

Algiers - 1957:

An Approach to Urban Counterinsurgency

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Three dead. A score wounded. Building demolished. Thus goes the report, dated 30 September 1956; of the First *Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN)* terrorist attack in the city of Algiers, French Algeria. The scene was the Cafe Metropole, a meeting place of Algerians of both European and Arabic extraction. Unnoticed, a member of an *FLN* bomb squad had entered, had ordered and had left, leaving behind an innocuous-looking package. With a shattering explosion, the Algerian war had come to Algiers.

Beginning in September 1956, the *FLN*, through the expert use of terror, progressively paralyzed the city of Algiers. By January 1957, control of the city had been virtually wrested from the hands of the French civil administration. Recognizing the fact that the civil authorities were unable to contain the *FLN*, the government in Paris gave the following missions to the French Army:

- (1) Restore order to Algiers.
- (2) Destroy the *FLN* terrorist organization.

This article evaluates the effectiveness of the methods employed by the French Army in the accomplishment of these missions.

Setting the Scene

On 1 November 1954, four months after the cease-fire in Indochina, the first shots of the Algerian insurgency resounded in the Awes Mountains, some 100 miles south of the city of Constantine. In a matter of hours, the *FLN* struck in over 70 incidents of bombing, arson, ambushes and attacks on police stations. Thus began the insurgency which most experts suggest is a classic model of revolutionary warfare. As it is not within the scope of this article to discuss all aspects of the

eight-year French-Algerian War, the period from November 1954 to August 1956 is summarized by these developments: early success for the *FLN*; slow reaction by the French; internal disputes and reorganization on the part of the rebels; reinforcement of the French Army; and, finally, by August 1956, a situation approximating stalemate existing throughout the country.

In an attempt to find a means of breaking this stalemate, on 30 August 1956, the leadership of the *FLN* gathered in the relatively secure Soumman Valley, located some 100 miles west of Algiers. This congress reorganized and expanded the revolutionary leadership, formally designated the rebel army as the Army of National liberation (*ALN*), and created a formal command structure and general staff. As a step toward quick victory, the *FLN* leadership adopted as a course of action a terrorist campaign within the city of Algiers. To accomplish the goal of bringing Algiers swiftly to its knees, the Soumman Conference established a separate terrorist organization for the city. Given the title of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers (*ZAA*), it is generally considered as the classic example for the structuring of an urban insurgent movement. As this was the organization that the French Army would have to destroy if it were successfully to accomplish its mission of restoring order to the city, let us take a closer look at it.

The *ZAA* was directed by a council made up of four members: the politico-military leader; the political assistant; the military assistant; and the assistant for external liaison and intelligence. Theoretically coequals, the politico-military leader was in fact the predominant member. The city itself was divided into three regions, and the three regions further divided into 10 sections. Finally, these

10 sections were partitioned into 34 districts.¹ Each district had its own political organization (*FLN*) whose purpose was the collecting of taxes, supplies, intelligence, and the indoctrination of the populace.

The structure was based on the demicell of three men, then the cell, the demi-group, the group, and the subdistrict. Normally numbering 127 men, all were under the control of the district leader.²

The military organization of the district (*ALN*), whose purpose was the protection of the *FLN* and the accomplishment of terrorist missions, consisted



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of 35 men. The district commander and his deputy were at the head of three armed groups, each headed by a leader and composed of three cells of three men each.

A final important element of the ZAA organization was the bomb-throwing network which was directly responsible to the Zonal Council.

Kept apart from other elements of the

organization, the network was made up of several quite distinct and compartmented branches. Each of these branches was in communication only with the network chief through a system of letter boxes.

In this way, by January 1957, the terrorist organization in Algiers comprised approximately 1200 armed men (*ALN*) and 4500 persons belonging to the *FLN*. Opposing this formidable force were scarcely 1000 municipal police, equipped only to combat common criminals in time of peace.³ Taken by surprise by an adversary of which it was totally ignorant, the police were incapable of dealing with the situation. As the plight of Algiers worsened, the French Government was forced into a difficult decision:

*Should terror be fought with ordinary means or with counter-terror? The ultimate intervention of the French Army was undesirable but unavoidable.*⁴

