Chapter 8

British Leaders and Irregular Warfare

David Benest

Introduction

In his recent book, General Sir Rupert Smith claims that ‘industrial warfare’, as experienced in both world wars and subsequently in many regional conflicts, is over. It has been replaced by a new paradigm in warfare – ‘war among the people.’ This is not necessarily asymmetric warfare, though it might be, but it represents his own experience in former Yugoslavia as commander of UNPROFOR and as General Officer Commanding (GOC) Northern Ireland. The Senior Fellow at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom similarly claims that we are facing a revolution in the nature of conflict.2

Both of these assertions are open to question. ‘Industrial war’ (or regular war) has not disappeared and nor will it, in Colin Gray’s view.3 And to see ‘war among the people’, or irregular war, as a new phenomenon simply ignores a swathe of conflicts ‘among people’ that have occurred throughout the twentieth century. In both respects, Colin Gray is surely closer to the truth: regular warfare has been part of the human condition for a very long time and there is no reason to believe that it has ceased to exist. Yet whatever the rights and wrongs of these conflicting views, both authors are equally of the opinion that irregular war is here to stay.

Accepting the premise that irregular warfare is not a new phenomenon and is as likely to be enduring, this chapter explores the British experience of leadership in irregular warfare throughout the past century. In doing so, it draws on an unparalleled

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and vast experience of irregular war, including South Africa, Ireland, the mandates of Mesopotamia and Palestine, India, Egypt, the colonies of Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Aden, Borneo, Dhofar, Northern Ireland, and now Iraq and Afghanistan.

The focus throughout is on the role of leaders, both political, military and police leaders. Regarding definitions, much time and effort has been spent in attempting to distinguish between insurgency, terrorism, disorder, rebellion and wars of national liberation.

This chapter will simply emulate Colin Gray and stick to ‘irregular war’ as opposed to ‘regular war’ in reference to the above conflicts. They are typified by the characteristics Rupert Smith alludes to: they are generally of long duration; they involve the use of technology never designed for the situation; the media is ever present; the political aim is often obscure, or changing; sometimes there is no political ‘solution’ or exit strategy; regular forces are pitched against irregular; and the question as in all wars, is of whether the irregular’s vision of the political future or that of the existing polity is to prevail.

The chapter deliberately focuses on the ‘British Way’ in countering irregular war on grounds that it is unique, reflecting upon British culture, educational system, religion, rule of law tradition and liberal democracy, open to scrutiny by a free press. Hence, the personality, character and behaviour of, say, Gerard Templer in Malaya in 1952 or Rupert Smith in Northern Ireland in 1996 can be compared and contrasted but they have more in common than that which sets them apart. The leaders considered have all passed

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