

Coln of the Realm

reviewed by Capt Scott A. Cuomo

As we remain locked in extremely complex counterinsurgency (CoIn) battles in Afghanistan and Iraq, readers of the *Gazette* would be hard-pressed to find a book more relevant, thought-provoking, and important than John A. Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*. Nagl, a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel currently serving as the Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, prefaces this edition by comparing his CoIn experiences in Iraq's "Sunni Triangle" with his analysis of the British Army in Malaya and the U.S. Army in Vietnam later presented in the book. Although admitting a few minor omissions and missteps in the preface, primarily as a result of writing the first edition before ever "practicing" CoIn, Nagl concludes that his explanations of why the British Army defeated the Communist insurgency in Malaya and the U.S. Army failed in its CoIn efforts in Vietnam were right on target. In both cases he analyzes each army's ability and willingness to change to meet the needs of CoIn warfare. He then argues that the British Army succeeded in large measure because it was a learning and adaptable institution in contrast to the U.S. Army, whose organizational culture during the Vietnam era prevented it from making the necessary changes required to win.

The book is segmented into four parts. Part I sets the stage for his comparison by examining how armies learn, the hard lessons of insurgent warfare, and the general role played by the British and U.S. Armies throughout history.

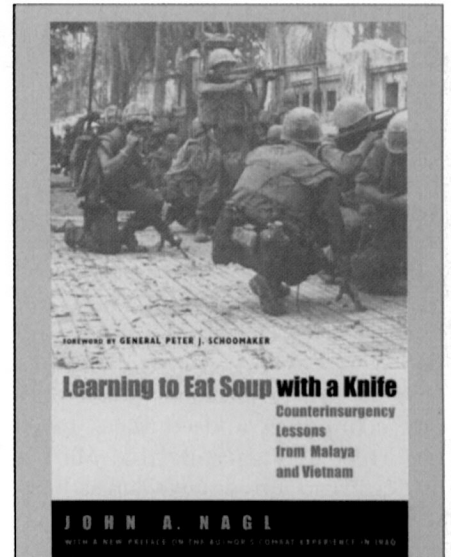
Part II focuses on the British Army CoIn experience in Malaya from 1948-60. What is most telling about this section is how the British Army encountered many of the same challenges the U.S. military has faced in Iraq, and how, from 1948 to 1951, it often responded in similar ways. For example, stemming from their successes in conventional operations during World War II, British commanders looked to large-scale battal-

ion maneuvers against suspected pockets of insurgents as the answer to eliminating the enemy. From 1952 to 1960, British strategy changed to focusing heavily on coordinating social, political, economic, police, and military efforts. Advising and assisting Malayan security forces to ensure that the populace was protected from the insurgency also became a top priority. Much of the British Army's success is credited to GEN Sir Gerald Templer, the British High Commissioner in Malaya from February 1952 to May 1954, who inspired organizational change and refused to let bureaucracy stand in the way of mission accomplishment.

Part III looks at the U.S. Army in Vietnam, first during the advisory years from 1950 to 1964 and then after the introduction of U.S. conventional forces from 1965 to 1972. Nagl's analysis reveals that U.S. efforts during the advisory years were severely handicapped by the fact that those who truly grasped the problems of CoIn, particularly the advisors on the ground, were ignored or outright removed by their conventionally minded superiors. Most senior U.S. Army officers refused to accept the importance of understanding the Vietnamese language and culture and the necessity to use Vietnamese security forces to protect the population.

Part IV emphasizes the hard lessons learned in CoIn by both armies. Specific attention is paid to the importance of fostering an organizational culture that is willing to constantly learn and adapt based on the situation. The book's final pages reinforce this point by noting how the "dirty little war" trend continues. Having passed from Vietnam to Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and rearing its head again in Afghanistan and Iraq, Nagl stresses that CoIn is also the most likely type of conflict U.S. forces will encounter in the foreseeable future.

In the book, Nagl references Otto von Bismarck's suggestion that fools learn by experience whereas wise



LEARNING TO EAT SOUP WITH A KNIFE: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam (Paperback). By John A. Nagl. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2005, ISBN 0226567702, 280 pp., \$17.00. (Member \$15.30)

men learn from other peoples' experience. I spent more than a year in Iraq trying to figure out how to fight the insurgency. I look back on my experience now with the belief that, at best, I accomplished very little and, worse, facilitated the masses increasing their support of and active role in the insurgency. Had I read *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* before "spilling soup all over myself" many times over, the result of my efforts would have been drastically different. I suspect that the vast majority of Marines who read this book after serving in Afghanistan and Iraq will feel the same way. It's time for us all to really begin learning from others' experiences in CoIn. *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* should be the starting point for staff noncommissioned officers and officers.

USMC

>Capt Cuomo served with 1/4 as a rifle platoon commander, company XO, and combined antiarmor team platoon commander during Operations IRAQI FREEDOM I and II. He is currently a warfighting instructor at The Basic School.