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Review by **Andrew Orr**, Sam Houston State University

Marc DeVore's article "The United Kingdom's last hot war of the Cold War: Oman, 1963-75" provides a timely look into the Dhofar War, a barely-remembered Middle Eastern conflict. Between 1963 and 1975 the Omani government fought a long, and often brutal, war against rebels in its southern Dhofar province which sometimes blended with Marxist and Islamist rebellions in the country's northern core territories. Fought in the context of Britain's winding down of its Middle Eastern commitments, DeVore uses the Dhofar War as a backdrop to explore the role of foreign military and political support in a successful counterinsurgency campaign. In the process of highlighting the role of regional political dynamics in the Dhofar War's origins, course, and outcome, DeVore problematizes the British School of counterinsurgency in particular and claims that there are universal rules for a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in general. He also emphasizes the contingent nature of modern insurgent and counterinsurgent warfare.

The Dhofar War began as a local tribal revolt against the authority of Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman. Because Dhofar was separated from the rest of Oman by five hundred miles of desert and only populated by about 30,000 people, the central government paid the province little attention. The revolt itself would not have been particularly dangerous from the Sultan's perspective, but in the context of the Cold War, it developed into a deadly threat because of regional dynamics. In the first phase of the conflict the Omani government committed very limited resources to the counterinsurgency and seemed content to allow the revolt to play out as long as the Sultan's forces were not completely expelled from the region. During this phase, the Dhofar Liberation Front's (D.L.F.) forces proved unable to defeat the Sultan's men or to take control over much of the province. Given enough time the insurgency would likely have burned itself out, but the Omani government soon found itself faced a more serious danger.

In 1967 changing regional dynamics made the conflict part of the Cold War. The British withdrawal from South Yemen in 1967 was followed by the victory of the avowedly communist National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) and the creation of a communist and Soviet-aligned government. The N.L.F. government provided arms and training to the Dhofar rebels. South Yemen's intervention soon brought more powers into the conflict. By 1970, the D.L.F. was receiving aid from South Yemen, Iraq, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Cuba. The Vietnam War prevented the United States from intervening itself, so the British were left to manage the conflict on their own as Sultan Said's protectors.

DeVore takes pains to emphasize the international context of the conflict. He argues that outside support defined both the insurgency and the counter-insurgency. The support of the communist N.L.F government in South Yemen for the revolt helped trigger greater British intervention and eventually Soviet bloc support for other rebels inside Oman. DeVore demonstrates that South Yemeni support allowed the D.L.F. to survive several severe setbacks and eventually, the danger that than Oman might lose triggered greater regional intervention including substantial Iranian forces which tilted the balance in favor of the government.

Initially Omani forces, which included British contract and loan officers, fought the war on a shoestring. As a result they relied on counter-productive collective punishments, such as well capping, to fight the insurgents. However, as Oman's small oil industry developed, greater resources became available and the Sultan's forces slowly expanded. DeVore argues that 1970 was a near-tipping point for the Oman government. By 1970, the D.L.F., which had changed its name to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (P.F.L.O.A.G.) was in control of about eighty percent of Dhofar and anti-government forces of P.F.L.O.A.G.'s northern Omani sister organization the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (N.D.F.L.O.A.G.) were attempting to spread the war to inner or northern Oman. The Omani government was also locked in a long struggle with the exile Imam Ghalib bin Ali, the traditional ruler of northern Oman's hinterland. In the 1950s Sultan Said had seized control of the Imam's territories and imposed central authority over them. The Imam fled to Saudi Arabia and continued low-level resistance from there.

As it became clear that Omani forces could not crush the Dhofar Rebellion and that the instability risked spreading into the core provinces, British representatives increasingly blamed Sultan Said. In July 1970, British diplomats and advisors organized a coup in which Said's son Qaboos, a Sandhurst graduate, overthrew his father. The new Sultan was more willing than his father to increase the size of the military, even at the risk of deficit spending. Sultan Qaboos also accepted the need for a political solution to reduce his enemies. DeVore does not attempt to hide Britain's primary role in the coup, but also does not analyze what that meant for Oman's long-term relationship to the United Kingdom.

DeVore argues that the pressure of the revolt let the Omani government to embrace Islamic appeals and ally with religious elites in its propaganda. Sultan Qaboos struck a deal with Imam Ghalib, the traditional ruler of the interior of eastern Oman. In-exchange for accepting the Sultan's control of his lands, the Imam was recognized as the religious leader, or Mufti, of all of Oman. The Imam extracted an annual subsidy and, more interestingly, a monopoly on importing Ford automobiles and Coca Cola. This helped stabilize eastern Oman, allowed a concentration of force in Dhofar, and brought Saudi support for the regime.

DeVore shows that the Omani government extensively used Islam as a weapon against P.F.L.O.A.G. in Dhofar and highlighted the anti-Islamic ideology of the N.L.F. regime in South Yemen. That strategy enjoyed considerable success in dividing the rebels. Starting in 1971-72 the British and Omanis also worked to get D.L.F. fighters to change sides by using Islamic appeals and promises of money and arms. This effort succeeded in weakening the D.L.F., but not destroying it.

