Civil Wars

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Thompson in Helmand: Comparing Theory to Practice in British Counter-insurgency Operations in Afghanistan

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British operations in Helmand province, Afghanistan, have been contextualised within the theory and practice of counter-insurgency. The theories of Sir Robert Thompson are held to represent the basis for successful counter-insurgency campaigning. This analysis takes the simple premise of posing the question as to whether British conduct in Helmand between 2006 and 2008 has represented the effective utilisation of Thompson’s principles. Evaluating the evolution of British operations on the ground this analysis suggests that while the influence of Thompson’s thinking can be clearly detected, in practice the implementation of his precepts have been undermined and negated by a variety of factors, most notably the weaknesses of the government of Afghanistan. The result has been an ever-greater focus on the prosecution of the military campaign to the exclusion of the multifaceted programme advocated by Thompson. In conclusion, it may be contended the campaign in Helmand does not resemble the ideals outlined by Thompson or, indeed, much of an effective counter-insurgency plan.

In A Million Bullets James Ferguson comes to the conclusion that in 2006 ‘the government had sent a boy (albeit a very tough one) to do a man’s job’.¹ In April of that year the British gained control of Helmand province in Southern Afghanistan as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. Since their arrival they have been fighting an arduous campaign against the Pashtun based insurgency of the Taliban as well as other anti-government forces. The outcome has never been certain since the start of Operation HERRICK IV. This has led many to review the methods utilised by the British armed forces and those government bodies tasked with the stabilisation effort, which invariably is set against earlier insurgencies in which Britain has been involved.²

Much thinking about HERRICK is contextualised within the British tradition of counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigning, the epitome of which is seen as the Malayan Emergency between 1948 and 1960. Here, the British battled with communists to determine who would succeed the colonial administration as the imperial commitment came to an end. Malaya is often seen by later writers, and not only British ones, as the exemplar for COIN warfare. Its importance in terms of

² Ibid.
this study is that it was from this conflict that the theorist Sir Robert Thompson (1916–92) formulated his framework for the conduct of successful COIN operations. In John Nagl’s work, amongst others, this would come to be perceived as representing a British approach. Based around five principles, it is offered as a guide to how governments and their allies should act when faced with an insurgent threat. Nagl outlines Thompson’s five principles thus:

1. The government must have a clear political aim: to establish and maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable.
2. The government must function in accordance with the law.
3. The government must have an overall plan.
4. The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas.
5. In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base areas first.3

The significance of Thompson himself was that he was a practitioner–theorist (in that order). As a long-serving member of the colonial Malayan Civil Service he was at the centre of the British counter-insurgency effort during the Emergency, rising to become deputy secretary of defence (1955–59) and permanent secretary for defence for Malaya (1959–61).4 In 1961 he was appointed on the recommendation of the former high commissioner in Malaya, Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer, to become head of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, which ostensibly aimed to convey the lessons of the Malayan campaign to the South Vietnamese government in its attempt to thwart the burgeoning Viet Cong insurgency. Although gaining a limited hearing both with the Saigon regime and the administration of President John F. Kennedy in the years of the expanding US military commitment, his views were largely ignored. He became increasingly critical of the war’s conduct and the Mission’s work ceased in early 1965,5 though he later became an unofficial advisor to President Richard Nixon in 1969 whose policy of ‘Vietnamisation’ and emphasis on pacification more coincided with his own views about how the war should be prosecuted.

It was only after he left service with the British Advisory Mission that he began to write of his experiences of the counter-insurgency campaigns in Malaya and South Vietnam in the course which he formulated his five principles. Since then, Thompson’s principles have become an established template for understanding the basics of COIN practice. In the years following the coalition invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, and the gradual recognition of the reality of protracted resistance against the central administrations of those countries, classical COIN thinking has enjoyed a renaissance in contemporary military theory, with the Malayan experience, and more specifically Thompson’s work being referenced by analysts as an influence on British government and military policy in Afghanistan.6
Discerning an explicit link between Thompson’s thinking and current British military practice in Afghanistan is not, however, altogether straightforward. Official military doctrines rarely mention or pay obeisance to any one theorist. With respect to the evolution of British COIN thinking there is an even more direct reason for this, which is that Thompson was not the architect of the British campaign in Malaya. His later writings represented his reflections on the campaign as a whole – the direction of which was formulated largely by Thompson’s superiors, Sir Gerald Templer, Sir Henry Gurney, who was Templer’s predecessor as high commissioner, and Gurney’s director of operations, General Sir Harold Briggs. In particular, Thompson’s expositions were an attempt to encapsulate his experiences within a loose theoretical framework, which sought to distil the essentials for effective counter-insurgency. Such thinking did, though, aspire to a degree of universal applicability, be it to the jungles of Malaya and South Vietnam, or the mountainous hinterland of Afghanistan. As Colonel David Benest points out, ‘Thompson’s principles’ were an ‘exercise in post-event rationalisation rather than a basis of policy at the time’.7 In this context his thinking became a key referent – the locus classicus – in what later commentators have characterised as a ‘body of semi-formal counter-insurgency theory’,8 exercising influence as an informal ‘doctrinal construct’ in British COIN understandings.9 Writing in the journal of the French armed force’s doctrine centre, Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Rollins of the British Army argued that while ‘British writings on COIN did not enjoy “official” status’, they ‘were nonetheless influential’, singling out ‘Sir Robert Thompson whose “five principles” stressed political responses, reflecting his experiences in Malaya’.10 Indeed, it can be contended that the background influence of Thompson’s ideas find their expression in the views further up the chain in the Army’s command. For example, a strong Thompsonian imprint can be detected in the remarks of former chief of the defence staff, General Sir Mike Jackson, who in a speech in late 2007 emphasised the principles of ‘governance’, ‘the rule of law’ and ‘political development’ as vital elements in British counter-insurgency thought.11

If, therefore, we accept that Thompson’s principles do comprise a template of understanding that contains the potential for applicability across time and space, and can reasonably infer that these principles function as an influence, albeit an indirect one, on current British military conduct then we can construct a very simple but interesting question, which this analysis will aim to answer: Are the rules laid out by Thompson’s writings being followed in Helmand province? Further, are they applicable to this conflict? The framework elaborated by Thompson was first articulated in the 1960s. In the current era the enemy is no longer communism but religious extremism; and in the case of Afghanistan and the Taliban, a specific combination of Islamist radicalism and entrenched tribal systems of authority. Using the British effort in Afghanistan from April 2006 to October 2008 so as to include HERRICK IV through to VII, this analysis will attempt a comparison with Thompson’s basic principles of COIN warfare to judge whether the methods coincide, and what this may imply for British operations in Helmand province.

In order to make this comparison a mixture of Thompson’s works and contemporary source material is required. Thompson’s ideas will be extracted
primarily from his three key works on the subject of COIN, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966), *No Exit from Vietnam* (1969) and *Revolutionary Warfare in World Strategy 1945-1969* (1970). It is in these volumes, most particularly *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, that his framework is laid out and a variety of other interesting comments are made that are relevant to this discussion. Arguably, none of the books are works of pure COIN theory. Instead, while they express Thompson’s ideas about the subject, they comprise for the most part reviews of the British experience in Malaya and the American counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam with a basic set of conceptual ideas skinned off.

