

**War by other means:**  
**Lessons of British responses to Republican terrorism in Northern Ireland.**

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**Introduction:**

Oscar Wilde said that ‘experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes’. If that is the case, then the British government and armed forces gained plenty of experience during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. However, they learned from their experiences and we can draw some valuable lessons from their successes and failures. This paper will draw on the aspects of the British experience that seem most applicable to the current situation.

The claim that intelligence plays an even more important role in the war against terrorism than in conventional warfare will be examined, as will the British intelligence efforts against the IRA. Special attention will be given to their use of human intelligence sources.

The roles of Special Forces and the regular army in the British campaign against terrorism in Northern Ireland provide useful lessons in military force. Special Forces are the most glamorous part of the armed forces but just how should they be used against terrorists?

The war on terrorism is also a war for hearts and minds. This requires both control of the media and propaganda efforts to harm the enemy. The British experiences in dealing with the media and using black propaganda in Northern Ireland are useful case studies.

This paper will refer to the geographical area in question as Northern Ireland, not to make any political statement but simply as a matter of convenience. It seems to be the least contentious of the various options available to refer to the area. As others have discovered, ‘language, like everything else in Ireland, has a political dimension’<sup>1</sup>. I use the term ‘terrorism’ to describe the actions of the IRA during the Troubles. This is not merely for ease of reference, but partly to reflect my personal feelings about any small group who attempt to use violence against civilians as means of imposing their will on the population.

**Background:**

The Troubles were a war between two societies with the vast experiences of insurgency<sup>2</sup>. The Irish struggle, if we believe Belfast graffiti, has been going 800 years. Even ignoring the sporadic troubles in Ireland, the British had been fighting ‘asymmetrical, uncivilized, even savage warfare against tribal, partisan and religiously

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Arthur and Keith Jeffery Northern Ireland since 1968 Basil Blackwell: Oxford. 1989. p.3.

<sup>2</sup> The Troubles is a name often used to refer to the situation in Northern Ireland since 1969.

inspired forces' for over a century<sup>3</sup>. The Troubles involved asymmetrical forces. Both sides acted in an uncivilized manner on occasion, sometimes even savagely. Northern Ireland was certainly a tribal and partisan society<sup>4</sup>.

With 53 counter-insurgency campaigns between the end of World War 2 and January 1969, the British Army should have been experts on modern counter-insurgency when sent to Northern Ireland<sup>5</sup>. However, the latest instalment of their longest running counter-insurgency campaign looks likely to be their last, longest and toughest counter-insurgency challenge ever. The modern Troubles have both taught new lessons to the British and reconfirmed old ones.

The IRA was one of the most organised, long-lived and successful terrorist organisations when it was active<sup>6</sup>. Although there are some Republican splinter groups who continue the terrorist campaign under various banners, they are tiny and of negligible effectiveness. The bulk of the IRA seems to have relinquished the Armalite in favour of the ballot box. In its prime, however, it was arguably the world champion of terrorist organisations.

A further advantage of using the Troubles as a case study is that Britain is a very similar society to the United States. Indeed, it is most similar country with any experience of sustained counter-terrorist efforts. The situation Britain faced in Northern Ireland appears at first sight to be very different from that which the United States is currently facing. However, the Provisional IRA and Al Quada have much more in common than just their effectiveness as terrorist organisations. The parallels between Al Quada and the IRA are surprisingly strong. Al Quada is often described as a terrorist network of discrete cells, the IRA is also organised along decentralised, cellular lines. IRA gunmen are typically 'young men of modest educational achievements who are or were in comparatively low status, unskilled jobs'<sup>7</sup>. This pen portrait could just as well describe the majority of Al Quada volunteers. In both organisations, the exceptions to this rule tend to be trusted with more important and complex jobs such as planning operations, intelligence work or flying aeroplanes. For example, some professors at Queen's University in Belfast do intelligence work for the IRA and at least one of the September 11<sup>th</sup> pilots had a university degree<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Colin Gray Modern Strategy Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999. p.275. Although Republicanism is not technically a religion, a convincing case can be made for treating it as such based on the strength of belief its adherents hold.

