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## Minimum force in British counterinsurgency

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With strategic success in Iraq and Afghanistan far from certain, comforting beliefs about Britain's superiority at counterinsurgency have come under increasingly sceptical scrutiny. This article contributes to the debate with particular reference to the supposedly pivotal principle of minimum force. After discussing the recent literature on the subject, the article critiques the methodology employed by advocates of the traditionalist view on British COIN, arguing for a more rigorous historical approach based on primary sources. Following these historical matters, it is argued that conceptually, minimum force should be analysed dialectically in relation to practices of exemplary force, and above all, on the evidence of what happens in a conflict. Arguably the value ascribed to doctrine in strategic analysis has become unduly inflated, and we must look beyond it to understand war and political violence.

**Keywords:** minimum force; British counterinsurgency; Mau Mau; Kenya Emergency; Afghanistan

### Introduction

In a recent contribution to this journal, Dr Rod Thornton critiqued an earlier article by me on the nature of the British Army's campaign in Kenya against the Mau Mau.<sup>1</sup> His piece raised a number of important points in relation to the concept of 'minimum force' in modern British counterinsurgency, and presents the opportunity to develop the debate. In the last couple of years, strategic failings in Iraq and Afghanistan have converged with a growing body of historical scholarship to destabilise the previously solid consensus that British expertise in counterinsurgency is second to none. This article reflects the shifting interpretation of the British Army's experience in these types of war by responding to Dr Thornton's defence of the 'classical' position in five ways. Firstly, the article expands the analysis of how the academic and policy perspectives on COIN are currently moving in new directions, and situates my research within these broader trends. Secondly, I challenge Dr Thornton's critique of my methodology and suggest it is superior to his own, which has itself demonstrated serious failings in producing numerous basic factual mistakes. Thirdly, the article debates

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Thornton's more useful question about the nature of the army in the age of empire, and how matters of identity should be addressed in studying distinct types of military formation. Penultimately, the analysis moves on to show how Thornton's fundamental objection to my original article is based on a gross misreading of its conceptual framework. The implications of this argument have an important bearing upon the wider issue of what exactly 'minimum force' means, a matter elaborated upon in the final section, where the posited continuing relevance of the concept is brought into question. Along with several other writers, this article concludes that a methodology for analysing conflicts based on doctrine alone, and lacking detailed empirical examination, is worthless in understanding battlefield realities.<sup>2</sup> For the military professional or civilian strategist, equating doctrinal ideal types with reality is dangerously delusional.

### **The historian's role as interpreter of British counterinsurgency**

Dr Thornton declares debates about the Emergency in Kenya should be governed by a concern for 'the reputations of real people, real units and that of an army'. Indeed, all of these 'should expect to be defended'.<sup>3</sup> This advocacy of the military historian's professional purpose as being to defend, whatever the evidence, the reputation of the army, will disquiet some readers. It brings to mind Michael Howard's distinguished exposition on the professional military historian's task.<sup>4</sup> Howard argued that all militaries created myths, defined as images of the past, in order to sustain certain beliefs. The regimental historian is expected to emphasise bravery and efficiency in his accounts, ignoring ignoble episodes, to bolster unit pride and thus morale.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the professional historian's function is to discover what really happened, necessarily involving 'a critical examination of the "myth", assessing and discarding its patriotic basis and probing deeply into the things it leaves unsaid'.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between these two profoundly contrasting approaches is far from being merely theoretical. As Howard insists, while mythology has its place, when it begins to replace critical history, military efficiency itself suffers. A false view of the past inspires unrealistic expectations about the future.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon emerged in the wildly optimistic planning for deployment to Helmand in 2006, based on a mythological view of British supremacy in counterinsurgency, now thoroughly demolished.<sup>8</sup> Dr Thornton seems content to pursue the regimental approach, but this author prefers aspiring to the standards set by Michael Howard.