Sources on the British operations in Afghanistan are more varied. There is a wealth of first-hand and journalistic accounts along with national newspaper reports and statements that emanate from British government and military perspectives. These will be used to provide insight into particular events, and in some cases critiques of British conduct. On an academic level, studies and lectures which closely relate to the topic will also be referenced. As stated, the British experiences in Malaya and Afghanistan have been widely quoted of late and the similarities and contrasts between these cases provide additional insight into the application of Thompson’s framework to British policy in Helmand province.

So what will this study be aiming to prove? First, it will suggest that, ultimately, it would seem that much of what comprises the so-called five principles can be seen in the ‘Comprehensive Approach’, which is the modern British incarnation of COIN theory. This approach, embodied in the pre-deployment ‘Joint UK Plan for Helmand’, did – in theory – apply all five principles. Starting off in a secure zone at Lashkar Gar, a ‘clear, hold and build’ approach was envisaged. It recognised the importance of a political aim in the establishment of Afghan political and economic viability. Plans included extending the authority of President Hamid Karzai’s Afghan government and developing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), as well as the economic and social development of the province. Lastly, the whole operation was coordinated by the Helmand Executive Group; known since June 2008 as the Civil–Military Mission Helmand (CMMH), bringing together the security plan and civilian development efforts.

Second, this study will show that despite theoretical adherence to Thompsonian principles, since the British deployment to the province there has been some major deviation from the Joint Plan and thus the Thompson ideal. For the most part this has been caused by the rapid expansion of the secure zone to include the northern population centres such as Sangin, Now Zad and Musa Qala. This has stretched the British military commitment, putting UK forces in the midst of a heavy Taliban presence. The result has been that the provision of security has now become the main focus of the British effort, and the main source of problems. The combined military/socio-economic approach became blunted as civilian operatives were unable to work in unsecure areas. In this climate it would appear that Thompson’s ideas were being ignored or negated. Yet going into 2007 and 2008 actions taken to remedy the situation have suggested that a more Thompson-like approach is being
implemented slowly, although uncertainty remains as to how effective even these changes will prove in the long run.

In addition, the complexities of the Helmand theatre have also led to some conflict between Thompson’s theories and actual action on the ground. Problems with Afghan government and police corruption have impeded the judicial process and the attempt to halt local support for the insurgency. Meanwhile, the narcotics issue has seen the British juggle the need to combat the high levels of poverty in the province with the aim to eradicate Helmand’s opium production. A further complicating factor is that the Taliban were an established government before 2001, and thus are not unskilled in ruling areas they occupy.13

Overall, a comparison between British operations in Helmand and Thompson’s principles shows that the basic ideas of secure areas, political motive and clear plans were applied. However, as the security situation worsened, the realities on the ground diverged from these theoretical ideas enough for them to be considered to be in contradiction with Thompson’s precepts. As for the key principles of separating the people from the guerrillas and the application of proper standards of justice, these were divergent from the start. This had nothing to do with British action, but was a result of the nature of Helmand province and those who were attempting to govern it under the aegis of the central Afghan administration.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Before this comparison can be made, there are a number of issues raised by the question that have to be addressed. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that this study suffers from a degree of self-imposed ‘tunnel vision’. The war in Afghanistan is a multinational effort comprising the American anti-terror Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and the NATO ISAF and United Nations (UN) mandate mission to stabilise and develop the country. These will only be referenced when relevant. This may seem an unduly narrow focus as it is often hard to distinguish British policy from that of ISAF. Even so, British policy can be isolated for the reason that it is the lead nation in Helmand and to a certain extent it is possible to analyse it in its singularity.

Secondly, there is also the issue of what is actually meant by ‘the British’. Within the British effort there are effectively two sides, civilian and military. These both consist of a number of organisations. For the requirements of this study, ‘British’ will be used as a blanket term to cover the various government institutions and the armed forces involved in Helmand province. The different groups will be mentioned in the relevant areas, but any reference to British policy is to be taken as the combined civil/military effort where not stipulated otherwise. It may also be referred to as United Kingdom (UK) policy. Similarly, any reference to British military or civil actions will also include all organisations involved in those efforts.

Lastly, there needs to be an explanation as to the structure of this study as we shall be elaborating Thompson’s theories in the opposite order to that in which he originally articulated them. As the most narrative area, it would be prudent to start
with the fifth principle. The explanation of secure area expansion lends itself to the chronological description of security operations as well as some of the key ideas that constitute the COIN campaign in Helmand. Putting this principle first enables the evolution of UK policy to be clearly identified from its inception and the important operational names and basic themes introduced logically and coherently. We shall see the unfolding implications of these initial themes in the evaluation of the subsequent four principles. As this is the starting point, the principles shall be looked at in reverse. With that, and the above issues in mind, the comparison between Thompson’s work and the British involvement in Helmand province can be initiated.

THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE – THE NEED FOR A SECURE BASE AREA

In Thompson’s fifth principle, he states that in the guerrilla phase of an insurgency its opponents should seek a secure base area. Driving the choice of location should be districts with a greater level of infrastructure and the higher concentrations of population. These are also ‘more vital to the government from the point of view of its communications and the economy’. Ultimately, these areas should be relatively easy to secure compared to outlying regions. In turn, the early successes in securing the main urban centres will produce morale benefits to both the security forces and local population, helping commit them to the struggle ahead. He notes that there is a negative side effect in the short-term whereby the insurgency would gain control over more remote areas. In the long-term, however, if the base areas are properly secured counter-insurgency forces can methodically work their way outwards without fear of their falling into enemy hands.

To assess the applicability of this principle to Helmand, it first must be ascertained where the province was in political and military terms when the British entered the fray. Patrick Bishop states that at the time of the British deployment to the south, the Taliban were seeking to regain control of the province after their removal from power in 2001. The Taliban began once again to assert authority over the local population. Therefore the Taliban’s campaign can be regarded as inhabiting the initial stages of the guerrilla phase, according to the description of the progression of an insurgency given by Thompson. At this stage, according to Thompson, the insurgent movement is aiming to gain momentum, building up weapons and attacking isolated police and military installations with the intention of throwing the government off balance in order to ‘cause panic in the population and to dislocate the economy’. These activities are the prelude to achieve the wider political aim to gain control over the population, starting in the rural areas, and to destroy the government’s authority. The military aim is to neutralize the government’s armed force, and render them powerless to save the country. Given this situation in Helmand, the British did indeed follow a noticeably similar line to that articulated by Thompson’s fifth principle. The deployment plan, known as the Joint UK Plan for Helmand, called for a base area focused on the more developed Lashkar Gah and Gereshk regions. Known as the ‘triangle’, this was marked as the
prime place to start the stabilisation effort because it contained two-thirds of Helmand’s population and was by Helmandi standards highly developed. Central to this base was the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Lashkar Gah, a combined civilian–military venture designed to coordinate stabilisation and reconstruction.

