

Iraq 2003-9: Understanding and the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Although the NATO intervention in Libya 2011 and the on-going Syrian crisis both raise hugely pertinent questions on the subject of understanding, particularly the latter and the way in which a surfeit of 'understanding' can actually paralyse policymakers, the Coalition experience in Southern Iraq 2003-2009 encapsulates many of the complexities involved in trying to actually 'operationalise' understanding in conflict scenarios and provides necessary hindsight to judge how matters have evolved. If the initial stages (2003-05) of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Telic were marked by a fundamental lack of understanding of the political and social milieu of central and southern Iraq on the part of US and British forces respectively, this would simply typify the opening stages of any comparable counterinsurgency campaign. More interesting questions arise from the point in 2006 when respective commands were able to forge a much more sophisticated and insightful

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⁶⁰ For an excellent analysis of the causes of the Kabul Rebellion see Malcolm Yapp 'Disturbances in Eastern Afghanistan 1839-42' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25/3 (1962) 499-523.

⁶¹ In particular the British Army's 'Adaptive Force', in which its constituent Brigades seek to assume regional specialisations, presently Central Europe and Asia, North, West, Southern and Eastern Africa, the Near East, the Gulf, South Asia and South East Asia.

understanding of the socio-political environment within which they operated. In these respects the example of Iraq illustrates not simply the perils of military forces operating without a firm understanding of their environment, but so too the unforeseen and sometimes perverse ramifications of decisions taken when that lack of understanding is addressed. The most interesting aspect however, is how these developments unfolded in such a different manner for US and British forces respectively.

For the British, the early stages of their post-invasion occupation of Iraq was badly affected by inability of military commanders and their political advisers to identify, let alone bolster, the relevant political structures required to stabilise the British area of operations (AO) in Basra and Maysan provinces.⁶² No-one appeared able to understand what 'government' meant, where it might reside among competing actors and interests, or even what it should look like. Competition between powerful local actors in both provinces, and an initially weak national administration in Baghdad, only added to the general confusion. Ultimately a full and proper understanding of where true political power lay in the south and its relationship to powerbrokers in Baghdad was missing. It led to a state of affairs whereby British commanders were unable to discern who could preserve and who could threaten whatever established political order might be crafted; a worrying situation considering that the host nation 'government' is not only a partner institution in the conduct of a counterinsurgency campaign, but is the ultimate concern *of* it.⁶³

Consequently, the initial stages of the campaign saw a series of local actors installed in important governance positions in Basra and Maysan province, each of which was to prove troublesome as their vested interests caused violent clashes with other competing local elements and/or with rivals within the national Government in Baghdad who maintained influence in the south.⁶⁴ Such complications were inescapable. British commanders and political advisors were trying to ascertain, against a perplexing background of legal confusion, constitutional upheaval and violence, which aspect of Iraqi government it was – local governors, national ministries or the prime minister's office – that had the requisite authority over the areas that British forces operated in. They then, as an external actor, tried to shape that authority to best reflect their own interests: an incredibly complex task which, unsurprisingly, was beyond their capabilities to begin with.⁶⁵ But as stated above, what is of real interest is what happened when courses of action that worked with rather than against local political dynamics could be implemented.

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⁶² See Glen Rangwala 'Counterinsurgency amid Fragmentation: The British in Southern Iraq' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32/3, (2009) 495-513

⁶³ On the subject of British difficulties in Basra during this period see Christopher Elliot, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghan Wars* (London, Hurst, 2015) and Rory Stewart *Occupational Hazards: My Time Governing Iraq* (London, Picador, 2007).