The Role of Terror

The *sine qua non* for success in revolutionary warfare is that, to succeed, you must win the "hearts and minds of the people." A corollary of this might be—if you want to work your will on another, see that he fears for his life. This was the philosophy behind the urban terror campaign developed by the ZAA. In the street, at work, at home, the citizen of Algiers lived continually under the threat of violent death. In the presence of this permanent danger, he had the depressing feeling of being an isolated and defenseless target. The fact that the French authorities were no longer capable of ensuring his security added to his distress. Losing confidence in the state, he was more and more drawn to the side of the terrorists who alone seemed able to guarantee his safety.⁵

The stated objectives of the ZAA terror campaign were as follows:

First. Force the Francophile Muslims and those serving as officials within the government to turn against the French. This was accomplished by numerous examples of mutilation and assassination. By January 1957, opposition to the *FLN* was effectually silenced, and the French administration was deprived of support from much of the Muslim population. As an ancillary benefit, *FLN* prestige was enhanced as terrorism of this nature offered tangible proof of the organization's effectiveness.

Second. Create an atmosphere of anxiety and distrust between "colons" (Algerians of European extraction) and Muslims. This was accomplished by the indiscriminate bombings and shootings

of colons. The harsh but ineffective countermeasures of the French police further antagonized the Muslim population and deepened the cleavage between the two communities.⁶

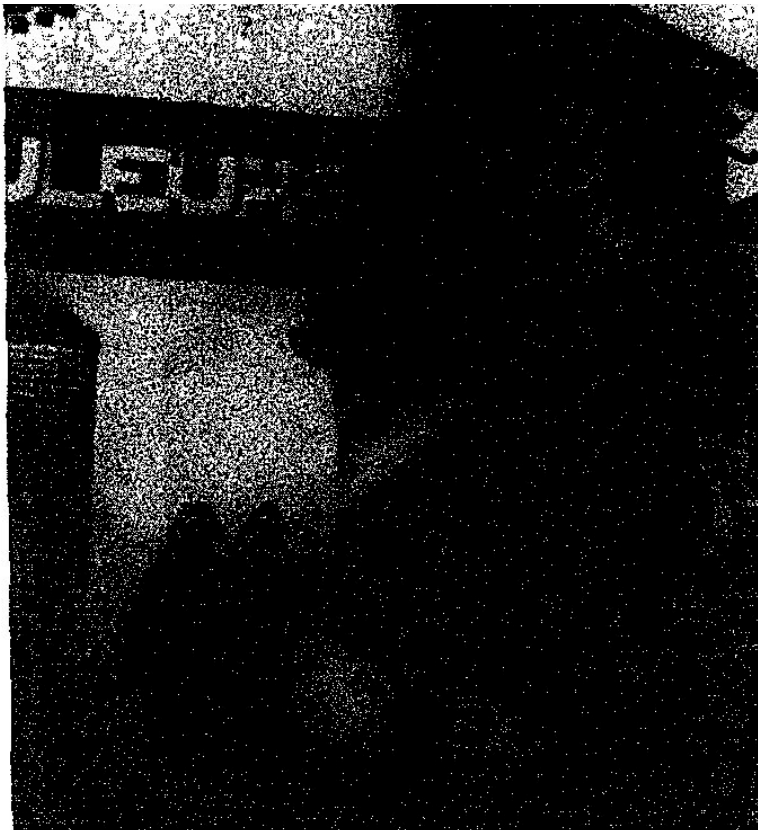
Perhaps terrorism can be defined as the systematic use of intimidation for political ends. This definition would seem to fit the Algerian situation. Though not stated, one can surmise that a further goal of the terror campaign was to persuade the French Government that it had become too costly to hold on in Algeria. Additionally, a terror campaign would gain world attention and possibly would enlist additional outside support for the rebel cause. It would certainly provoke a divisive political debate within France.

The overall effectiveness of the campaign of terror in Algiers is well-known. During its first months (September 1956 to December 1956), there were an average of 100 incidents per month. When one considers that each attack had the effect of terrorizing not just the victims, but also the thousands of people who read of the incident in their newspapers, the effectiveness of urban terror can be appreciated. The efficiency of the ZAA terror network can be testified to by the fact that, during the first four months of the campaign, not one terrorist was arrested by the French police. This fact was not lost on the Muslim population of the city.⁷

Thus, by January 1957, Algiers was about to fall to the *FLN*. In light of the inability of the municipal police to stem the tide of *FLN* control of the city, the mission of restoring French control to Algiers was given to the army. The army realized that, if the goal of revolutionary warfare is the control of the people, the first objective must be to assure the people of their security against terrorist acts. The ZAA, for its part, understood that "terrorism is the one action that the urban revolutionary can never relinquish."⁸ The stage was thus set for what history has come to call the "Battle of Algiers."