My work on Kenya sits within the context of a wider body of research critical of the mythology of British COIN. The orthodox view is based upon a doctrinal interpretation of the post-war campaigns, heavily influenced by Robert Thompson's seminal 1966 study.<sup>9</sup> Studies tend to list doctrinal attributes, which vary in their precise formulation but normally include a political objective, using minimum force within a legal framework, having devolved command in an inter-agency setting, and winning hearts and minds. Authors then seek out information to support a case for how these doctrinal precepts were complied with

and thus brought about success.<sup>10</sup> The most influential study in recent years is Thomas Mockaitis's *British Counterinsurgency*.<sup>11</sup> Such approaches cohered with a growing consensus in the British Army during the mid-1990s that doctrine possessed major educational benefits for the officer class. Unfortunately, insufficient attention was paid to doctrine's limitations, sometimes leading officers to expect reality to fit doctrine, rather than realising doctrine should adapt to political conditions.<sup>12</sup> Adam Roberts identifies the ahistorical character of much COIN doctrine, and the quest for general rules, as having impeded operations in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Without surveying British counterinsurgency's entire historiography, summarising the evidence presented in some recent studies will suffice to make the point that my article on Kenya is part of an alternative perspective to that recognised by Dr Thornton. In his study into civil disturbances in the interwar period, Simeon Shoul discovered the British killed a larger number of people than should have been the case.<sup>14</sup> Jacob Norris shows how policy during the Palestine revolt just before the Second World War centred upon using violence to intimidate the whole population into submission.<sup>15</sup> Analysing the same conflict, Matthew Hughes found doctrine permitted collective punishments and reprisals, with property destruction becoming systematic and Arabs being shot at random.<sup>16</sup> On the 1948–1960 Malayan Emergency, Karl Hack has suggested 'screwing down the people' played a more central part in defeating the Communist insurgency than winning hearts and minds.<sup>17</sup> My own research presented archival evidence of a formal policy to intimidate the population through indiscriminate violence in the opening years of Malaya.<sup>18</sup> Inspecting the army's conduct in Iraq, Rachel Kerr concludes soldiers employed illegal interrogation techniques, including hooding and sleep deprivation, due to higher-level official sanction.<sup>19</sup> This case in particular completely contradicts Dr Thornton's argument that the 'philosophy' of minimum force (surely a precept, not a system of thought) permeated the entire army throughout the counterinsurgency era.<sup>20</sup> If a cultural norm against excessive force, presumably including long-banned interrogation methods, suffused all ranks, how could mistreatment arise in Iraq? As has been shown, my article sits in a larger body at variance with the image presented by Dr Thornton's mythologising account. Most bizarrely of all, Dr Thornton is himself the author of an article cognisant of systemic breaches of minimum force in Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup>

### Methodology

Dr Thornton takes umbrage at my method of interpreting the British Army's campaign in Kenya in the 1950s. He considers my arguments 'unsubstantiated'.<sup>22</sup> Axiomatically, in an article on a historical subject, there is an overwhelming case for using archival and primary sources to address the research question. My original piece included 192 footnotes, 89 of which referred to primary sources, in addition to a wide range of secondary sources. Reading primary documents allows the historian to gain imaginative proximity to the people being studied, to hear their voices in their own words, without the distortions of hindsight.

Dr Thornton's attempt to refute my article contains 11 sources. None of them are primary sources.