Once the base had been established, plans up to November 2006 and the end of the HERRICK IV deployment consisted of a strategy of clear, hold and build, limited to a small area around the triangle and pushing north. Undeniably, it looked as if things would develop like a classic Malayan ‘oil spot’ strategy of base area growth. In May, the situation was seemingly calm. Military commanders talked of implementing the ‘Sangin effect’, the slow expansion into the villages north of Gereshk. This was started by a steady increase in patrols to consolidate the position and to notify the locals of their presence. All signs still pointed to Thompson.

Yet in June, as the British began to employ the ‘Sangin effect’, they were forced to deviate from the Joint Plan at the request of the government of Afghanistan (GoA). The Taliban began to infiltrate the northern districts in force. This was shown by the increase of attacks on the ANSF, including one assault that resulted in the killing of 20 members of the Afghan National Police (ANP) in Musa Qala. Helmand’s governor at that time, Mohammed Daoud, understandably saw these Taliban advances in the north as threatening to government control of the province, especially the symbolic Kajaki hydroelectric dam. Nonetheless, for the British to respond to Daoud’s appeal threatened to defy Thompson’s dictum. In a criticism of such reactionary moves, he notes that, ‘by seeking quick military victories in insurgent controlled areas, [the security forces] will certainly get a long haul for which it nor the people may be prepared’.24

This situation was recognised by Brigadier Ed Butler, commander of Task Force Helmand and head of the British military mission. He argued that it went ‘against military logic, experience and tactical wisdom’, but could not ignore the GoA. Responding to requests to defend the Kajaki dam project was not in and of itself politically illogical given that the aim of the British commitment is to stabilise and expand the authority of the Kabul government. Brigadier Butler’s point was that it was militarily nugatory – and therefore politically foolish – to attempt to defend fixed positions in places where operational capacity was insufficient to secure and hold those areas. However, political imperatives won the day and in doing so caused a series of events that would affect the entire British effort. Thompson’s words would be made to appear almost prophetic as a force of 3,300 men, of which only 650 were combat troops, now had to spread out into the north. Small fortified bases or ‘platoon houses’ were set up in district towns. Inside these areas of high Taliban concentration, they were soon under siege.

Unsurprisingly, the overstretched military was unable to stabilise the situation, at first only able to hold small pockets within the towns. In all district centres except Musa Qala they clung on, even though Thompson proposed that in such an unstable situation the security forces should withdraw. The ill-advised nature of these actions was due entirely to wider political considerations. Everyone knew that to leave
these towns to ANSF control would be to permit them to fall into enemy hands. This would appear disastrous for the GoA. Further, a British withdrawal and abandonment of the GoA would critically affect their standing within ISAF. The plan had now diverged from the fifth principle completely.

To make matters worse, the British were unable to stabilise the expanded commitment due to the needs of other operations. The British military effort also formed part of the wider American led campaign, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, the primary mission of which was to eliminate terrorists and their supporters. As a result, the British were forced into ‘kinetic’ or more conventional, military operations in Helmand during Operation MOUNTAIN THRUST in 2006 involving 11,000 troops from the US, Britain and Canada aimed at flushing out the Taliban across the southern Afghan provinces. Rather than focusing on patrolling, personnel were used for ‘search and cordon’ missions. Yet, despite government claims, these did nothing to further the stabilisation effort. Thus degrees of tension arose between aggressive operations like MOUNTAIN THRUST, which ran the risk of alienating the local population, and the longer term political objective to pacify lawless areas through stabilisation and development. These fears were compounded in the British command by what was sometimes seen as excessive civilian collateral damage inflicted by American forces during such operations.

The stabilisation of the security situation became the focus of HERRICK IV and subsequently into 2007 with HERRICKs V and VI. ‘Clear’ and ‘hold’ were the watchwords and they tried to lay the groundwork for a successful COIN campaign in Helmand. Disruption missions such as Operation GLACIER 4 in February, designed to destroy the Taliban’s supply chain, did fit in with Thompson’s ideas on operating in an insecure environment. This was in turn combined with operations such as ACHILLES and LASTAY KULANG, which attempted to remove the Taliban presence from the Sangin valley and Kajaki areas. These were important targets for the reconstruction effort. According to British and other ISAF officials the Taliban suffered heavy casualties under the weight of firepower, and had been driven back thus expanding the area of GoA control. In reality, the outcome of these operations was a little more uncertain. International media, as well as the Taliban themselves, claimed that there had been no GoA gains whatsoever. Despite losses, the insurgents were simply moving back into the territory once the security forces left. To apply this to Thompson’s theories, methodically taking and holding key areas is essential for the success of a counter-insurgency campaign. It is then necessary to make them as secure as the original base. Thompson describes it as like a ‘steamroller out-look’. If media reports are correct and the holding part did not happen as it was meant to then operations such as LASTAY KULANG were not an attempt to slowly expand control like Thompson’s steamroller but simply a short-term effort which achieved no lasting results.

By the start of 2008 a stalemate had been reached. The Taliban seemed to be shying away from the type of engagements that characterised 2006 indicating perhaps that superior British firepower had compelled them to change tactics. Yet a focus on firepower alone obviously would not be sufficient to defeat the
insurgents. In August, the Taliban began a series of attacks against Lashkar Gah in an effort to show that the GoA’s hold on the area was fragile. In this climate the British continued to conduct area denial operations in an attempt to keep the Taliban on the back-foot. Nonetheless, the security situation did appear to be worsening. Even the much applauded Operation OQAB TSUKA, the delivery of new turbines to the Kajaki dam, was nothing like an attempt to carefully expand a secure area. Although the then commander of the Task Force, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, proclaimed the operation as marking ‘the end of the beginning’, time was to reveal this assessment to be somewhat premature.

In summary, it would seem that the fifth principle was certainly applicable to the British military effort in Helmand. Initially, the military did attempt to set up a secure base in the most populated and developed area. That fitted Thompson’s recommendation exactly, but the fact that the British became pressured into a reactionary response as a result of GoA demands forced them to deviate. As a consequence the British had to place their forces in unsecured areas. The subsequent operations, the inability and then seeming unwillingness to hold ground after clearing operations, resulted in little improvement in the stability of the province. This was precisely the negative outcome that Thompson theorised would come from such action.

**THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE – THE NEED TO SEPARATE THE INSURGENCY FROM THE PEOPLE**

The deteriorating security situation was largely due to the fact that the British were fighting more than just a ‘hardcore’ of Taliban. There were others who, for a variety of reasons, were willing to fight for them or cooperate with them. There was, therefore, a need to overcome political subversion as Thompson sets out in his fourth principle. According to the principle, it is necessary to end the collaboration between ordinary people and the enemy. To separate the insurgents from the wider population is to remove them from their source of supplies and recruits. By doing so, the insurgents will begin to wither away allowing the security forces to conduct a ‘mopping up’ operation. An essential part of this separation process is the gathering of intelligence on insurgents and sympathisers, with police and indigenous intelligence gathering taking the lead.

In Helmand it has been a struggle to separate people from the insurgents. In part this was due to the sheer number of opposing groups, each with differing agendas. It was often a problem for the British to lump all enemy groups together as ‘Taliban’. The complex reality was that they were confronting a centuries-old tradition of Pashtun based resistance to central authority and were fighting other groups affiliated with the Taliban. Firstly, there were the drug barons and their militias, who find common cause with the Taliban in wanting Western influence evicted from Helmand. They also provided the insurgency with arms and funding in return for protection from British counter-narcotics operations. There was also an ongoing
agreement that the Taliban would cease operations against the security forces during the poppy harvest so that it could be brought in with the minimum of interference.