The Strike

With terrorism in Algiers having reached unprecedented heights, the *FLN* decided to test their hold on the people. A general strike was announced for 28 January 1957. The population was informed that the strike would last eight days, that during the strike all Muslims were to remain indoors, that all shops were to remain closed and that all infractions would be met with punishment to include death. In addition to demonstrating *FLN* control over the people of Algiers, the strike was to focus the



Paint work destroyed, a bomb 14 January 1957.

attention of the United Nations General Assembly on the Algerian problem. However, a new card was about to be played by the French.

On 8 January 1957, the crack 10th Parachute Division, under the command of Brigadier General Jacques Massu, was given the mission of restoring order to Algiers. Three of the division's four battle groups immediately moved into the city. The fourth remained in reserve just outside the city limits. Not well prepared for this type of work, the division experienced an initial period of hesitation as to



Female terrorist were a reality.

what methods to employ in the accomplishment of its mission. However, not one to allow the initiative to remain in the hands of the enemy, Massu decided that the announced general strike would be crushed. On 14 January 1957, he declared:

*In the event of a strike, all shops will remain open. If necessary, they will be forced open, in which case the security of the merchandise cannot be guaranteed.*⁹

On 18 January 1957, he stated: "Algiers will be encompassed, compartmented, tightly controlled, that is to say, protected and disinfected." It was clear that new leadership had come to Algiers.

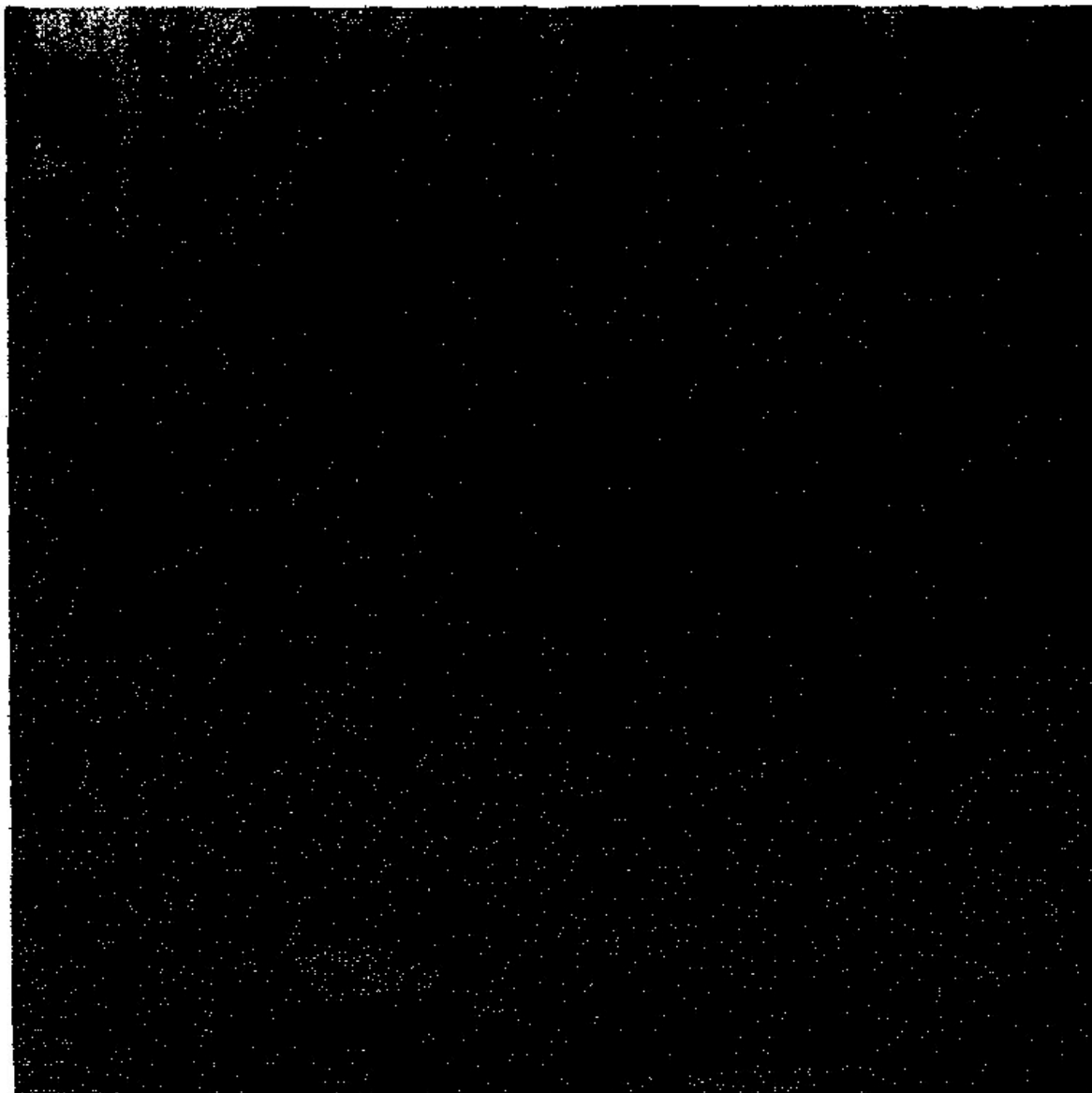
However, to back down in the face of this new army commander would result in an unacceptable loss of face for the ZAA, and, on 28 January 1957, a general strike in the city of Algiers was declared. On the first day, the strike experienced some initial success. On the second day, the effectiveness of the strike was sharply reduced. On the third day, there was only minimal participation. By the fourth day, true to Massu's word, the strike had been crushed. More importantly, the ZAA organization had begun to disintegrate and in slightly more than two weeks would be rendered impotent. By 14 February 1957, 23 gunmen, 51 chiefs of terrorist cells, and 174 FLN tax collectors had been arrested. Significantly, the leadership of the ZAA had been forced to flee to Tunisia. By the end of March, total control of Algiers again rested with the French. In the words of one FLN leader, "The organization that we so painfully, succeeded in building up has been destroyed."¹⁰ How had this remarkable turnabout taken place?