The shaky ground on which Dr Thornton's piece stands is amply demonstrated by an abundance of basic factual errors. These result from his failure to enter the archives and his regimental historian's approach to intellectual inquiry. As even a passing familiarity with the Emergency makes clear, the tribe from which the insurgency arose were the Kikuyu, rather than 'Kikuyi'.<sup>23</sup> A massacre of loyalists happened in the village of Lari, not 'Lori'.<sup>24</sup> Dr Thornton asserts the Kenya Regiment was not military, and consisted of white settlers.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it was a territorial army unit, trained by non-commissioned officers from the Brigade of Guards, and commanded by seconded British officers. Depending upon the Kenya Government for logistical purposes, it came under the regular military chain of command for discipline and operations.<sup>26</sup> Although the majority of the rank and file were European settlers, a small number of Africans served with the unit during the Emergency.<sup>27</sup> According to Dr Thornton, at the Emergency's start the soldiers in Kenya reported to 'Middle East Command'.<sup>28</sup> No such body existed. Until 29 May 1953, the armed forces in Kenya were subordinate to Middle East Land Forces.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, General Erskine assumed command in May 1953.<sup>30</sup> This is wrong: General Erskine arrived on 7 June.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he did not strictly 'replace' Major-General William Hinde.<sup>32</sup> The latter initially held the rank of Personal Staff Officer to the Governor, and subsequently Director of Operations. General Erskine arrived to take charge of a newly created, independent East Africa Command, with the title of Commander-in-Chief, and considerably greater powers.<sup>33</sup> Also, Dr Thornton states the police commanded all security forces in Kenya, including the army, until late January 1953. He bases this view on a paragraph without any references in Elkins's book.<sup>34</sup> However, at first the Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring, exercised his formal powers as supreme commander in the colony. Sir Evelyn coordinated police and army activities, who maintained their separate headquarters but engaged in numerous joint sweeps through Kikuyuland. Baring chaired a 'Sitrep' (Situation Report) Committee, deciding on Emergency policy. At the end of December 1952, after two requests from Baring, Brigadier G.A Rimbault arrived to assume the post of Personal Staff Officer to the Governor. He held the position until 1 February, when Major-General Hinde arrived as Chief Staff Officer, and was later given increased authority as Director of Operations. The battalions in Kenya reported to 70th (East Africa) Brigade, which came under East Africa Command (headed by Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Cameron), itself subordinate to Middle East Land Forces.<sup>35</sup> The position was modified in a paper published on 19 March 1953. The Governor's Emergency Committee formulated and approved policy in all areas necessary to re-establish law and order. The Chief Staff Officer was '... to direct the conduct of operations by the forces of law and order, i.e. the police and the armed forces'. At lower levels, provincial and district emergency committees implemented policies devised by the Governor's committee and the Chief Staff Officer.<sup>36</sup> So quite clearly the police did not control operations.

In relation to this point, Dr Thornton asserts 'a nuance that Bennett appears to miss' was General Erskine's lack of authority over non-military security forces.<sup>37</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, this ignores the army's operational command over all security forces, and its efforts to expand formations, notably the Home Guard, widely accused of systematic torture.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Dr Thornton's claim that there was not close collaboration between the Army and the police, Kenya Police Reserve and Home Guard starkly demonstrates his total ignorance of the archival record. The archives are replete with countless cases of combined operations between all elements of the security forces, in the opening phase and afterwards.<sup>39</sup> For example, a letter from the officer commanding 70th (East Africa) Infantry Brigade in October 1953 pointed out how:

... we are all well in the picture regarding co-op with the Adm [administration] and the Police.... there must always be a triumvirate of all three Services which plans and executes ops, punitive actions and certain preventative measures such as the 'Denial of Food' campaign. This triumvirate must act as a team. As a matter of principle the CO of a bn [battalion] must be at the main adm hub of the area in which he is operating. He must constantly consult his opposite numbers in the Adm and Police.<sup>40</sup>

Later on in his article, Dr Thornton asserts my understanding of the legal position is erroneous, and that derogations from the European Convention on Human Rights were immaterial because Common Law still applied.<sup>41</sup> Such a view ignores the sweeping powers granted under the Emergency regulations regime, documented extensively in the authoritative study by Brian Simpson cited in my original article. Simpson concludes that as a general pattern, colonies were run as police states during insurrections. On Kenya, he finds: '... draconian regulations, which were continuously amended, enabled the authorities to take more or less whatever action they wished'.<sup>42</sup> This hardly chimes with Dr Thornton's belief in the law's restraining influence, based on a gross misreading of David Anderson's book, itself a sophisticated critique of the politicisation and perversion of justice during the Emergency. Similarly, Dr Thornton's reference to oversight – 'as in any democracy' – is extraordinarily naive, given that Kenya was not a full democracy by any measure.<sup>43</sup> The Emergency only became an issue in the British parliament later on: the first questions about the army's conduct arose in November 1953.<sup>44</sup> The parliamentary delegation to Kenya also mentioned here actually visited the country in January 1954.<sup>45</sup> My article confined itself to the period between October 1952 and June 1953. Thus Dr Thornton's comments are irrelevant.