⁶⁴ Rangwala, 'Counterinsurgency and Fragmentation', 498

⁶⁵ Ibid

What transpired was that for the British in southern Iraq the greater the understanding, the starker the solution: withdrawal from Basra. In other words, retreat. As Storrie narrates it had become clear by 2006 that the British presence in Basra was the problem, not the solution.⁶⁶ What had originated as a low-key insurgency by various disaffected elements had now become a war between British forces and the Shi'ite *Jaish al-Mahdi* (JAM) militia, while Basra itself had fallen prey to powerful rival conglomerates of politico-criminal mafias.⁶⁷ The British were trapped in the midst of an intra-Shia power struggle that was simultaneously providing space for the troublesome advance of Iranian influence.⁶⁸ The decision was taken therefore to reach an accommodation with the JAM, withdraw British forces peacefully from the city and hand over security duties to the ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) under Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC). Although the JAM would effectively be given free rein in Basra to begin with, the arena would at least be set for Iraqi government forces to win the contest for legitimacy there.

The points to make in regard to British strategy during this period are threefold. The first is that the decisions taken were correct. An understanding of the challenges facing their presence in Basra and Maysan provinces, as well as an understanding of the increasingly reluctant commitment of the British Government to resourcing the campaign in Southern Iraq, led Commanders onward to a series of decisions designed to square that particular circle.⁶⁹ Their ability, and that of their staffs, to accurately conceptualise the intricate layers of formal and informal actors providing a framework for the insurgency, whilst simultaneously adjusting for both Coalition political designs and a creeping and malign Iranian presence, highlighted the intellectual abilities of these military professionals in their best light.⁷⁰

The second point to be made is that there were still significant shortcomings in British processes. One member of a US Human Terrain Team deployed to the city after the British had departed observed that the latter had focussed their attention upon political relationships among the local Shia militias and largely ignored the concerns of ordinary Baswaris. This elite-centric (as opposed to a population-centric) approach was reinforced by limited amounts of uninformative cultural data, much of which appeared to contain little analysis or depth. Diagrams of tribal structures took precedence over insights as to the grievances, hopes, aspirations and cultural

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⁶⁶ Storrie, 18

⁶⁷ See Ian Thomas: *The British Experience in Iraq 2007: A Perspective on the Utility of Force* (School of Advanced Military Studies, Leavenworth, 2007), 45-55.

⁶⁸ Storrie, 18

⁶⁹ General Jonathan Shaw commanded Multinational Division (MND) South-East, the coalition forces occupying southern Iraq.

⁷⁰ Ian Thomas, 'Pointing the Way Out: The Basra Narrative and the Utility of Force January-August 2007'. *British Army Review* 148 (Winter 2009/10), 8-13

nuances of local people.⁷¹ There were also potentially damaging shortcomings in the way that the British conceptualised the role of the JAM by overestimating its legitimacy and degree of public support. Some viewed it as an armed provider of social services; others used their experience of Northern Ireland to compare it to the Orange Order movement.⁷² In reality it was a ruthless and sociopathic organisation which, once it had *de facto* control of Basra, implemented a vicious policy of repression and engaged in extortion, murder and ethnic cleansing.⁷³ No matter the wisdom of the Basra 'accommodation', there is no doubt that the British were unprepared for the savage methods by which the JAM would seek to extend its remit. And although it brutally overplayed its hand, ultimately losing the battle of legitimacy to Iraqi Government forces, the British were nothing more than a hostage to fortune in that regard. Moreover, the process by which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ultimately secured legitimacy in Basra – the so-called Charge of the Knights – proved a huge embarrassment both to the Army and to the British Government. Despite the former always intending for Iraqi Government forces to 'win' Basra and designing a plan for that purpose, the operation was carried out pre-emptively and effectively behind British backs. When it stalled, The Iraqi Government called upon US forces to help, leaving the impression of an irrelevant British force, freshly ejected from Basra and effectively side-lined within its own Area of Operations (AO).⁷⁴

The sense of institutional embarrassment over the abandonment of Basra and public exclusion from the subsequent Iraqi-US effort to reclaim it from the JAM was palpable. The whole affair left an uncomfortable impression of defeat that dominated media reports at the time and which still lingers within the collective conscious of the British Army.⁷⁵ As one US Army officer observed at the time, "The British have lost Basra, if indeed they ever had it...There will be a stink about this that will hang around the British military".⁷⁶ As Patrick Porter uncharitably observed, 'With the foot of the Mahdi Army on its throat, Britain cut a deal and withdrew'.⁷⁷ And while Storrie and others justifiably and correctly point to the deeply unpalatable scenarios which might have unfolded as a consequence of other courses of action being taken at the time, we can only place judgement on what happened. While 'understanding' may have solved certain immediate problems in Basra by way of the 'accommodation' it simply resulted in other unpalatable courses of action

⁷¹ See Leslie Adrienne Payne 'Allied Civilian Enablers and the Helmand Surge' in McFate and Laurence (eds) *Social Science Goes to War*, 216

⁷² Storrie, 20. The Orange Order is a Protestant fraternal organisation.