<sup>4</sup> The exact role of religion, aside from as a means of political identification, is subject to some debate, and outside the scope of this paper Martin Dillon examined this issue in his book God and the Gun: The Church and Irish Terrorism

<sup>5</sup> Pat McGeown 'British Counterinsurgency' in The Starry Plough Issue One, Volume One, available online at [www.extext.org/politics/INAC/british.counterinsurgency](http://www.extext.org/politics/INAC/british.counterinsurgency) (accessed 10/04/01) n.p. n.d.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, IRA will be used to refer to the Provisional IRA (rather than the Official IRA who have been of limited importance since the two organizations split in 1970)

<sup>7</sup> Alan O'Day 'Northern Ireland, terrorism and the British state' in Terrorism: Theory and Practise. pp121-137. Edited by Yonah Alexander, David Carlton and Paul Wilkinson. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1979. p.125.

<sup>8</sup> I heard of the professors in private communication with a university student from Northern Ireland. The information on Muhammad Atta (one of the presumed pilots) comes from NBC News Sept 18th

Members of both organisations share a fanatical devotion to their cause. It may seem superficial to compare the Al Quada *jihād* with Republican devotion to ‘the struggle’ but both groups, in general, share an intense commitment to achieving their goals. Even leaving aside these comparisons, British experiences are examples of what could be considered general principles of counter-terrorism.

### **Intelligence:**

Twenty five hundred years ago, Sun Tzu recognized ‘know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be defeated’<sup>9</sup>. This has been repeated so many times about more conventional struggles that it has become clichéd. However, in counter-terrorist “wars”, intelligence is so much more important that it bears repeating.

The vast majority of literature on the subject seems to take the greater importance of terrorism in small and dirty wars as a given. Frank Kitson wrote that ‘during times of insurgency, the government and its security forces require large amounts of low grade intelligence’<sup>10</sup>. This is presumably over and above the amount low-grade intelligence required to fight a regular enemy. James Adams went as far as to claim that ‘the key [to counter-terrorism] is not military action but better intelligence gathering’<sup>11</sup>.

Certain aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism make intelligence very important. In a war without a front line, or when everywhere is the front line, it is harder to find the enemy than in conventional warfare. There are further difficulties in identifying an army that does not wear uniforms and does not behave like an army much of the time. The state needs intelligence on terrorist plans to be able to thwart them. The ability to prevent attacks influences the morale of the general public, which is of great importance in counter-terrorism<sup>12</sup>.

A counter-terrorist campaign can be seen as an effort to isolate the terrorists from their popular support<sup>13</sup>. This requires knowledge of the terrorists, their constituency and how various events affect their relationship. In addition, because of the public relations battle, actions against the terrorists need to be very carefully planned and targeted to avoid seriously damaging relationships with communities that may support the terrorists.

So, what lessons can be drawn from the British experiences? The largest lesson is probably that the old-fashioned human intelligence source (an informer or agent inside the terrorist organisation) is still the best method of combating some threats to the state. However, the British also proved the value of making the general environment difficult

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<sup>9</sup> Sun Tzu The Art of War trans by Samuel Griffith, Oxford University Press: Oxford. 1982. p.84. The date is slightly speculative but approximately 500 BCE seems to generally accepted.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Kitson Bunch of Five Faber and Faber: London. 1977. pp.60-61.

<sup>11</sup> James Adams The Financing of Terror Simon and Schuster: New York. 1986. p35.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Maguire “The Intelligence War in Northern Ireland” The International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence Vol4 no.2 (Summer 1990): pp145-166. p.152.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Urban Big Boys’ Rules: The SAS and the secret struggle against the IRA Faber and Faber: London. 1993 p.101.

for terrorists and the usefulness of low-level information in doing so. Another principle their experiences suggest is the usefulness of technology in support of, not in place of, human beings.

One estimate of the value of human sources is that informers provided two thirds of the intelligence the British used against the IRA<sup>14</sup>. Although other authors are loath to quantify the value of informers, the sentiment is echoed throughout the literature. For example, Mark Bowlin contends that 'human intelligence ... defined the intelligence war in Northern Ireland'<sup>15</sup>.

The main attraction of informers is their ability, or at least potential, to produce a large quantity of information, often of quite high level, unavailable from other sources. The best intelligence about an enemy comes from the enemy itself.

The most prominent type of informer was the so-called *supergrass*. This was the name given to former terrorists who gave information about their ex-comrades in return for immunity and a new life. It has been evaluated as 'a major bonanza for the security forces'<sup>16</sup>. The *supergrass* system resulted in the arrest of hundreds of terrorists during the years it operated<sup>17</sup>. Although many of the accused were not convicted (*supergrasses* often retracted their evidence before going to court), the system still resulted in significant numbers of convictions. Furthermore, the security services still gained much valuable information from *supergrasses* who retracted their evidence. This information gave them a much better idea of who and what they were facing.