Finally on the subject of historical interpretation, Dr Thornton expresses particular scorn for my use of language.<sup>46</sup> Naturally, he is quite entitled to deprecate my stylistic foibles, which are far from perfect. However, he makes several unreasonable assertions. Firstly, he objects to the words 'beatings', 'torture' and 'atrocities'. Perhaps he would prefer some less morally troublesome euphemisms. The corpus of research on the Mau Mau Emergency sustains the conclusion that beatings, torture and atrocities happened, and it is intellectually

dishonest to call them by another name. Secondly, Dr Thornton criticises qualified phrases such as ‘seems highly likely’, or ‘might’, declaring them ‘out of place in an academic article’. In my view, academic writing demands a duty to qualify arguments depending upon the strength of the evidence available. Thus qualified phrases reflect incomplete or conflicting source materials. Dr Thornton is fortunate (or not) to be blessed with absolute certainty in his interpretations. Thirdly, it is apparently inconceivable to suggest some officers from the Lancashire Fusiliers might participate in a policy they themselves disagreed with.<sup>47</sup> Needless to say, soldiers must obey orders regardless of their personal opinions. Fourthly, the quotation from Colonial Secretary Oliver Lyttelton refers to the parliamentary ‘Opposition’, as should be apparent from the word’s capitalisation, and would have become abundantly clear to Dr Thornton had he read the archival source in full as cited. Finally, Dr Thornton is in a weak position to pontificate on language when the first sentence of his conclusion is inconsistent with his attempt to vindicate British Army actions.<sup>48</sup>

### **Defining the term ‘Army’**

Apparently, on the Emergency’s outbreak in October 1952, the military forces in Kenya comprised three regiments of the King’s African Rifles (KAR), supplemented by 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, flown in from Egypt.<sup>49</sup> Once again, Dr Thornton commits a basic factual error indicating a wider unfamiliarity with the campaign’s context. In fact, the military formations consisted of the Lancashires, five KAR regiments, the Kenya Regiment, the East Africa Armoured Car Squadron, and the 156 (East African) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery.<sup>50</sup> Following recommendations by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, KAR units were strengthened, and staff for two brigade headquarters were sent to Kenya, in addition to two further British battalions: 1st Royal East Kent Regiment and 1st Devonshire Regiment, which became operational on 10 May 1953.<sup>51</sup> A more interesting question is posed about the identity of the KAR: were these troops part of the British Army? In Dr Thornton’s opinion, the KAR were not because they were manned by ‘African soldiery and usually officered by locally raised white settler officers or by seconded officers’. The implication was that these men ‘would certainly not be expected to exhibit the same cultural mores as a British regiment’.<sup>52</sup> The inference here – quite insulting to a formation boasting a record of impressive efficiency and bravery in Burma in the Second World War and more recently in Malaya – is that African soldiers simply failed to match British standards. Clearly, soldiers born and raised in East Africa experienced cultural, social and political influences other than those in the United Kingdom.<sup>53</sup> But the ramifications for conduct on operations can be overstated for several reasons. Firstly, the KAR reported to East Africa Command, and thence to the War Office in London, as did any British regiment.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, the basic training regime and disciplinary standards (based on the Army Act) were the same for British and African regiments. During the Emergency, all military units received additional



context-specific training before deployment at the East Africa Battle School, and they all worked from the same tactical doctrine, *The Conduct of Anti-Mau Mau Operations*.<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, Dr Thornton's belief that officers serving with the KAR had been 'socialised and acculturated' in different ways to those working in British battalions is flawed.<sup>56</sup> As Anthony Clayton and David Killingray thoroughly demonstrate, KAR officers shared the same social background as British regular officers. Most officers in the KAR were seconded from British battalions for two or three years, and during the national service era, the KAR could afford to select high quality candidates as it proved a popular choice.<sup>57</sup> The point is reinforced by analysing the numbers of British Army officers on secondment in the KAR during the Emergency's opening phase. At the Emergency's declaration in October 1952, 9 Lieutenant-Colonels, 47 Majors, 72 Captains, 22 Lieutenants and one Chaplain, 4th Class, from the British Army were placed in King's African Rifles units. They came from regiments such as the Durham Light Infantry, the Essex Regiment, the Buffs and the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.<sup>58</sup> By December, the number of British officers on secondment had risen to 223, drawn from regiments such as the Sherwood Foresters, the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the Glosters and the Dorsets.<sup>59</sup> In April 1953, the number had risen again – to 227, including 57 Captains, from units such as the Royal Hampshires, the Somerset Light Infantry and the Surreys. The staff officers running the whole operation (a Lieutenant-General, two Brigadiers, three Colonels, ten Lieutenant-Colonels and five Majors) all came from the regular army too.<sup>60</sup> Thus Dr Thornton's assertion that the officer corps in Kenya was totally distinct from the regular British Army is nonsense. Finally, his argument seriously underestimates the pivotal position occupied by imperial troops in the British Empire. Indeed, soldiers from the King's African Rifles played a substantial part in consolidating the East African colony in the first years of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> Due to the Empire's vast size and the distaste for conscription in Britain, protecting the overseas territories from external and internal threats always proved beyond metropolitan forces alone.<sup>62</sup> So while there is merit in differentiating between units, it should not blind us to the deeply symbiotic relationship between centre and periphery characteristic of the British Empire. The Empire shaped British strategy and national identity throughout the twentieth century – and its wars were inconceivable minus imperial support.<sup>63</sup>