Secondly, there are the ‘tier two’ Taliban fighters. These are not indigenous Afghans, but foreign jihadists motivated by religious aims. Although the exact scale of foreign jihadist involvement is open to question, there is evidence of some non-Afghan participation, most notably recruits from Pakistan. As they are not drawn from the local population they are unaffected by efforts to separate the population from the insurgency. The existence of such a group in the insurgent ranks reveals a problem with the fourth principle as they are unlikely to be influenced by the social, economic and security benefits that the government could use to bring people over to its side. In this respect, they provide a separate source of manpower that can only be dealt with by military means as they have come to Helmand to fight and die for their cause.

The last group are those that may be termed the ordinary Afghans. The vast majority of locals who fight for the Taliban often do so for monetary reward or, alternatively, because they feel marginalised by central government. The Taliban has been adept, in particular, at exploiting tribal divisions in the south and east of Afghanistan to enlist the support of those groups who feel excluded from power and economic opportunities in the new political dispensation. Helmand is poverty-ridden with little work other than subsistence agriculture. This means that between farming seasons people with few other job prospects are happy to use fighting the British as an alternative source of income. Thompson’s principle seems highly relevant when related to these ‘ten dollar Taliban’. These farmers are not only part of the opposition to British aims when they fight for the Taliban. They also grow opium for its conversion to heroin and so would be affected by counter-narcotics missions.

As suggested, there is little in the way of economic alternatives. Life in the Afghan National Army (ANA) is tough and offers only $4 a day to its soldiers in the field compared to an estimated $12 a day for those fighting for the Taliban. Yet going into 2008 there has been one British backed initiative that has provided a viable alternative to the insurgency. It is also one mentioned by Thompson. The idea of supporting government building projects is one principally adopted by the civilian aid agencies and taken up by the British to a limited degree in Helmand. GoA projects can be effective in two ways in that they provide jobs and create an incentive to support the government, not least in holding out the prospect of more employment. The lack of stability has of course limited its scope and thus its overall effectiveness. It is, however, another link with Thompson’s theories and the practice of British policy in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, as a result of the worsening security situation, the likelihood of gaining local support has reduced in another way. As some territory, such as Musa Qala, changed hands the population became more reluctant to fully support the COIN effort for fear of reprisals as the security force withdrew. For example, there are various reported cases of tribal elders attending council meetings, or shuras, in British bases that were unwilling to point out that there were Taliban amongst their
number who were there for the purposes of examining defensive positions.\textsuperscript{50} They simply did not think the British would be around long enough to protect them. In his theory, Thompson recognises that it is only natural that ‘there will be an inclination to support the side which looks like winning’.\textsuperscript{51} In 2006 especially, the outcome was far from certain and the people doubted the commitment of British forces.

The above view was induced, in part, by the sense of abandonment felt after the fall of the Taliban. International forces had left them at the mercy of a resurgent Taliban once before. So it was not long before the British realised, as Thompson perceived, that the security forces ‘must demonstrate both [their] determination and [their] capacity to win’.\textsuperscript{52} Part of the goal of maintaining offensive operations became a show of force, and a reminder that the British were willing to fight. This was illustrated at the end of the 2007 fight for Musa Qala known as Operation MAR KARDAD, lost the year before due to British overstretch. As the operation drew to a close the spokesman for the commander of Task Force Helmand, Colonel Richard Eaton, announced that ‘the aim of this operation is to win over the people of Helmand. The support of the people is the prize’.\textsuperscript{53}

Lack of security was not the only thing keeping the people close to the Taliban. The ethnic issue also affected the willingness to cooperate with the British. Some individuals working within the security effort have accused the British of ignoring the Pashtun nature of the insurgency and how this related to the population of Helmand.\textsuperscript{54} The insurgency has the same background and lives to a large extent by the same rules as the population they operate within. In Pashtun society, social code is dictated by the \textit{Pushtunwali}, which, with its strong emphasis on hospitality, has meant that security forces are often frustrated by efforts to root out Taliban members from the host populations.\textsuperscript{55} There was also the fact that established ANA units brought into Helmand early on came from different ethnic areas in the north of the country, causing further resentment amongst the intensely honour-driven Pashtun tribes.

As intelligence is such a central part of the fourth principle, it is quite revealing that it was seemingly missing from the British campaign.\textsuperscript{56} The chief of the general staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, observed that the British, along with the rest of NATO had assumed that the Afghans would welcome them. Instead, the reaction was ‘rather similar to prodding the lion who was otherwise kipping in the corner, minding his own business’.\textsuperscript{57} It could be argued that it was a naïve assumption to believe that the Afghans’ goals and those of the British would be the same, particularly in the Pashtun dominated south which had traditionally resisted the imposition of outside authority. As a counter-point, however, there was a pre-deployment debate about the effect of the insertion of outside forces on local warlords with vested interests in opium production.\textsuperscript{58} Still, the received wisdom remained that the majority of people would see the British as saviours and thereby, in the words of Sir Jock Stirrup, the chief of the defence staff, they were perhaps too complacent.\textsuperscript{59}

The final difficulty facing the British with respect to effecting Thompson’s fourth principle is the GoA itself. The problem is that it has not been seen as a preferable
alternative to the Taliban. One crucial reason is that the government’s representatives on the streets of the province, the ANP, have not been popular with the wider population. The police are the pivotal element of an effective COIN campaign and the unpopularity of the ANP has been highly detrimental to the British security effort. The ANP are seen as corrupt and there have been reported cases of members actively helping the Taliban, as well as setting up illegal checkpoints to steal from locals. Such a troublesome police force has meant that they have often been side-lined by the British. This is certainly something which goes against Thompson’s understanding of police primacy.

The support of corrupt or unpopular figures by the GoA has also been a great hindrance to the British. Taliban propaganda has been able to play on this aspect to garner more support from the locals by reducing trust in the GoA and its allies. The British have attempted to influence the choice of governor or police chiefs, but often they have been forced to accept Karzai’s decisions. One such example saw the British enter Sangin in 2006 to rescue a district chief of the ANP from an angry mob because he had been convicted of rape. The security forces knew that such action would be used to good effect by the Taliban as an example of British support for corruption.

All this, of course, illustrates the contradiction between the counter-insurgency principles derived from the experience such as that in Malaya where the British were the presiding colonial authority and able to coordinate the different aspects of the campaign, and the experience of being an external actor in support of a democratically elected regime. Should the British have had the right to overrule GoA appointments? The British were not the sovereign power in Helmand, let alone Afghanistan. To have overtly interfered in political appointments risked undermining the goal of attempting to expand the authority of the central government. Yet such examples demonstrate the clash of perceptions that can occur within the Thompsonian principle of how to separate the people from the insurgents. In fact, it can be contended that the very essence of the political goal which British operations are designed to support, namely, the expansion and consolidation of Kabul’s control are part of the problem. As Johnson and Mason argue, the ‘millions of tribesmen’ who live within the traditional structures of the Pashtunwali ‘have no desire to have a new, alien system imposed on them by outsiders’. And the Kabul government, whether supported by NATO forces or not, is seen as an outsider.