The new sultan boosted the army by half and received larger-scale British support. By 1971 British commanders were ready to attempt what DeVore called a "text-book counterinsurgency" in the style of earlier operations in Malaya and Kenya.¹ This involved more combat troops, development programs, anti-guerilla units made up of locals and former guerillas, and home guard units to hold cleared ground.

Sultan Qaboos worked aggressively to gain regional support. His concessions to Imam Ghalib won him Saudi backing and he courted the powerful Shah of Iran. In the process he got support from Jordan's King Hussein. By 1973 he felt ready to use his foreign support and his own armed forces, whose size and firepower he had increased thanks to the rising price of oil and his willingness to borrow money to fund renewed attacks on the insurgents. This large and well-equipped force combined with the success of the regime's counter-propaganda to instill a sense of confidence in the 1973 offensives.

Despite all of the Omani regime's advantages in 1973, it almost lost the war because of major mistakes made by its commanders. The threat of Omani defeat triggered greater regional involvement and the Shah of Iran rushed 3,500 men to Oman to rescue the situation. The Iranian forces tilted the balance and by 1975 the rebellion collapsed. DeVore presents the regime's final victory as a result of a variety of factors including the isolation of the rebels from other regional power centers, the skillful use of Islamic appeals to neutralize the Marxist appeal of P.F.L.O.A.G., the strength of the Sultan's Armed Forces, and divisions among the rebels, and, most importantly, foreign military support for the Omani government.

¹ See Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experience from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966). Thompson's book is the classic statement of the British School. A more recent treatment that reinforced many of the same themes is John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

DeVore's work provides an important scholarly treatment of a little-known war. His broad approach recognizes that there is no magic bullet which is always and everywhere the key to defeating an insurgency. During the war, the Omani regime increased its 'boots on the ground,' created a counter-insurgent ideology, negotiated with the insurgents, and sought and received aid from regional and global powers. DeVore's refusal to credit a single factor with defeating the insurgency allows him to present the Dhofar War as a story about trial and error, and competitive adaptation without condemning the British or Omanis for not immediately finding the perfect solution.

DeVore's emphasis on the regional dynamic is his most important contribution. By showing both the insurgent and anti-insurgent forces as players in overlapping regional and even global struggles he exposes the weakness of all of the individual players' ability to control events. He skillfully charts the multilevel network of power in the conflict in which everyone from villagers in Dhofar to British and Iranian leaders had a limited say over how the conflict played out.

The article recognizes the crucial moment in Middle Eastern history created by decolonization and uses the Dhofar War to imply that the conservative monarchies which dominated the Middle East before decolonization could easily have collapsed. Instead the Sultan of Oman survived in large part because of a broad alliance of conservative monarchies that intervened to help Sultan Qaboos crush the Dhofar Revolt and forestall the danger of communist expansion in the Arab world. This suggests new avenues of research that the author did not explore. Given the Arab Spring's surface similarity to the Revolutions of 1848, could the alliance of conservative monarchies DeVore identifies be usefully compared to the Holy Alliance or the Quadruple Alliance?

DeVore presents the war as a victory for the Omani government and its many allies, even though the conflict lasted for twelve years. The length of the conflict is one area that could have been better explored. Unanswered questions relating to time include not just why the war lasted so long, but what effect the length of the war had on its outcome. Did the length of the conflict make it harder or easier for the counterinsurgents to prevail in the end? In light of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, which has now lasted a decade, DeVore's answer would have been interesting to read.

This article speaks to several contemporary issues, but does so without preaching an overly political message. Nonetheless DeVore's article points to some useful improvements that are needed in much of the current literature on the Iraq and Afghan Wars. The most obvious is a need to provide still greater integration of the conflicts into regional and global dynamics. By challenging the idea that universal rules for COIN exist, DeVore implicitly raises questions about the ability of the United States to transfer successful strategies from Iraq to Afghanistan.

DeVore's story differs from many studies of insurgencies by avoiding a sense of inevitability about the outcome. Too often studies of insurgencies obscure the contingent reality of warfare by presenting conflicts as having been decided by preexisting structural factors. DeVore, however, remains focused on the decisions made by participants during the conflict and their consequences, which provides a fertile ground for analysis. In the process he draws a nuanced picture of a conflict in which both sides made mistakes and overcame obstacles in a long a complex struggle in which foreign support played an important role on each side. Marc DeVore's thorough documentation, emphasis on transnational action, and even-handedness make his article a valuable contribution to the history of the Cold War, decolonization, and the Middle East.

Andrew Orr is Assistant Professor of History at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. He received his Ph.D. in Modern European History from the University of Notre Dame and is the author of "We call you to holy war': Mustafa Kemal, Communism, and Germany in French Intelligence Nightmares, 1919-1923" in the *Journal of Military History*. He is currently working on a book of the politics of the French Army in the 1920s and 1930s.

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