Another reason the security services found informers, even those of relatively minor importance, so useful was the difficulty of infiltrating the IRA. Although turning members of the IRA was not easy, it was significantly easier than attempting to penetrate a very tight knit organisation in a tight knit society<sup>18</sup>. Even low level information and gossip from someone unimportant helped the British to get a better picture of their enemy.

The chief method of convincing a member of the IRA to become an informer was coercion<sup>19</sup>. The security services would threaten an IRA man with a lengthy prison sentence and use this to try and turn him. If the security forces succeeded, they could use his testimony as a lever on his comrades. The hope would be that they too would talk in an effort to avoid the lengthy prison terms that terrorist crimes (scheduled offences) attracted<sup>20</sup>. However, the vast quantity of information informers provided to the security

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Dillon The Dirty War: Covert strategies and tactics used in political conflicts Routledge: New York. 1990. p.283.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Bowlin British Intelligence and the IRA: The secret war in Northern Ireland 1969-88 Master of Arts in National Security Affairs thesis, Naval Post-Graduate School: Monterey California. 1999 p.36.

<sup>16</sup> Maguire p.158.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Hainsworth "Law and Order" in Northern Ireland Politics. pp103-109. Edited by Arthur Aughey and Duncan Morrow. Longman: Harlow, England. 1996. p.106.

<sup>18</sup> Maguire p.156.

<sup>19</sup> Urban p.105.

<sup>20</sup> Dillon p.334.

services by informers, is not the only reason they were so useful during the Troubles. Another, surprisingly significant impact is the indirect effect they have on the IRA. *Touts*, as Republicans call them, are the most hated of all creatures. It is said that if you rape or murder, you will be forgiven but if your grandfather was a *tout*, the stigma will still be attached to you and your family<sup>21</sup>. There are several reasons for the IRA's hatred of *touts*.

Having an informer in the ranks dramatically increases the chances of a volunteer being arrested or executed (since the IRA were convinced the British were operating a shoot on sight policy). However, even volunteers in no immediate danger would still hate the *tout*.

One significant reason for the intensity of the hatred the IRA has for informers is that the climate of fear and suspicion a *tout* creates can cause more damage to the IRA than the information he passes on to the British<sup>22</sup>. The presence of an informer, or the mere suspicion of one, reduces the trust between members of the organisation and makes everyone more careful about what they do and say. Volunteers are less likely to be willing to risk planning and participating in operations if an informer may compromise them to the security forces. These internal problems reduce the effectiveness of IRA units who may not have otherwise been cramped by the traitor's revelations.

Once it becomes clear that there is a leak, the IRA's internal security organisation goes to work. These *nutting* squads consist of some of the elite of the IRA because of the importance the IRA places on finding and removing informers. They are very effective at finding leaks, even where the security forces claim there were no leaks. There is evidence to suggest that many of the confessions extracted were simply fiction given to appease the torturers<sup>23</sup>. These seemingly random purges cost the IRA support and yet they could see no alternative to them, given the damage informers were doing.

*Touts* damage the IRA directly by the secrets they betray to the security services. They also damage the IRA indirectly by creating a climate of fear and suspicion. However, perhaps the most significant implication of an informer in this war of wills is the body blow it deals to the self-image of Republicans and Republicanism. Alan O'Day described Irish terrorism as 'a very parochial business'<sup>24</sup>. The close nature of the Republican community means that the odds are that the Judas is one of your relatives, friends or neighbours. The sense of betrayal is therefore heightened and this is very demoralizing in a society where these ties are cherished.

Informers are the traditional bane of Irish rebellions. They are blamed for the failure of numerous rebellions before 1921. Whether this belief is accurate or not is irrelevant. The facts of history are less important than a person's chosen interpretation of it, especially in Ireland. Modern *touts*, to some extent, bear the cross for all previous betrayals.

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<sup>21</sup> Toby Harnden *Bandit Country: The IRA in South Armagh* Hodder and Stoughton: London. 1999 p.78.

<sup>22</sup> J. Bowyer-Bell *The IRA 1968-2000: Analysis of a Secret Army* Frank Cass: London. 2000 p.168.

<sup>23</sup> Urban p.244.

<sup>24</sup> O'Day p.127.

