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Operation Banner whitewashes over truth

(Jim Gibney, [Irish News](#))

Operation Banner is the considered analysis from three senior members of the British army about their military operations in the north from 1969 until July 2006 when the assessment was written.

It is an important document for a number of reasons. It started its life as an in-house, private, confidential, almost secret assessment. It is the product of a military mind-set by military personnel who presumably did not expect to see their views in the public domain. That in itself provides an invaluable insight into the thinking of those who at various stages were in control of British troops on the ground in the north since 1969.

The document's authors are at pains to point out, and do so repeatedly, that the assessment is an 'educational guide for future commanders'.

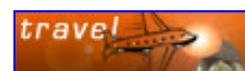
Only one of the three authors is named, General Sir Mike Jackson. He provides the review's foreword. Jackson was one of the officers in charge of the British Paras who shot and killed 14 civil rights marchers in Derry on what became known as Bloody Sunday.

Despite having the advantage of hindsight the authors chose to maintain the fallacies, which have underpinned the British government's occupation of the six counties since partition in 1920.

Jackson's foreword sets the scene for the continuation of the myths: British military operations only started in 1969, no mention of their armed garrison of several thousand permanently here before '69; their operations were "waged on British soil" and "brought to a successful conclusion". He commends British troops for their "successes, which were considerable", while qualifying lessons are to be learned from "mistakes where they were made".

However, on the significant issue of whether the British army was involved in a war – the authors intend to say they were not, but run into difficulties with the number of times they use the word 'war' in the document.

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There are references to a "campaign", an "insurgency" "the troubles". At one point the conflict is described as a "working-class war, between working-class republicans and working-class loyalists". Tactical decisions, which are viewed as a success are described as a "war-winner" while military discussions at the highest level are "war gaming".

The authors try very hard to set Operation Banner in a peace mission context. But their own facts militate against their arguments.

A quarter of a million British troops were involved in the war, 10,000 on patrol on any given day in the 1970s; 600 British personnel were killed, 102 in 1972.

The IRA is described as "professional, dedicated, highly skilled and resilient" but also "as one of the most effective terrorist organisations in history".

There is also contradictory thinking reflected in the authors' attempts to set the conflict in history – the impact of discrimination and the failures of Stormont, while beating the 'terrorism' drum.

It is obvious that the 'terrorism' argument does not apply to the conflict here yet it is advanced in this analysis because it is central to the British government's portrayal of itself internationally as a peace-keeper in Ireland.

Opaque language is used to mislead, for example "deep interrogation techniques" really mean torture; "an operational level reverse", a disaster; "information operations opportunity" a propaganda coup and "catch terrorists" is their explanation for the 'shoot-to-kill' period.

Operation Motorman in August 1972 was a "great success" and the IRA were "badly beaten" yet elsewhere we are told of the IRA's capacity to "survive and evolve".

As far as the authors are concerned they have only one enemy – the IRA.

Loyalist organisations are rarely mentioned and when they are as in the case of the UDA they are viewed "as the most respectable", while the UVF are "essentially terrorists".

The UDR provided a "major service" with "rare" "security breaches".

No mention of the numbers involved in sectarian killings or the ease with which loyalists removed weapons from UDR bases. The word collusion does not appear in this wordy

document, hence no responsibility for hundreds killed; Bloody Sunday and the Falls Curfew are the only "two examples of poor military decision-making" in 36 years.

This document confirms what republicans have long said that the British government and its forces are in denial about their war here and its legacy.

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