### The concept of minimum force

Dr Thornton's argument is centred on the belief that the concept of minimum force pervaded the British Army at all levels, and was applied uniformly in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>64</sup> Before proceeding to the empirical validity of such an interpretation, we may note the *a priori* illogic infusing both propositions. Given the capacity of individuals to act distinctly, and the differences found in regimental subcultures, the suggestion that all soldiers understand a concept identically is absurd. Accepting the vast variation in the strategic context of conflicts, let alone during them, the same level of force cannot prevail at all



times. My article argued the official doctrinal position on minimum force allowed great latitude, and during insurrections permitted the use of any degree of force deemed necessary by the man on the spot.<sup>65</sup> As such, the concept is virtually meaningless in analytical terms, because it lacks clear criteria for judging when it applies and when not. The practical importance of the point is clear to those who have conducted thorough archival research. As Matthew Hughes notes, the government in Palestine reconstructed the law to give soldiers' actions legality.<sup>66</sup> Paul Dixon shows how doctrine in Northern Ireland proved ambiguous and allowed divergent approaches.<sup>67</sup> In a recent analysis, Nick Lloyd explains how even the Amritsar Massacre – the worst atrocity in British military history – can be excused as complying with official doctrine.<sup>68</sup> If an event resulting in 379 civilian deaths – and which even the army's defenders concede was its darkest hour – is included then minimum force's analytical utility is surely in grave doubt.

As my original article argued, the minimum force concept therefore possesses limited explanatory power when analysing the use of force. This is not to advocate, as Thornton incorrectly implies, abandoning minimum force altogether. Rather, two methodological devices should be applied to create a nuanced, and historically accurate, interpretation. Firstly, the use of force may be viewed as a dialectic, where the amount of violence applied by a combatant will oscillate from the maximum possible with the available means, to the minimum possible (which may include non-kinetic operations, such as psychological warfare). Classical strategic theory from Clausewitz onwards operationalises this dialectic.<sup>69</sup> Within the Mau Mau Emergency context, the policy of creating special and prohibited areas constituted a means for limiting violence, and thus complied with the minimum force ideal. Conversely, the decision to allow widespread torture represented a maximum level of violence. In the original article, I referred to the latter form as 'exemplary force', a term regrettably confusing for Dr Thornton.<sup>70</sup> In Kenya, exemplary force meant using violence against non-combatants for the purpose of intimidating the whole Kikuyu population into submission. Punishing villages for the actions of insurgents was thought to provide a terrible warning for everyone else in the area. Secondly, the conventional historical device of periodisation is helpful. Here my article deliberately stated the arguments made pertained only to the period from October 1952 to June 1953, the early phase before General Erskine arrived and changed the campaign plan considerably. Dr Thornton completely refuses to notice this absolutely critical qualification to the argument. For example, he cites the McLean Inquiry into army conduct as evidence that the military adhered to the rule of law. Yet the McLean Inquiry sat in December 1953, and deliberately excluded material on the early phase because it threatened to reveal embarrassing details. My earlier research actually stresses the army's increasing adaptation from a broadly exemplary force approach to one more closely approximating minimum force from June 1953 onwards.<sup>71</sup> The article presented original archival evidence to support the case for considering exemplary force the more prominent form in the opening phase. Dr Thornton cannot address these sources as he has not read them.