Furthermore, the commitment that volunteers have to the cause is shaken by the appearance of a traitor. There are two possible situations when an IRA man turns against the cause - either he was once one of their own, sharing their devotion to the struggle towards the inevitable united Ireland or he wasn't. Neither is an appealing idea for an IRA man to consider. The doubt a betrayal could cast on the validity of the cause and the potential it revealed for succumbing to one's weakness would be worrying to the remaining faithful. An alternative is that the British succeeded in penetrating the organisation from the outside. This raises unpleasant questions about the balance of power as it suggests that British Intelligence has the upper hand over the IRA.

Informers were probably the best source of information to use directly against the IRA. However, the British knew that they could not just act on the terrorist's personnel and supplies of cash and weapons. They would also need to make the general environment inhospitable<sup>25</sup>

It was information collected from people who knew very little of the IRA that was of most use in these efforts. Shortly after realising their presence in Northern Ireland would not be a short term, temporary situation, the British Army undertook a major, house-by-house data gathering exercise to build profiles of key districts<sup>26</sup>. When they started to put low level, bitty, even seemingly inconsequential information together, without preconceptions, they began to understand their enemy<sup>27</sup>.

Understanding the enemy is important in any conflict and vital in a counter-terrorist situation. As Heskin writes, 'It is only by trying to understand the people involved in terrorist organisations that one can realistically begin to tackle the problem which they and the situation represent'<sup>28</sup>. One of the problems that the British faced during the early years was that officers from mainland Britain 'simply did not understand Northern Ireland'<sup>29</sup>.

However, to their credit, the British quickly recognised this problem and took measures to counter it. The development of local profiles was a major step towards better understanding. However, it was supported by other measures such as lengthening the tours of duty and increased reliance on local personnel.

In addition to the simple measure of talking to the locals, the British used Vehicle

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Wilkinson "Terrorist Movements" in Terrorism: Theory and Practise. pp99-120. Edited by Yonah Alexander, David Carlton and Paul Wilkinson. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1979. p.104.

In terms of the Maoist paradigm that many IRA men subscribe to, the British were draining the pond the IRA swam in.

<sup>26</sup> Maguire p.154. The profiles contained information on family members, activities, sometimes even how the furniture was arranged in the living room.

<sup>27</sup> Desmond Hamill Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland 1969-1984 Methuen: London. 1985. p.121.

<sup>28</sup> Ken Heskin "The Psychology of Terrorism in Northern Ireland" in Terrorism in Ireland. pp88-105. Edited by Yonah Alexander and Alan O'Day. St Martin's Press: New York. 1984 p.104.

<sup>29</sup> Bowlin pp.37-8.

Check Points (VCPs) to impede the terrorists' movement. VCPs were designed to gather low-level information on the movements of the population and force the terrorist to change from casual movement to more sophisticated and systematic methods, which are easier for the intelligence services to discover<sup>30</sup>. VCPs could also be used to protect areas such as town centres from terrorist attack. VCPs also had the potential, however slim, for getting lucky, such as when the British captured the address book of the IRA chief of staff<sup>31</sup>.

However, the downside of the VCPs is that they impinge on the movements of the general public. This quite obviously irritates people as it delays their journey. Furthermore, being stopped by a gun toting 19 year old who interrogates you about your movements is simply not an enjoyable experience for the vast majority of people. Especially when it may happen several times on one trip<sup>32</sup>.

There is a significant problem with VCPs and other efforts, such as searches, identity checks, roadblocks and patrols, to protect the population from terrorist attacks and gather information. Quite simply, these measures upset civilians<sup>33</sup>. Upsetting civilians is a step from alienating them an alienated community will provide little intelligence. Therefore, a balance must be struck between the value of intrusive intelligence gathering and the harm it does to community relations.

The introduction of VENGEFUL (the first computerized number plate checking system) greatly assisted the British for two reasons. It forced the IRA either to take very elaborate counter-measures when transporting sensitive items or to take a greater risk of getting caught. The other main advantage was that being able to check a car's "tags" on a computer made a routine VCP stop slightly quicker.

Maguire claimed that 'low level intelligence is needed to break decentralised terrorist groups'<sup>34</sup>. However, he left off a vital part of the recipe - the need for analysis of this data. The problem with the data collected by VCPs and chatting with locals is not lack of quantity but quality. Quite simply, the security forces were in danger of drowning in the data.

