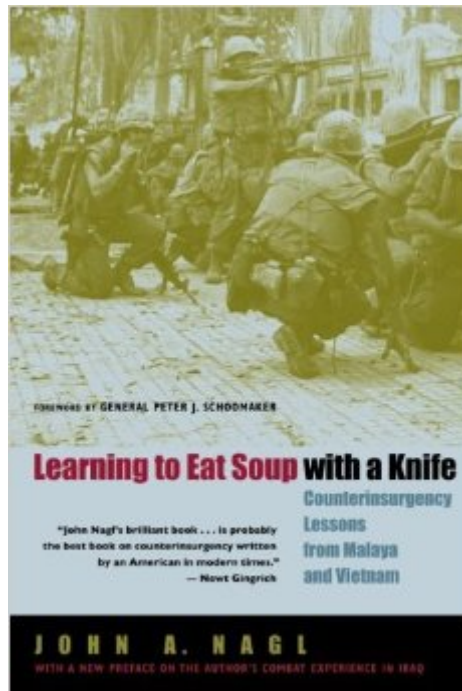


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# Learning To Eat Soup With A Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya And Vietnam



## Synopsis

Invariably, armies are accused of preparing to fight the previous war. In *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl—a veteran of both Operation Desert Storm and the current conflict in Iraq—considers the now-crucial question of how armies adapt to changing circumstances during the course of conflicts for which they are initially unprepared. Through the use of archival sources and interviews with participants in both engagements, Nagl compares the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and practice in the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960 with what developed in the Vietnam War from 1950 to 1975. In examining these two events, Nagl—the subject of a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story by Peter Maass—argues that organizational culture is key to the ability to learn from unanticipated conditions, a variable which explains why the British army successfully conducted counterinsurgency in Malaya but why the American army failed to do so in Vietnam, treating the war instead as a conventional conflict. Nagl concludes that the British army, because of its role as a colonial police force and the organizational characteristics created by its history and national culture, was better able to quickly learn and apply the lessons of counterinsurgency during the course of the Malayan Emergency. With a new preface reflecting on the author's combat experience in Iraq, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* is a timely examination of the lessons of previous counterinsurgency campaigns that will be hailed by both military leaders and interested civilians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Exceptionally well written book. If this reviewer understands the forward correctly, Maj Nagl (now LCOL) wrote this book as his PhD thesis at Oxford University. However, it reads like a popular and best-selling history and not with a dry stilted academic tone. Likewise, this book is exceedingly well researched. Despite feeling fairly well-read on military history in general and Vietnam in particular, I must have jotted down 20 - 30 books for future reference and study. One can certainly see that LCOL Nagl earned his PhD at Oxford. The best part of the book is that it is not really about fighting a counter-insurgency, but rather about how institutions learn (or fail to learn) when confronted with radical change. In this sense, the British come off much better in the Malay experience than America does in Vietnam. However, the book has several weaknesses. First, the book has several errors of fact in the examples of the Chinese Civil War. These are not glaring errors, but since LCOL Nagl uses the Chinese Civil War as a basis to begin his discussion of the Malay conflict, they are relevant. Strangely, the revolutionary doctrine that Mao exports more closely resembles what LCOL Nagl reports vice what actually happened so, perhaps, for the purpose of this book, this failing is an academic one. Second, Nagl implies that only had we followed all the great ideas the British had, we could have easily won in Vietnam. This is not knowable and may ultimately be false. The conflict in Vietnam was far more violent than the one in Malaya. Likewise the Viet Minh and North Vietnamese Army had several advantages that the Chinese Terrorists (CTs) in Malaya did not.

How does an army learn to fight an effective counterinsurgency? Sound relevant to today's headlines? John Nagl asked this question before it was "cool" - before the pundits of CNN or MSNBC knew how to spell "counterinsurgency". This book - *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* - is his answer. John is a scholar and a soldier who combines academic prowess and firsthand experience in counterinsurgency. LTC John Nagl is a West Point graduate (and in the interests of disclosure, a classmate of the reviewer), an armor officer, a Rhodes Scholar, a former instructor of International Affairs at West Point, and a veteran of the insurgency in Iraq. The insurgency in Iraq had not begun when the hardcover edition of his book came out in 2002. Unfortunately, it's not at all certain that the people who opened the current war in Iraq read it. This 2nd edition includes a new author's preface discussing the relationship between his earlier scholarship and his recent combat experiences in Iraq. He candidly discusses what he now thinks of his own work based upon his first-hand experience with insurgency. The depth of LTC Nagl's research is evident in every chapter and should satisfy the rigor of academia while, at the same time, his writing style is clear, concise, and leaves little doubt as to his reasoning. To be successful in an age of insurgencies, Nagl concludes that the Army "will have to make the ability to learn to deal with messy, uncomfortable

situations an integral part" of its organizational culture. It must, per T.E. Lawrence, be comfortable eating soup with a knife. Victory in a fluid insurgency requires the ability to learn and to adapt and may even require differing victory conditions, organizations, and core competencies depending upon the context.

My own multiple interests in organizational redesign, learning and adaptation, and national security issues led me to read this book. MAJ Nagl is an armor officer, a Rhodes Scholar, and a former instructor of International Affairs at West Point. His book, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaysia and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, discusses the way armies learn within the frameworks of the British experience with counterinsurgency in Malaya and the American experience in Vietnam. It is particularly timely as the army finds itself in a global war against shadowy networks more reminiscent of insurgencies than conventional armies. These networks have turned the "rules" upside down. Networks that can change direction at will or that can go in different directions simultaneously are not easily defeated by bureaucratic juggernauts that require fifteen years to field a new weapon system or that still apply failed tactics from thirty years ago. Victory in multiple, rapidly changing environments requires the ability to learn and to adapt and may even require differing victory conditions, organizations, and core competencies depending upon the context. MAJ Nagl presents a twofold thesis. First, the British Army developed a successful counterinsurgency doctrine in Malaya due to its performance as a learning institution. Second, the American Army failed to do the same in Vietnam and in fact actively resisted the necessity of learning to fight a new sort of war. But what is organizational learning? Learning theorists tend to recognize the inherently iterative nature of the learning process whether they characterize it using a simple model such as Boyd's OODA loop or Ackoff's more complex organizational learning and adaptation model.

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