### Minimum force today

Apparently minimum force is alive and well today in British Army operations in Afghanistan, and is especially evident when contrasted against the gung-ho American disregard for civilian life.<sup>72</sup> Assessing the use of force is highly problematic as core data on rules of engagement, investigations by the military justice system and so forth is not available. Care should be exercised in recognising the tangible efforts made by the Army in attempting to minimise civilian casualties and adhere to international law. Soldiers undergo extensive pre-deployment training in the rules of engagement, and on numerous instances withhold fire when civilians are at risk.<sup>73</sup> But this is not the whole story. Those who have followed revelations about British complicity in American abuses during the war on terror, from Guantanamo to rendition, will find the case for national distinctiveness little comfort.<sup>74</sup> In Afghanistan, there appear to be more similarities than differences in how civilian casualties arise. And the problem is a serious one. During 2008, civilian deaths rose by 46% on the previous year.<sup>75</sup> Nationally, pro-government forces admitted killing 629 civilians in 2007, and 828 in 2008.<sup>76</sup> Were all these deaths due to careless Afghan security forces or firepower-obsessed Americans? No; the Ministry of Defence has so far paid at least £700,000 in compensation to families of Afghans killed or wounded.<sup>77</sup> Even the former Chief of the General Staff, General Dannatt, is quoted as saying: 'In the early days we probably wound up – maybe still are – killing lots of farmers.'<sup>78</sup> Quantitatively assessing the force employed in recent years is another indicator, and while complete figures are presently unavailable, those in the public domain are striking. During Operation Herrick 5, from October 2006 to March 2007, the British fired 1,295,795 bullets. Herrick 6, covering the subsequent six months, expended 2,474,560 bullets. These figures exclude bombs, artillery rounds and cannon shells.<sup>79</sup> As Warren Chin argues, British operations '... have been shaped by a heavy reliance on modern firepower to kill the enemy at a distance'. For example, the Multiple Launch Rocket System and Javelin surface-to-air missiles are often fired, with questions remaining about whether they constitute too blunt a tool for a counterinsurgency.<sup>80</sup>

Dr Thornton specifically contrasts British and American approaches to airpower in Afghanistan, stating British pilots cannot fire unless soldiers come under attack.<sup>81</sup> This is certainly no longer the case and oversimplifies the rules of engagement, which permit attacks on unarmed insurgents involved in improvised explosive device activities, for example.<sup>82</sup> The munitions dropped in close air support missions called in by British ground troops in any case often come from American and other NATO aeroplanes.<sup>83</sup> The use of airpower by NATO more broadly is attracting considerable controversy in-theatre and amidst audiences back home – witness the recent outrage over civilians killed by an American aeroplane called in by German forces.<sup>84</sup> In 2006, the coalition caused 116 deaths from the air, rising to 321 in 2007.<sup>85</sup> For 2008, the United Nations estimated air raids caused 552 civilian casualties.<sup>86</sup> From January to June 2009, the coalition killed 200 civilians with airpower.<sup>87</sup>

General McChrystal, the former NATO commander, recognised the strategic goal these air strikes bring about in his initial review for the President.<sup>88</sup>

The British cannot be considered immune to these criticisms. Between April 2007 and March 2009 each brigade called in 500 to 540 air strikes.<sup>89</sup> Some anecdotal evidence for inaccurate air strikes exists.<sup>90</sup> However, the Army has used a high intensity of force in ways besides a reliance upon airpower to compensate for an insufficient infantry presence. Anthony King argues the Army's institutional culture places pre-eminent value on fighting conventional warfare, and thus the operational style in Afghanistan favours excessive violence.<sup>91</sup> Early on in the deployment in Helmand, the Task Force agreed to an Afghan request to place troops in platoon houses surrounding faltering local security force bases. British soldiers could only hold these positions by using massive firepower, often alienating the population whose homes turned to rubble under the onslaught.<sup>92</sup> In the words of an officer who observed the policy in action, 'the villages were razed'.<sup>93</sup> While those concerned very likely wished to avoid civilian casualties, their good intentions probably carried limited weight with the affected persons. Since the platoon house policy's demise, the high-intensity approach persists in other forms. Both 3 Commando Brigade and 12 Mechanised Brigade pursued an attritional campaign aiming to kill Taliban insurgents. Commanders sometimes talk about 'mowing the grass'.<sup>94</sup> The logic of the body count survived the Vietnam War, and spread beyond the US Army, after all. Warren Chin contests the extent to which attritional behaviours emanate from organisational culture. He points out the substantial emphasis on traditional counterinsurgency principles, including minimum force, in pre-deployment training. Rather, detailed planning at the brigade level has been rejected in combat as a reaction to enemy tactics and the higher dictates of alliance politics.<sup>95</sup>