Overall, in evaluating the fourth element of Thompson’s COIN theory we can see again the relevance of his ideas. Yet the intelligence picture on the population’s links to the insurgency appeared to be seriously lacking pre-deployment, a problem which has not been remedied to any great degree. The fact that this has been such a hindrance to the British is surely proof of the validity of Thompson’s concept. Added to this, the problems that have been hampering efforts to remove the people from the insurgency caused by GoA corruption have meant a struggle for the British. They were attempting to expand government authority in order to weaken the Taliban hold on Helmand, but often they and the population were unhappy as to the type of authority the government was offering them. The reality, as it seems to
present itself, is that no matter how much the British may recognise the essential utility of Thompson’s fourth principle, trying to separate the people from the insurgency and promoting an alternative political authority is simply not going to be effective if the people themselves do not see the alternative as viable.

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE – THE NEED FOR A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH TO COIN

So far in this analysis the primary focus has been on the security side of the British campaign. However, according to Thompsonian precepts an efficacious COIN effort must be based on the realisation that an insurgency cannot be defeated by military means alone. This is where the multi-faceted plan explained in the third principle requires consideration. A successful plan, Thompson explains, should not focus solely on security concerns, but on ‘all political, social, economic, administrative, police and other measures’. 63 All these factors are needed to overcome an insurgency. The plan should consist of a balance between military and civilian measures, each with clearly defined roles to maximise efficiency and make sure the two sides are mutually supporting.

Before the civil effort is mentioned, we must return briefly to the military plan once more. Since 2006 it has always been seen that the military would be used as the enabler for the political, social and economic development of Helmand province. The expansion of British control in the province would tie in with an expansion of GoA authority, thus producing the stabilisation that is a necessary base for civilian efforts. The military’s role in bolstering the GoA’s governance would also be facilitated through the training of the ANA. This was to be carried out by Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) drawn from the British Army.64

In practice, the civilian effort has proven a lot less straightforward in terms of the ability to deliver development and reconstruction. In 2006 the civilian agencies that make up the PRTs, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Department for International Development (DFID), Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Stabilisation Unit (SU), started their commitment to the province in the wake of the military effort.65 In the long-term, though, the civilian organisations planned to follow the benchmarks and targets set out in the ‘Afghanistan Compact’, a multi-national agreement on the goals for Afghan development. The compact offers ‘a framework for co-operation over the next five years in the areas of security; governance, rule of law and human rights; economic and social development; and ... narcotics’.66

To fill the gap between the end of the military phase in an area, and the achievement of the five year development goals set out in the compact, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) were devised. These consisted of small projects to win over the local population, such as constructing wells. Ultimately, this was an effort to create an immediately noticeable difference between the time when the area was held by the insurgency and the GoA.67 In-keeping with the balanced approach these QIPs were to be coordinated by the PRT and MOD’s Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) teams. To all appearances, the programme fitted in with the third principle.
Yet even before the Taliban offensive of June 2006, tensions were beginning to show in civilian–military relations. Some in the civilian effort wanted to be seen as separate from the military. Thus, they wanted to keep their distance, and in doing so delayed follow-up efforts to military operations. Military personnel on the ground could not understand the inability to act.68 There were some good reasons why these organisations were compelled to operate slowly, not least out of concerns for the safety of personnel who could not, of course, be expected to risk their lives in danger areas in the same way military personnel would. Nevertheless, personal risk aside, there were persistent allegations of ineffective coordination, communication and direction across the spectrum of agencies tasked with peacebuilding efforts.69 From the military perspective it bred the idea that the civilian side of the campaign was incompetent, a theme already seized upon by the media. In relation to Thompson, the unwillingness of some civilians to support the military endeavour contradicts the recommendations of his principle. The lack of civil–military coordination also began to demonstrate itself in the negligible gains in security in Helmand and, consequently, the trend towards the domination of the military effort over all other aspects of the struggle.

The increased difficulties in the provision of security put an end to a clear civilian side to the counter-insurgency effort. With the lack of secure areas it was some time before the civil side of the mission could even operate outside of their compounds. Decisionmakers in the government agencies would not let their personnel travel to such dangerous environments as the north of Helmand. Therefore, the military also came to take responsibility for part of the supposedly civilian developmental effort. In this environment, QIPs that were originally the remit of the FCO and DfID were often actually carried out by British Army engineers.70 While this was dictated by the situation, it hardly made for a balanced approach. Moreover, there were reported cases of civilian agencies resisting the military’s attempts to execute those tasks allocated to them, while still unable to fulfil these tasks themselves.71

To compound matters, as the military expanded its efforts it ended up clashing with more tribal groups or warlords who had interests linked to the Taliban. So, far from truly unifying the social, economic and political dimensions of the counter-insurgency campaign in line with Thompson’s thinking, British forces were compelled to focus for the most part on the security effort. The initiatives that received the most attention are those that are seen as aiding the fight against the insurgency, such as the training of local forces, primarily the ANA under the OMLTs.72 The police on the other hand, while they have been mentored by the military, have not been properly trained in policing techniques. Instead they have been trained as a paramilitary force, something that while necessary for the police in such an insecure environment is, so far, the only real training the ANP has had. In effect, the ANP has been turned into another militia rather than a functioning police force.

Even so, to say there has not been social and economic development in the province would be untrue. As the Taliban attacks scaled-down some PRT efforts were put into place. These included the building of schools and, notably, the development of women’s rights. Tying in to the theme of the previous section, these
efforts did begin to show that there was a viable alternative in the GoA and their Western supporters. Women especially were quick to become some of the most ardent supporters of change, helped in no small part by the work of DfID and the FCO. FCO sponsored programmes focused, among other things, on encouraging female literacy, education, and political participation, as well as engaging the Afghan government in efforts to develop an equal rights agenda. Also mentioned in the previous section, there have been efforts to encourage local economic growth and a sense of personal investment in the success of the GoA.

Nonetheless, when the bigger picture is examined, this effort is hardly balanced in the way Thompson indicated it should be. The security situation dominates the British psyche when it comes to Helmand. Even the show-piece of the development effort in Helmand was made out to be a security triumph. The delivery of the turbine to the Kajaki dam, Operation OQAB TSUKA, was a military success and showed how they were carrying out the reconstruction effort. Prestige projects, such as the dam are a useful way of showing in a very obvious manner that something is being achieved. In his work, Thompson notes this too. From the standpoint of this comparison though, this was also a display of how the reconstruction effort had become militarised.

The idea of ‘muddling through’ seems to be the recurring theme of the British involvement in theatre. Criticism coming out of various senior members of the British deployment suggests little in the way of planning for a combined effort. This includes the military effort. Leo Docherty implies that upon entering the district centres the British force had no clue what they were meant to do. To a degree this was understandable. They had not planned to head into the northern districts immediately. Nor had they planned for such a volatile security situation. This meant there was little guidance for military personnel other than to hold the districts from the Taliban and to attempt to extend the authority of the GoA.