The potential for computers to help deal with the vast piles of information the army was collecting has been recognised since the late 1970s (when they introduced VENGEFUL). This is perhaps where technology is most useful in the war against terrorism. Not fancy devices to prevent weapons from being used or James Bond style tracking devices but storing data in a coherent manner. However, as information technology advances, the potential for an Artificial Intelligence program to analyse screeds of data and pick up on potentially significant links may give computers an even

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<sup>30</sup> Hammil p.135.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Kelley The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA Zed Press: London. 1982. p.185.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to my parents for informing me just how common VCPs were during the early 70s.

<sup>33</sup> Phillip Schlesinger "Terrorism, the Media and the Liberal-Democratic State: A Critique of the Orthodoxy" in Terrorism in Ireland. pp213-232. Edited by Yonah Alexander and Alan O'Day. St Martin's Press: New York. 1984 p.262.

<sup>34</sup> Maguire p.152.

greater role in the fight against terrorism than merely replacing filing cabinets<sup>35</sup>. For example, a supercomputer filters all phone calls made in Northern Ireland for key phrases that “trigger” a recording of the whole conversation.

### **The Regular Army:**

As Chapman argues, ‘intelligence [alone] has never defeated a terrorist enemy anywhere’<sup>36</sup>. At some point, somebody is going to have to go into the ghettos of West Belfast, the farms of South Armagh or the caves of Afghanistan and either kill or capture the enemy. At first glance, this sounds like a textbook role for line infantry regiments. It is what they train for after all. However, when the enemy is small in number and hidden within the population, the regular army is quite an inappropriate tool to use.

Many soldiers in Belfast felt they were ‘just figure 11s out on the streets’<sup>37</sup>. This feeling is supported by looking at some casualty figures for the Troubles – Approximately 562 soldiers were killed by terrorists between 1969 and 1998. They killed around 79 terrorists in response<sup>38</sup>.

A related problem is that the army is to blame for the deaths of roughly 168 bystanders. This is probably because the main responses infantrymen on the streets of Belfast had available to the abuse, petrol bombs or bullets coming at them were their passive acceptance or high powered rifle fire.

Kill counts of combatants mean little in the war against terrorism. However, the kill counts of innocents mean much in the war for hearts and minds<sup>39</sup>. Every time the security forces killed or wounded a civilian, it hardened the attitudes of the Nationalist community against the British. This was perhaps a perfect example of a government defeating itself through brutal over-reactive measures that alienated the target population<sup>40</sup>. This was one of the lessons the British seemed to find most difficult to learn throughout their 800-year stay in Ireland.

It is argued that the war against terrorism is one in which ‘perception is all’<sup>41</sup>. If that is the case, then the real problem with using the regular army is that the presence of armed British soldiers on the streets of Belfast lent credence to the IRA claim that the British were an occupying force. Indeed, their actions did little to disprove this claim.

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<sup>35</sup> Tony Geraghty The Irish War: The hidden conflict between the IRA and British Intelligence Johns Hopkins: Baltimore. 2000 p.133.

<sup>36</sup> Chapman “Reflections on Terrorism, A Sideline View” The International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence pp207-226. Vol2 no.2 (Summer 1999): p.219.

<sup>37</sup> Figure 11 is the army designation for the cardboard charging man figure used in target practice. This particular soldier was cited in Urban p.217. but it is a common sentiment expressed by soldiers sent to Northern Ireland.

<sup>38</sup> These casualty figures are based on data from the University of Ulster’s Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>) They are based on a combination of the Fay, Morrissey and Smyth figures and those of Sutton. As such, they should not be considered exact, merely indicative

<sup>39</sup> Adams p36.

<sup>40</sup> Gray p.295.

<sup>41</sup> Bowyer-Bell p.6.

Although line infantry units made it more difficult for the terrorists to act freely, they also provided easy, and politically valuable, targets for the terrorists.

The regular army simply does not have the required skills and mindset to defeat the terrorists without embarking on a major, exceptionally destructive and violent campaign. Such a campaign would be unacceptable within the modern context of detailed media scrutiny of British actions and American sympathy for the Nationalist cause. Attempts to use the regular army to actually defeat terrorists are akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. It might work but you will probably break the fingers holding the nut and what is left after you succeed probably is not worth having.

### **The Special Air Service:**

If the regular army is a sledgehammer when it comes to dealing with (rather than merely containing) terrorists, then units such as the Special Air Service (SAS) are a scalpel. It might be more difficult to open the nut but there is less risk of serious collateral damage and what is left after the nut is cracked is actually a relatively intact society instead of a pounded mess.