There is evidence the approach taken since early 2008 involves fewer large-scale sweep operations and a move towards population security.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, the concept of minimum force is valid in explaining some elements of current British strategy, and even from the start, where important limitations on pre-planned bombing were in place. Knowing the precise nature of the Army's use of force is impossible with the sources to hand, especially given the initial exclusion of journalists from the theatre.<sup>97</sup> In the instances when violence is applied at a level clearly beyond any reasonable definition of minimum, the rationale behind the decision bears no similarity to the situation in Kenya over 50 years ago. The impetus then derived largely from an urge to coerce the population, whereas now the problem stems from insufficient troops and prioritising force protection over protecting civilians. For serving soldiers, the moral distinction in intentions is absolutely vital. For Afghan civilians, whose loyalties will decide the conflict, they must seem irrelevant semantics at best. As David Gompert argues, 'expressions of regret cannot repair the political damage of harming people whom soldiers are supposed to protect'.<sup>98</sup> The British counterinsurgency in Helmand must address problems besides the use of force, not least finding a political strategy, improving implementation of the comprehensive approach and better coordination within NATO.<sup>99</sup> But being realistic about how violence is used, and its impact on the population, is vital in the ongoing debate about British policy in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

Increasingly, historians and social scientists are arguing the need to examine what soldiers actually do rather than what doctrine or social background posit they ought to do.<sup>100</sup> At a crisis point for British counterinsurgency, empirical observation should rate a higher priority than normative postulation. Of course, neither the orthodox nor the critical approaches can claim absolute and exclusive objectivity. Rather, the choice between them must depend upon what the scholarly community wishes to achieve in the debate. If scholars wish to reassure and defend reputations, the orthodox view is for them. Conversely, those who believe the difficulties assailing British forces originate partially from internal weaknesses, in addition to problems caused by external actors, will prefer the critical view. The point is not to condemn the Army for its own sake, but rather to support emulating recent American practice in conducting vigorous self-examination as a basis for strategic renewal and success. This article has attempted to show how a seemingly academic debate holds important implications for military strategy and operational efficiency. The sacred view of British superiority in counterinsurgency became institutionalised over many years, in no short measure as a comforting compensation for imperial decline. Events in Basra and Helmand, and a fresh look at the archival record – facilitated by the Freedom of Information Act – compel a revision. This is precisely what is taking place amidst a recognition that the Americans now lead the world in counterinsurgency expertise. Moving beyond an obsessional impulse to prove doctrine true, and actually to examine the evidence in depth, is essential. Doing otherwise will only produce factual errors, as seen in Dr Thornton's misinformed piece. These mistakes might sustain a mythology some individuals wish to perpetuate, but they risk endangering the Army's understanding of what is possible in conflicts. They also obscure the truth. Neither minimum nor exemplary force on their own explain much. Applying a dialectical approach to our studies, emphasising continuities and changes and above all recognising the unique characteristics in all conflicts promises a fuller understanding than the dogma purveyed by regimental historians.

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## Notes

1. Rod Thornton, "'Minimum Force': a reply to Huw Bennett"; Huw Bennett, 'The Other Side of the COIN: Minimum and Exemplary Force in British Army Counter-insurgency in Kenya'.

2. David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', 321; Adam Roberts, 'Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan'.
3. Thornton, 'A Reply to Huw Bennett', 224.
4. Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History'.
5. Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', 208–9.
6. *Ibid.*, 209–210.
7. *Ibid.*, 209–10.
8. Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, 'COIN Machine: The British Military in Afghanistan', 18.
9. Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*.
10. For a critique of the orthodox view in the Kenya Emergency context, see Huw Bennett, 'The Mau Mau Emergency as part of the British Army's post-war counter-insurgency experience'.
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