The narcotics effort has also received much criticism. The establishment of a viable alternative to poppies was seen as a failure as their cultivation is so much a part of the provincial economy, where poverty and poor growing conditions mean farmers need to maximise returns from their crops. The security situation is also greatly linked. As a result, there was bound to be a conflict of interests. What occurred was a situation where the government claimed it was mounting a counter-narcotics effort, while those on the ground attempted to avoid upsetting the local economy and thus the population by dealing with it. The military were especially keen to remove themselves from this part of the plan. In the hostile environment, though, they ended up being utilised to facilitate the goals of the civilian operation, such as the destruction of drug labs rather than improve the overall security environment.

Perhaps Thompson’s third principle would have been applicable if the lack of security had not blunted civil development efforts around Lashkar Gah. The inability of the FCO or DfID to move around meant that they were not able to adapt to the situation on the ground, let alone follow a coherent plan. Therefore, the arrangements that were put in place were highly-security minded, with solely military participation. Efforts to train the ANSF focused primarily on the ANA to
help bolster British operations and give them an Afghan face. The ANP were also trained in a military manner and thus effectively became another wing of the army rather than a civilian force. Therefore, the widespread fighting made a Thompson-like approach unmanageable. The military had to take the lead.

THE SECOND PRINCIPLE – THE NEED TO ACT IN ACCORDANCE WITH LAW

The application of law is another one of Thompson’s ideas that was widely accepted as necessary for an effective prosecution of counter-insurgency in Helmand. The second principle states that it is the law that separates the government from the insurgency. Only by operating under the law can a government expect its people to live by it and thus reject the insurgency. The backing of the law gives the government more legitimacy, making it easier for them to gain support. In essence, the insurgents should be treated as criminals, and their crimes ‘spotlighted’ by the judicial process. Nevertheless, as will be seen, the situation in Helmand does not lend itself easily to the distinction of law enforcer and law breaker. For the British, this situation has made it extremely difficult to act in way that seems legitimate.

To use Thompson’s own words, when it comes to the rule of law the people of Helmand, ‘have no reason for choosing to support the government’. That is because Helmand is almost officially lawless, at least in terms of the operation of the writ of the central government. On paper it has law, with two judges per district to administer it. Due to threat levels, however, these judges only really operate within Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. This means that large areas in the province, including those held by the GoA, are devoid of state-enforced law. Elsewhere, across Pashtun dominated Helmand where tribal social codes apply, state law is ‘considered an alien construct’.

Even for those who can access it, the judicial process has little appeal. This is because the legal system seems to be a victim of all the problems that affect the other parts of national governance. The people complain of corruption and inefficiency. A leading judge in Helmand is one of those accused of offering reduced sentences in return for bribes. Building confidence in the law and encouraging support for the government is extremely difficult in such circumstances. This has not been helped by the lack of an effective police force. As it has been shown, the ANP are just as corrupt, receiving bribes as well as trafficking drugs.

This situation has led many locals to turn to other methods of gaining justice. In contrast to Thompson’s theories, here the insurgency offers an alternative to the unpopular GoA and ANP system. The Taliban originally came to power on a mandate of security and justice and so have a popular reputation for being able to enforce Islamic law. They operate their own judges who exploit the ‘justice gap’ left by GoA weakness. The reason that Taliban justice is sometimes preferred is that unlike the often slow and inconclusive GoA system, the Taliban are able to provide fast and often brutal decisions. To the average Afghan this has more appeal than a slow, cumbersome and Western-imposed system, and as such has been a serious barrier to the extension of GoA authority.
There are three other informal methods of justice in Helmand. First, ‘personal justice’ and revenge have become increasingly common. Family vendettas saw people taking the law into their own hands and punishing ‘guilty’ individuals themselves. Second, there is an opposing legal process based on the *Pashtunwali*, which instead of Western notions of justice and rule of law focuses on consensus and honour. This is certainly a relatively peaceful method of resolving conflicts in the often fractious clan based Helmandi hinterlands, but due to the influence of the Taliban is one which has not been widely practiced in the recent past. Lastly, tribal law is based around *shuras*, which also relies on consensus. Tribal elders will meet to discuss punishments for particular offences. Recognising the importance of this type of process in Helmand, there have been attempts to utilise *shuras* in parallel with the development of the GoA’s Western-style law. Meetings with elders are being trialled as a way of reconciling formal and customary law. Given that attempts to impose law from the centre are often resented in areas like Helmand, a middle-way, representing a Western/Kabul mandated return to the traditional Pashtun justice system seems both logical and appropriate.

Working with tribal norms and customs in this manner is not necessarily incompatible with the formal state system, but the effort has to be finely calibrated because there are inevitable tensions between two systems running in parallel. If one system is based on customary norms, the other on entirely separate juridical principles, there is always a risk that tribal law will trump the state legal system, thus undermining the functioning of that system, which in turn makes the state less legitimate. If these legal experiments are not successful then tribal law will continue to weaken central government, and by extension British control in the province. Having such a system in place takes authority away from the very system that is attempting to be expanded by the GoA.

In their military operations, the British have been dealing with another form of law to define legitimacy. These are the laws that govern war fighting as interpreted in the rules of engagement (ROE). ROE dictates what a legitimate target is for military personnel. A contentious issue in the modern environment, it is against this that military actions are judged. These catch-all rules, however, are for reasons of operational security, unknown outside the military. It can create the appearance that British forces are acting of their own accord under their own terms of operational necessity. This is especially true if they leave an area after a mission, rather than holding it. This would create a correlation between their appearance and the destruction arising from armed conflict, particularly with heavy reliance on air support, which causes the most in the way of collateral damage.

Ideally, the followers of the British Comprehensive Approach would like to focus on a criminal justice model for operations. The criminal justice model of COIN emphasises the precepts of proportionality and the rule of law. The actions of insurgents will be treated as a criminal conspiracy and be dealt with by normal police and judicial processes that uphold civil rights and due process. The scale of the fighting in Helmand, however, has prevented anything like a criminal justice model being implemented. The amount of hostility the British have faced has moved...
them completely towards war-fighting. For the most part, all that matters are the rules of warfare in the effort to enforce ‘human security’.92 The hope is that by spreading GoA authority, governance and justice can follow at a later date. Law then, has like everything else in the Helmand campaign, comes down to dealing with the security situation. Conventional legal issues, such as those of property, are marginalised by the GoA and the security forces. All the effort is being put into finding and pursuing insurgents and enemies of the state. That, arguably, is of little interest to the average Helmandi farmer.

The overall result of these problems is that the British have been unable to uphold governmental rule of law, which is almost non-existent in Helmand. The state of the GoA’s legal system means that it has offered no viable alternative to the legal systems already established in Helmand province. Legal authority has therefore continued to rest with informal structures, rather than those initiated by the counter-insurgency campaign. The lack of government systems have also played into the hands of the Taliban: for they had an established legal structure themselves and were able to implement it much more effectively, if brutally, than their opponents. So what effect does this have on the understandings of effective counter-insurgency methods according to the Thompson model? With no legitimacy coming with a well established legal infrastructure to support them, the British have only been acting according to military law. The result is completely contrary to Thompson’s ideas. It therefore means that the second principle is not being applied in Helmand.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE – THE NEED FOR A CLEAR POLITICAL AIM

The muddling through that has apparently characterised the combined plans for Helmand, has given the appearance that the British government did not have a clear aim. The selection and maintenance of a political aim is the first principle Thompson sets out for a successful COIN operation. In his eyes, the goals should always be the establishment of an area which is ‘politically and economically stable and viable’.93 He contends that the insurgency may be the largest problem in the region, but it is more than likely not the only issue. The development and the restoration of government authority are just as vital as military action. The emphasis should be on a long-term aim not a simple reaction to insurgency.