⁷³ Storrie. 19

⁷⁴ British troops did fight in aid of Iraqi forces during this period, and provided logistical support. But as Patrick Porter states, 'it is not a question of fairness, but perception'. See 'Last Charge of the Knights: Iraq, Afghanistan and the Special Relationship' *International Affairs* 86/2 March 2010, 370

⁷⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/8031642/Iraq-British-abandoned-Basra-to-terror.html>, Financial Times 'How the British army lost Basra' Aug., 20 2007, 'Britain Suffered defeat in Iraq says US General' BBC News website 29 Sept., 2010 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11419878>

⁷⁶ See 'Last Charge of the Knights', 370.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

having to be taken in their stead, resulting in highly problematic developments in different forms as time progressed.⁷⁸

The final point with respect to the British experience of Southern Iraq reinforces the observation that understanding only really serves one's interests if it matches the prevailing strategic narrative. Despite its significant shortcomings the eventual elite-centric approach pursued by the British actually allowed military and political interests to coincide. Both wanted out of Basra and the military's understanding, both of its predicament and its possible resolution, facilitated that end. In other words the flawed understanding developed by the British in southern Iraq actually served their political interests, if not those of the people under their charge. In contrast, had the British Government sought to properly defeat the JAM in Basra and even resourced the effort appropriately, then it is unlikely that the Army's elite-centric understanding of the 'political terrain' would have facilitated the requisite influence over the real centre of gravity, i.e. the 'human terrain'.⁷⁹ And even had it sought, *a la* the US method, to embed itself among the human terrain in Basra there remained one insurmountable problem. Namely that British designs were ultimately based upon enhancing the legitimacy of the Iraqi Government with the objective of the latter being able (and most importantly being *seen* to be able) to take control of the city. Basra was never really there to be 'won' by the British in the traditional sense; doing so would only worsen relations with Iraq's Shia leadership who saw Basra as their personal bailiwick. Paradoxically therefore the lack of a 'population centric' approach ended up imposing politically useful inhibitions on British objectives. It served the British Army, and by extension their political masters; far better in real terms than a more developed form of understanding which may in turn have encouraged disruptive or unachievable ambitions.

In the final analysis of course, post-invasion Iraq was perhaps the paradigm of unachievable ambitions where western intervention was concerned. And it is here that the US experience is highly instructive. In 2006, taking advantage of a clumsy and brutal overplaying of its hand by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in its efforts to co-opt the powerful Anbar Sheikhs, US forces revolutionised their campaign in Iraq by abandoning their previous focus upon kinetic effect and instead embarking upon a concerted population-centric approach underpinned by much greater understanding of the political and socio-cultural dimensions of Anbar province.⁸⁰ Supported in turn by an entirely new counterinsurgency doctrine, a surge of some 20,000 extra troops, and drawing upon the newly-won

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⁷⁸ One senior officer intimately involved at the highest levels with the British actions in Basra during this critical period told the author in conversation, "Nothing we could have trained for, nothing we could have learned, could have prepared us for what we encountered in southern Iraq".