The most obvious theme in the coverage is that the psychological effect of Special Forces is often far greater than one could even dream of due to purely military reasons. Another lesson is that the real value of Special Forces may be that they can communicate a culture of excellence to other facets of the security forces and so improve their overall effectiveness.

The SAS is one of the world's premier special forces and its name is synonymous with 'stealth, firepower, aggression and efficient killing power'<sup>42</sup>. The regiment has achieved a near legendary status in modern British culture. People expect that the SAS will get the job done, regardless of the size of the task or strength of the opposition. The psychological effect of knowing the SAS are deployed in Northern Ireland has been out of all proportion to the actual numbers of personnel involved<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, in the pantheon of IRA hate figures; the SAS has become one of the main demons. The IRA sees the bogeymen of the SAS every time a volunteer is arrested, killed or simply can not complete a mission due to simple bad luck<sup>44</sup>.

However, as with everything else in Northern Ireland, sending in the SAS was seen as a political act. The symbolism of Britain's premier army unit being used against an enemy within was clear to both sides<sup>45</sup>. To the Unionists, it was a firm commitment to law and order and keeping Northern Ireland a part of Britain. To Republicans and their supporters, it was indicative of the brutal intentions of the army of occupation.

Special Forces would have little psychological impact if they were not also

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<sup>42</sup> Dillon p.147.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur and Jeffery p.72.

<sup>44</sup> Bowlin p.28.

<sup>45</sup> Urban p.7.

effective on the ground. The SAS has been very useful in the covert war against the IRA. Surprisingly, it is not in direct confrontations against the IRA that the SAS has been most use. The SAS killed 38 IRA men and arrested many more (at a cost of just 2 of their own lives)<sup>46</sup>. However, in the scale of the conflict, that is noticeable but not hugely significant.

The real value of the SAS in Northern Ireland was in its potential to act as a force multiplier not its operational capacity (although they certainly did provide some useful intelligence and intimidated the IRA). There were never more than about 150 SAS troopers in Northern Ireland at one time (usually far fewer), and there is a limit to how much even a group of super-men can achieve<sup>47</sup>. Especially when the super-men are hindered by the political restriction of not being able to operate on the other side of the border.

The main use of the SAS was to train troops of other British units, and members of the local police force, to conduct long-term covert surveillance operations and other such SAS type duties<sup>48</sup>. This means that many of the operations the IRA attribute to the SAS were probably carried out by SAS type organisations such as 14<sup>th</sup> Intelligence (under any of its many aliases), Royal Ulster Constabulary Head Quarters or Divisional Support Units or army Close Observation Platoons.

This use of Special Forces mainly for their political effect and ability to transfer useful skills to other personnel is a very effective one. Rather than risk one's best soldiers except when absolutely necessary, they are used to improve the rest of ones forces. The utility of using Special Forces soldiers as instructors has been recognised by several countries. For example, a major role of the Green Berets is to train indigenous forces and not get directly involved in conflict.

However, balancing the potential benefits of using Special Forces is the need to be careful in the application. Soldiers are trained to think in terms of closing with the enemy and inflicting as many casualties as is possible and necessary. However, this attitude does not work quite as well in an anti-terrorist war where public opinion is probably more important than kill counts. Indeed, it is counter productive and causes support for the terrorists.

Colin Gray argues that 'the expertise and mindset required of a "special" force if it is to be effective at counter-terrorism obliges it to function as a unit of "terrorists in uniform"<sup>49</sup>. An examination of SAS involvement in Northern Ireland could find support for that argument. There have been numerous allegations that the SAS were acting as extra-legal assassination squads<sup>50</sup>. True or not, the allegations affected public opinion. The battle for the hearts and minds of the population is the next area of the British experiences that this paper will analyse.

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<sup>46</sup> Geraghty p.116.

<sup>47</sup> Urban p.238.

<sup>48</sup> Arthur and Jeffery p.72.

<sup>49</sup> Gray p.290.

<sup>50</sup> Raymond Murray's The SAS in Ireland covers several such allegations.

## **Public Relations and Propaganda:**

One senior British officer said that ‘at the end of the day, what it is all really about is public relations’<sup>51</sup>. Northern Ireland was a bonanza for newsmen in Britain looking for dramatic stories. It was in the same time zone, not difficult to get to, normally hospitable and usually guaranteed a good story. The inhabitants even spoke English<sup>52</sup>. The British government’s actions were therefore subject to greater scrutiny than they had been in other campaigns.