Yet if all the rhetoric of the government and state institutions is evaluated, it does appear – in theory – as though there was a central aim for Helmand in the vein of Thompson. It has been reiterated constantly throughout the campaign that British efforts are directed at the stabilisation and reconstruction of the province, both economically and politically, with the security effort being but an enabler of this aim. The British move into the province was part of the four stage ISAF stabilisation mission to create a feasible state in Afghanistan. The British therefore subscribed to the aims of that mission. Britain’s interpretation of that long-term goal is:

A stable and secure Afghanistan restored to its rightful place in the community of nations; with a self-sustaining economy, strong institutions and a broad-based,
multi-ethnic regime committed to eradicating terrorism and eliminating opium production; reducing poverty; respecting human rights; and honouring Afghanistan’s other international obligations.94

In accordance with Thompson’s theories it is widely accepted that the overall political aims were more important than military ones. Both the Comprehensive Approach and British military doctrine state that there can be no purely military resolution in a counter-insurgency operation, so there is little doubt of Thompson’s influence in this area. Therefore, a political aim for the operation was bound to appear as the British took responsibility for a province with essentially no Kabul-backed regional government. Since the start of the campaign, the majority of these efforts have been heralded as attempts to extend GoA authority.95 This is shown in the Joint Plan, and the combined CMMH. In line with this approach it was then hoped that the authority could be followed up by obvious development benefits for the population under GoA control.

It is due to the inability to act in other areas for so long the military campaign has become the driver of the British COIN effort since June 2006. This is the main theme of the British effort, and which is why it has formed the centrepiece of this analysis. When the military aim became the only one that mattered, even if it was ultimately for the long-term reasons given earlier in this section, all focus thus fell on the physical defeat of the insurgency. The aim of extending government authority was still clear, and indeed political.96 Yet it had little in the way of mutually supporting factors.

As a result, these military operations, while on paper extending the influence of the government, have done little to create a politically viable state of affairs. Efforts to maintain authority in the long-term are also militarised, such as the training of the ANSF. Security and governance were always going to go hand-in-hand in Helmand. It was because of the increased need for security that the British approved the original deployment of 3,000 extra troops, in the form of 16 Air Assault Brigade. Yet a lack of understanding of the nature of the political and social environment in which British forces were called upon to operate led to a misguided aim based around ousting religious extremism. Consequently, much of the fighting has not dealt with the social and economic issues which are just as key drivers of the insurgency as the Taliban’s wish to regain power.

Exploring this recurring theme, Daniel Marston writes that government decisionmakers ‘focused on achieving targets that were not necessarily related to what was practicable in theatre’.97 This appears to be the case, not because these targets were wrong for a counter-insurgency policy in general but because they were too general for a counter-insurgency in Helmand. The aim the British had was political but, as evinced by the review of the fourth principle, there was no intelligence or understanding to prove that this could be achieved.98 Policymakers were hoping for a similar situation to that which they had faced in the north of Afghanistan pre-2006. There the people, while from a mixed ethnic background, were inherently anti-Taliban. However, in the Pashtun south, the ethnic ties between
the people and the Taliban made the political aims of the British much harder to implement.  

Added to this, counter-insurgency policy did not account for how closely the population and the power structures within the province were tied to the narcotics economy. It meant that the aim of eliminating the narcotics trade was going to produce conflict with the other aim of providing stability and economic progress. Therefore, the security effort was going to have to bear the brunt of the attempts to halt drug trafficking and thus played another role in the militarisation of the COIN effort in Helmand. This has only caused more problems for already overstretched forces. Further, GoA political accommodations with some of those involved in opium production mean that for the sake of the security effort, the economic aim has been dealt a major blow. In a way, though, the aim of the destruction of the Taliban is in itself unachievable as the ‘Taliban solution’ represents the desires of at least part of the Pashtun population.

The final theme that once again comes to the fore in this last section is that of the quality of GoA governance. Thompson writes that an effective government machine is necessary for the completion of long-term aims. Yet what the British have had to deal with was a far from efficient machine. The lack of law and faith in the GoA made that task of providing security and stimulating reconstruction all the harder. It only provided impetus for their enemies who were able to exploit the political weaknesses of the GoA’s rule. Dealing with corruption and bad governance is one of the aims of the British plan, but it is not something in which they can directly intervene for political reasons: for unlike Malaya, they are not the ultimate sovereign power. As a consequence, the British have been forced to support a COIN contrary to many of the principles of effective counter-insurgency operations as laid out by Thompson.

There have been glimpses of Thompson in the British aim for Helmand. The British talked about the creation of a politically and economically viable area. It has, however, proved to be beyond their control. The lack of GoA authority and the opium issue have made the aim of securing political and economic progress a difficult set of goals to achieve. In the south of Afghanistan some of these problems have resulted in the assertion of short-term military objectives over longer term political ones. Therefore, it can be seen that Thompson’s ideas of a unified programme of political, social and economic improvement have almost been abandoned on the ground in Helmand as the military has had to fight harder and harder to gain a secure hold in the province. The shortcomings of the British operation in Helmand extend from numerous causes, which needless to say cannot be blamed solely on the role of the GoA or the failure of all economic and governance reforms. Military failings have also revealed themselves in poor equipment provision along with procurement and operational deficiencies that have led to increasing casualties (though it is pointed out rightly that these shortcomings stemmed more from the weak political leadership of the then UK government, which led to inadequate resourcing, along with lack of a coherent mission statement for the NATO forces in Afghanistan). The crucial issue, though, is that the cumulative effect these difficulties afflicting
the political–military relationship with the GoA and the reconstruction programme is that the economic and political efforts to create a viable state have been replaced by the attempted imposition of stability through armed force: a necessary requirement to achieve stability for sure, but on its own simply not enough.

CONCLUSION – IS THOMPSON APPLICABLE TO THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE?

At the beginning of this study the question was asked whether the British deployment in Helmand province was applicable to Thompson’s principles of counter-insurgency. The question was posed because there were apparent differences between the conduct of the war in Helmand and the approaches that are held to characterise a successful COIN strategy. To answer the question, a comparison was made between Thompson’s five principles and British operations in the province. Using case studies of particular incidents related to recommendations made by Thompson in his various works, a judgement has been made as to whether or not each principle was being carried out.

Taking into account the above evidence, it would seem as if the British have been seeking to apply the generality of Thompson’s principles as they initiated the campaign. The five principles have, in theory, been encompassed in the Comprehensive Approach and, therefore, the Joint Plan for Helmand. Yet events on the ground since 2006 have forced the British to act in a completely different manner to that planned. The pivotal moment in this respect was the heavy fighting that began in June 2006. The movement into areas of heavy Taliban concentration made the original effort inapplicable. Therefore, the British effort has diverged from the Thompson ideal in some key areas.