⁷⁹ See Payne, 213-235

⁸⁰ See Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Gamble in Iraq* (London, Penguin, 2010)

support of a 130,000 strong Sunni militia army, American commanders quickly broke the spine of the insurgency, thus leaving the ground open for political advances and American withdrawal.⁸¹ Unfortunately those political advances have been dangerously unpredictable, and US withdrawal has only exacerbated matters. As Storrie observed, despite the remarkably adaptive performance of US forces, the measures taken to defeat the insurgency did not result in what was ultimately required: the emergence of a representative Iraqi Government in Baghdad and a properly functioning unitary state.⁸² The 'Awakening' simply reinforced dangerous sectarian divisions as exemplified by the ascent to power of Shia Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. His gradual marginalisation of Iraq's large Sunni minority, particularly after the 2010 elections, has been in large part responsible for the recrudescence of former insurgent elements into what would become ISIS/L.⁸³ The US military's actions in Iraq 2006 onward may have been underpinned by sophisticated levels of 'understanding', but they were not enough to provide the basis for a sustainable, long-term political victory.

Conclusion

The British experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, amplified by concerns as to the nature of the 'future operating environment' has seemingly convinced practitioners, particularly within the Army, of the need for deeper understanding of their surrounds. This article has illustrated some of the potential problems in that respect. But the American experience in Iraq 2006-11 should provide further food for thought. The US military's approach characterised the thrust for informed comprehension on the part of military professionals. But at its heart the entire premise of the mission, namely the determination to democratise Iraq, was unfeasible. In the context of liberal interventionism and forced democratization, no matter how sophisticated the understanding gathered it could never compensate for the inherently problematic nature of Iraq's overtly sectarian society. In the same way, 'understanding' in Afghanistan could never compensate for the inherent weakness of Afghan politics, nor in Libya for the byzantine and violent rivalries that would follow the removal of Muammar Ghadaffi from power. And indeed the recent debacle there provides a basic lesson to the West: some things are simply not in our gift. Consequently the thrust for 'understanding' on the part of the military machine risks encouraging a distracting tactical perspective of a matter that demands recognition of certain overarching political truths. Namely that the success of external

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⁸¹ For more on the 'Anbar Awakening' see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, 'Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?' *International Security* 37/1 (2012), 7-40. Critically, the authors state that conditions were so specific to Iraq during that period that US strategy cannot be used as a template for subsequent operations.

⁸² Storrie, 25

⁸³ For more on the details of this period see Emma Sky, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (US, Public Affairs, 2015).

interventions is dictated less by comprehending the local political and societal milieu than it is by other more fundamental considerations. In this case the inherent feasibility of the proposed enterprise, and the problematic way in which political actors perceive the likely success of distant 'ends'.

As on-going debates illustrate, there are serious doubts as to whether military operations under the auspices of liberal intervention or stabilisation can ever deliver 'success' if the target societies in question are economically underdeveloped, ethnically heterogeneous or lack prior experience with representative government. Such societies will always face serious obstacles to democratization, and even outsiders with good intentions are typically unable to surmount these barriers no matter how hard they try, or how much they understand.⁸⁴ And if British foreign policy, as articulated by the National Security Strategy, is inherently predicated on the notion of promoting democratic values and behaviours then the potential futility of realising such ambitions through the use of force, no matter the sophistication of ones 'local' understanding, is not difficult to forecast. First and foremost then the matter of whether the ends sought are actually feasible, whether the grand designs of political leaders and policymakers have a realistic chance of success taking into account known obstacles, is the form of understanding that should trump all others. Unless matters are framed in this way, then all subordinate forms of understanding become a hostage to fortune. Problematically such advice is unlikely to be heeded in future. Recent scholarship has identified the cognitive biases that encourage political leaders who prioritise long-term goals such as 'stabilisation' and 'democratisation' to envisage inherently favourable outcomes to their actions. They prefer to ignore feasibility in favour of political desirability, and tend to focus on the benefits that will accrue when those goals are realised rather than the necessary post-intervention measures required to achieve those goals.⁸⁵ In transformative interventions such as Iraq or Libya, such a trend was clear and obvious. And so too are the implications for militaries. Unfeasible objectives set by over-optimistic political leaders dictate that while the achievement of ground level understanding is an admirable and useful pursuit, in reality it may simply mean that our interventions take longer to fail.

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⁸⁴ Alexander B. Downes, Jonathan Monten, 'Forced to be Free? Why Foreign Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratisation' *International Security* 37/4 Spring 2013, 90-131

⁸⁵ Aaron Rapport, 'The Long and Short of It', 133-171

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