This meant the British needed to control the media coverage of Northern Ireland or they could well lose the public relations battle. Frank Kitson recognised the special importance of trying to ‘dictate how others saw the essence of the conflict’<sup>53</sup>. However, complete censorship would be at odds with Britain’s democratic traditions and so unacceptable to the people at home. Patrick Murphy, a former New York police chief, argues that in a democracy, censorship concedes a major victory to the terrorists by suppressing traditional freedoms<sup>54</sup>.

The British knew this and instead adopted subtle pressures and guidelines to control media coverage. The three basic principles of the British media polices were that coverage should be generally supportive of the security forces, delegitimise extremism (especially that of the IRA) and avoid inflammatory coverage<sup>55</sup>. Another valuable policy the British tried to introduce was co-operation with the media. They wished the security forces to realise that the media could be an ally rather than a foe. Major General Richard Clutterbeck expresses it as follows:

‘The television camera is like a weapon lying in the street. Either side can pick it up and use it. If governments use it in this way, encouraging their officials, policemen and soldiers to help the media-men and to answer their questions - it is far more effective than any kind of censorship or governmental control.’<sup>56</sup>

Obviously this means that on occasion, the government’s efforts will receive negative coverage. The British media are, in general, supportive of the government’s counter-terrorism efforts. Therefore, when the government receives negative coverage, it should act as a useful warning that their actions may have gone beyond what the public finds acceptable.

The difference between control of the media and the use of propaganda is a

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<sup>51</sup> Anonymous, cited in Urban p.76.

<sup>52</sup> There are those who would qualify this statement with “of a sort” because some Irish dialects can be nearly impossible for an outsider to understand. However, my mother would probably not appreciate my endorsement of this sentiment.

<sup>53</sup> Kitson Low Intensity Operations, cited in McGeown

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Schlesinger p.219.

<sup>55</sup> Schlesinger p.226.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Clutterbeck Living with Terrorism Faber and Faber: London. 1975. p.147.

difficult line to draw. In this paper, the two terms will refer to influence over the stories the media covered and the information the British released themselves to influence the conflict. The main goal of British propaganda was to discredit the IRA. The chief way in which they did this was release stories that reflected badly on the IRA. Some stories also were also used to goad the IRA into taking actions that reflected badly on themselves.

The security forces' comments to the media would often attempt to portray IRA killings as purely sectarian in nature. Phrases like "apparently motiveless murder" would be used to suggest that paramilitaries were not undertaking a political campaign but simply a murder spree. An ongoing British black propaganda effort was to report that IRA men were lining their own pockets with the proceeds of their racketeering. This had the obvious effect of making the IRA look like criminal godfathers rather than freedom fighters, which naturally influenced opinion against them. For example, when the media reported on an armed robbery conducted by the IRA, more money was reported as missing than had really been stolen<sup>57</sup>. This not only made the IRA look bad, it also brought IRA internal security into play and kneecappings were a common result<sup>58</sup>. These naturally did not make the IRA look good.

In addition to trying to discredit the IRA through propaganda, the British also used policy to try to influence public opinion. The main policy they used was that of criminalization. All offences committed in Northern Ireland, except for during a brief period in the early 1970s, were simply treated as criminal offences regardless of any political motivations. The British knew that if the IRA were seen as terrorists then they would lose support from the moderates who did not wish to be associated with terrorism. The other advantage was that the public tolerates a far stronger reaction by police forces against terrorists than against ordinary criminals<sup>59</sup>. Another advantage of sticking to their policy of treating terrorists as criminals was that they were demonstrating their resolve to the domestic (UK) audience<sup>60</sup>.

Although probably not British policy, security forces' collusion with Loyalist terrorist groups is deserving of brief consideration. There is definitely proof that some members of the security forces co-operated with Loyalist terrorist groups. Indeed, in some cases, members of the security forces were also members of a Loyalist paramilitary organisation. However, Martin Dillon's detailed and reasonably unbiased examination of these claims found that "The vast majority of conspiracy theories [about British co-operation with Loyalist paramilitaries] are inaccurate and in some instances are a deliberate creation of black propaganda"<sup>61</sup>.

Cooperating with Loyalist terrorists was one response the British government

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<sup>57</sup> Kelley p.252.

<sup>58</sup> The kneecapping was the most serious non-lethal form of IRA "justice". It involved shooting a victim in the kneecaps – usually crippling them. Power drills were also used on occasion.