With the initial deployment to Helmand, three of the principles were an obvious influence on way the British acted. To start by returning to Thompson’s fifth principle, the notion of a secure base area was implemented: the Joint Plan called for the securing of the area around the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. Following the guidelines that Thompson set out, this goal was chosen because it was the most populous and developed part of Helmand. The application of this principle was further shown by the operations planned after it had been seized. Those operations consisted of a slow expansion northwards towards the district centres.

The Joint Plan also contained the ideas embodied in the third principle of Thompson’s construct. The plan itself was a combined civil–military venture with mutually supporting security and reconstruction efforts. Government agencies would strive to achieve the reconstruction benchmarks agreed by the Afghan government, while the military acted as enablers for this effort, providing security for developmental measures to be implemented and to have their effect. To ensure coordination, the PRTs and CIMIC teams were used. Yet it was not long before problems began to occur in the relationship between the two parts of the COIN effort due to the incompetence of the civilian agencies, as perceived by the military, and their unwillingness to coordinate – or even be identified with – British military operations.104
The last principle evaluated (Thompson’s first principle) and undoubtedly applied during the initial phase was the idea that the COIN effort should have a clear political aim. The political motivation behind the deployment was the creation of a politically and economically viable province. It was, however, as a result of the ambiguities and problems embedded in the political aim that the British were forced into a situation where Thompson’s rules could not apply. In particular, due to GoA requests for the British military to counter Taliban advances in the northern districts, the secure base area was abandoned for a broader occupation of the north.

It is at this point that the reality of Helmand and the theory of Thompson diverged. The lack of a secure base meant that the groundwork for development was not in place. The civilian members of the mission were unable to carry out their tasks due to the risks involved. Consequently, that half of the COIN campaign was largely inactive. The third principle, the need for a multi-faceted programme, was therefore wholly negated. The military struggle became the focus of the campaign due to the overriding need to stabilise the province. This in turn made British aims more short-term and military focused.

The examination of the fourth and second of Thompson’s principles, on the other hand, suggest they were lacking from the start: not, though, due to the failure of the British to plan. The essential requirement to end subversion was missing due to a lack of understanding. As the British did not readily appreciate the social conditions and the people whom they were attempting to separate from the insurgents, nothing was achieved. Added to this, the hard fighting in which the British had been engaged in order to spread government authority found them over-extended. In itself, this was politically damaging because it was actually playing a part in promoting the view that they were fighting a losing battle as far as the population was concerned. Therefore, people were unwilling to side with the British forces for fear of Taliban reprisals later.

Finally, there was the lack of law and order. The British were unable to act legitimately under the auspices of the GoA. The system that the GoA had in place was in fact largely non-existent. Those parts that were working were seen as corrupt anyway. Contrary to Thompson, it was actually the insurgents who had what passed for ‘the law’ on their side. The Taliban were seen as tough and effective lawmakers and law enforcers, and there was a perceived immediacy in dispensing justice: people often went to them, rather than the government.

An analysis of Thompson’s key principles begs the question, are they a ‘one size fits all’ solution? At the very heart of his theory is the importance of a multi-faceted approach. His principles are all necessarily inter-related but the complexity of the current Afghan situation: its social and cultural traditions; the religious context; the economy of the narcotics industry; poverty; tribal factions; the history of the Taliban government; a weak GoA; the risks attached to civilian agency operations; an ill-disciplined paramilitary police force; an ineffective judiciary; and the insurgency combine to over-extend and over-burden the British military in terms of capability, resources, and jurisdiction. Thompson’s theory was never meant to be solely military.
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NOTES

15. Ibid. p.58.
17. Thompson (note 14) p.29.
22. Ibid. p.52.
23. Ferguson (note 1) p.158. Some might dispute the idea that the Kajaki dam project is merely symbolic. Central to the long-term development of the region though the dam might be, in a country where the vast majority has no mains electricity, a hydro-electric plant – particularly one located in an area where governmental control is weak – is, arguably, still little more than a symbol of ‘progress’.
25. Ferguson (note 1) p.158.
34. Thompson (note 14) p.58.
42. Macy (note 31) p.82.
43. Ibid. p.83.
44. Differing claims regarding the proportion of foreign fighters with the Taliban are hard to validate. News reports invariably allude to thousands of non-Afghan fighters. Other observers, however, suggest that these figures are often inflated by the Afghan government and its Western allies to imply that the insurgency lacks indigenous support. See ‘4,000 Foreigners Join Taliban, Minister Says, MSNBC 10 Oct. 2009, online at <www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33256784/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/>’, accessed 18 Oct. 2009; Tom Coghlan, ‘Afghanistan’s “Pristine Jihad” Draws in Outsiders from Pakistan’, The Times 21 Jul. 2008. Johnson and Mason (note 41) p.66 observe that while the Taliban insurgency is centred almost exclusively on the single ethnic grouping of the Pashtuns that their susceptibility to radicalised Islamism whenever their authority is challenged has drawn in outsiders under the banner of globalised jihadism. They note that ‘Taliban known to have participated in the fighting in Iraq have been killed by coalition forces in Afghanistan, as have jihadists from other countries, including Chechens, Uzbeks, and even a few Turks’.
46. Ibid.
There has been some criticism that quick impact projects comprise mainly low-level initiatives such as rubble clearing that are poorly paid and do little to sustain long-term employment sufficient to keep young men away from militia groups: sometimes described as ‘No Impact Projects’. Other impact projects, however, attempt to focus on the setting up of enterprises such as building companies that are capable of winning government contracts for infrastructure projects. These are intended to employ long-term skilled workers rather than people off the street. For a survey see: House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Operations in Afghanistan*, Thirteenth Report of Session, 2006–07 (London: Stationary Office 2007) pp.35–37.
76. Page (note 37).
77. Allen-Mills (note 57).
78. Docherty (note 56) p.185.
79. Bishop (note 16) p.35.
81. Thompson (note 14) p.52.
82. Ibid. p.54.
83. Ibid. p.54.
86. Ibid. p.84.
87. Sinno (note 55) p.83.
88. Ledwidge (note 85) p.8.
90. Ibid.
96. Anon. (note 89).
99. On the ability of the Taliban to mobilise the Pashtuns in relation to their traditions of resistance and their social codes see Johnson and Mason (note 41) pp.53–55 and 58–64.
100. Ibid.
101. The National Solidarity Programme, for example, undertaken by the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development where local shuras select and oversee development projects is widely seen as has having been successful in fostering local governance. See ‘The National Solidarity Programme’, online at <www.nspafghanistan.org>, accessed 25 Oct. 2009.
102. See Betz and Cormack (note 2) pp.325–27.
104. Many of the sources consulted for this analysis on the CIMIC were military and the majority were not favourable towards the civilian effort. This may reflect a particularly military take on the difficulties encountered in Helmand. It would perhaps be unfair therefore to characterise the civilian reconstruction organisations as incompetent as there are quite often complex reasons why deficiencies in any aspect of the effort in the province have manifested themselves. It should go without saying that these organisations may well have their own contending viewpoint, and it would be of benefit if they themselves or other analysts sought to evaluate the situation in Helmand from the perspective of the civilian agencies.