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# General's book reveals his despair at army's 'systemic incompetence'



by Richard Bath

**IN PRINT, Major General Andrew Mackay sounds like the angry man of the military.**

This is, after all, the former commander of British forces in Helmand whose parting shot upon resigning 18 months ago after just a few months in charge of the Army in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Northern England was that the MoD was "institutionally incapable" of fighting a successful war in Afghanistan.

The reality is very different. It's of a cheery and engaging ex-soldier in his sitting room in suburban Edinburgh discussing his forthcoming treatise on how to win hearts and minds. Like its author, his book, which luxuriates in the prosaic title of *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motivations Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict*, is measured, rational and understated.

But, as with Mackay, appearances can be very deceptive. This tome has teeth and may just be the most important book our politicians may never have the stomach to read.

*Behavioural Conflict* is a blueprint for a new way to wage war, one based around the wielding of what Mackay and co-author Steve Tatham characterise as "influence". This means that everything you do is designed to win over the civilian population rather than simply killing as many of the enemy as possible.

In an era of declining military spending, when the Western world moves away from expensive boots on the ground and surgical strikes, and towards working with domestic political movements and UN-led peace-keeping missions, the less-costly "soft power" first championed by Mackay, which measures success not in body bags but in friends won and peaces kept, is the new military zeitgeist.

Or at least it is in America. The first e-mail of congratulation Mackay received came from the former commander of US forces in Afghanistan David Petraeus, while his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, contributed the foreword.

In Britain, however, Sandhurst wheeled out a pair of military academics to rubbish Mackay's theories when mooted internally in 2009. Even now, he concedes, "the ideas we've put forward are still not being taken on seriously".

There is, he believes, such resistance to change that the strategic lessons of Afghanistan, where Nato troops are still bogged down after a decade of heavy fighting, have been completely lost. "Much as it disappoints me to say it, I suspect we would get the same outcome in Afghanistan if we went in now," he says. "You see very few lessons being learned, or of adaptation taking place as a consequence of those lessons and then being applied."

Poor equipment, political grandstanding and out-of-touch top command all play their part, but the inability of the MoD to adapt its institutions to changed circumstances is the root of the problem. "The level of incompetence is so great and has been occurring for so many years now, that it's systemic and it's become cultural," he says.

"When you're talking about adapting organisations for the sort of strategies and geo-politics involved in Afghanistan and Iraq, it's very difficult to force change at somewhere like Nato, with so many nations. But for a single country to not have adapted is incredible."

The contrast with the Americans is particularly depressing, he believes. "The British military hasn't adapted in any meaningful way, while the US military looked over this precipice of failure in Iraq – and for America to be defeated, as they so nearly were, would have had a major impact upon the world – and realised that they had to change," says Mackay. "But they didn't just change their approach in Iraq but in the whole US Army. They finally got the right people into positions of power and authority."

By change, Mackay means accepting that "the population is the prize" and acting accordingly. By initially failing to grasp how Afghans would react to Nato troops on the ground, and failing to communicate their mission effectively, failure was virtually guaranteed.

"We tried to shove democracy down their throats when the last thing Afghanistan needed was democracy. What it needed was security," says Mackay. "We need to engage with the Afghans, but when we bring them democracy or emphasise women's rights, we're bringing them our values system. That's something that we continually get wrong."

However, by adopting an "influence-driven approach then you are naturally inclined to understand their culture, ethnic balance and societal norms, so you'd understand that for an Afghan the notion of democracy is wild. "This is a society which has Pashtunwali, a code that predates the arrival of Islam and tells Pashtuns how to run everything in their life, from revenge and hospitality to how to treat your woman. Yet we barely understand it."

If that all sounds a soft approach, it's worth remembering that Mackay is the veteran of Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq who masterminded the successful assault on Musa Qala in Helmand in 2007, still regarded as Nato's finest victory in Afghanistan.




Mackay says that the whole operation was influence-driven: he allowed no shelling of the town, left a corridor through which the Taliban could escape, and ensured the first troops into Musa Qala were Afghans. The result was a thankful population and, because "for the Taliban, losing people is not an issue but losing face is very important", 400 Taliban defectors.

In Behavioural Conflict, Mackay argues for "super-trained" officers given time to do Masters degrees and PhDs in philosophy, economics and sociology – as their American counterparts are – and more education for all soldiers.

Only then can they truly adapt to fight an enemy that intuitively understands its native population.

"There's going to be profound change in the next five years and this is an idea whose time has come," says Mackay. "If I could only achieve one thing it would be for the notion of influence and the accompanying organisational changes and resources necessary to achieving that become mainstream activity in the British Army."

"I hope that we have opened up that debate, but wouldn't it be ironic if a book about influence ended up having no influence at all?"

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