<sup>59</sup> Adams p.8.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Finnane "The Inevitability of Politics: Responses to Terrorism in Northern Ireland" in Ireland's Terrorist Trauma pp127-148. Edited by Yonah Alexander and Alan O'Day. St Martin's Press: New York. 1989. p.128.

<sup>61</sup> Dillon p.xix.

probably never adopted to Republican terrorism. They did use intelligence, Special Forces and the media to try to defeat the IRA. This paper has examined British experiences of these policies in the hopes of drawing out some useful lessons about counter-terrorism.

### **Lessons of the British Experience:**

The aim of this paper is to analyse the British experience in Northern Ireland in the hopes of drawing out some lessons applicable to the situation the United States faces in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This section will detail the most useful lessons the British experience holds for current counter-terrorist efforts.

A common criticism of American intelligence gathering capabilities in the post cold war era is that they have neglected human intelligence gathering in favour of high tech solutions. British experiences in Northern Ireland proved the advantages informers have over satellites, cameras and other gadgets. No matter how useful bugging the coffin before a Republican funeral or helicopters with cameras capable of reading newspapers on the ground are, they cannot replace having a man on the inside. The United States has started to recognise this fact by increasing their recruitment of informers and lowering their lofty moral standards for potential informers<sup>62</sup>. However, it takes time to rebuild agent networks and regain the skills necessary to run a useful human intelligence gathering service. The British experiences suggest that perhaps a new body is needed to co-ordinate the efforts of agents and informers as the operations of multiple agencies tend to duplicate or even hinder each other.

The United States does not seem to have learned any lessons from the British about the use of military force. By using large scale bombing raids against Afghanistan, the United States are guilty of precisely the kind of brutal over-reaction that cost the British so dearly in Northern Ireland. To some extent, the American military seems to have reverted to the inter-War doctrine that air power is the best solution to conflict. The United States cannot hope to defeat Al Quada simply by virtue of its overwhelming military superiority<sup>63</sup>.

Despite their overwhelming military superiority, the British had to concede to range of Nationalist demands (many of which were actually very reasonable, such as anti-discrimination legislation). The British also spent billions of pounds improving the housing, employment and schooling prospects of the Nationalist community. The United States will probably need to undertake similar measures to woo the Islamic world. However, care must be taken that it is not seen as bribery or as a reward for co-operation but part of a genuine concern for their well-being. These measures should be a part of a campaign to alienate the terrorists from their community. It is difficult but necessary. Unless the average Muslim realises that the United States is not the enemy, then American military successes could well be Pyrrhic victories.

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<sup>62</sup> The CIA had restrictions on what the informants they could hire which made it difficult to get anybody who was actively involved in terrorism.

<sup>63</sup> Although it is impressive to watch them trying live on CNN.

The British used Vehicle Check Points to make life difficult for the IRA and to collect low-level information. The United States will find it difficult set VCPs up in its struggle against Al Quada. They will, be able to restrict the terrorists' freedom of movement, and have begun to do so. The importance of collecting simple information to help get to know one's enemy is even more apposite. English officers could not understand the situation 'across the water' without making an effort. Americans cannot hope to understand Middle Eastern Muslims without taking significant efforts to do so.

Another major lesson of the British experience is the importance of multi-faceted strategies in response to terrorism. Both political and military solutions on their own failed. No matter how effective the informer networks and how successful the Special Forces operations, the IRA survived. No matter how well the British manipulated the majority of public opinion, the IRA survived. No matter how appealing the political peace offers were, parts of the IRA kept fighting. It was only when all three elements combined that the current widespread, and hopefully lasting, ceasefire was reached.

However, the most important insight into the current conflict that British experiences reveal is one this paper has paid little explicit attention to. Quite simply, it is that a war against terrorism, by its very nature, will be lengthy and costly. Terrorism is a battle of wills. The side that is prepared to suffer most will win. Winning may not mean total annihilation and defeat of the enemy. It may mean containing the enemy at an acceptable level of violence until he gives up. This will almost certainly be the hardest lesson for the United States to absorb as they are used to and prefer clear-cut results<sup>64</sup>. However, there is no way to get around this lesson. Defeating terrorism takes time.

In the wake of the recent IRA arms decommissioning announcements, I think that it would be appropriate to close this paper by borrowing from James Joyce's Ulysses - History is a nightmare from which Northern Ireland is trying to awake. It finally seems that they might be successful.

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<sup>64</sup> To sports fans in the United States 'a tie is like kissing your sister'. British sports fans can respect a well-earned draw – why else would people watch test cricket?

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