Methods of the Tiger

Two days after assuming responsibility for Algiers, Massu had been granted "full police authority." Armed with this weapon, the aggressive troops of the 10th "Para" Division proceeded to intimidate, to interrogate, to establish stringent population control procedures, to install their own intelligence agents among the Muslim population, and to devise several techniques new to urban counterrevolutionary warfare. Let us consider each of these methods in more detail.

Interrogation. The initial break in the ZAA infrastructure occurred almost by accident. After several days of essentially ineffective patrolling by the paratroopers, a sentry was shot and killed while standing guard at the headquarters of one of the 10th Division's battle groups. Infuriated, Colonel Bigeard, the group commander, took drastic action. A section of the Kasbah, the Muslim enclave within Algiers, was sealed off. Literally the first 100 men that the troops of Colonel Bigeard encountered were brought to the battle group's headquarters and interrogated. As might be expected, these men were not very responsive. However, 10 of the most likely were selected and questioned more "forcefully." (The question of torture will be discussed later.) Of these 10, two broke and provided information on an FLN cell. This was the beginning of the end for the ZAA.

Colonel Bigeard proceeded to organize his entire battle group along the lines of an intelligence unit.



Casualty a terrorists' time bomb.

Interrogation centers were established in each of his six companies. The company commander was designated as the chief interrogator, and he was assisted by his executive officer and platoon sergeants. Apprehension squads were held ready to exploit immediately any intelligence gained by the interrogation unit. At the group headquarters, the S2 coordinated the activities of the six companies. Noting the effectiveness of Bigeard's unit, Massu ordered all battle groups to adopt this system. While operating on a 24-hour-per-day schedule, it should be noted that most arrests occurred at night.

This reduced the possibility of any warning reaching the exposed ZAA member, and also diminished the likelihood of any adverse reaction on the part of uninvolved Muslims.¹¹

Intimidation. As mentioned above, Massu had stated that the security of any shops participating in the general strike could not be guaranteed. True to his word, several shops which were closed on 28 January were forced open by the French troops and effectively ransacked. This blatant use of force made it clear to the shop owners that, regardless of their political leanings, they ran a great financial risk in

cooperating with the ZAA. Not surprisingly, the number of shops closed on the 29th was significantly less than on the previous day.

Additionally, Massu suspended all legal rights of anyone arrested, and the least sign of resistance toward a French soldier was sufficient grounds for arrest. Once arrested, the Muslim knew that, after a thorough interrogation, he was subject to indefinite detention in one of several recently erected "Re-Education Camps." The impact of these new rules of the game was not lost on those not solidly entrenched in the ZAA camp.¹²

Population Control. Though the fact that the headquarters of the ZAA was located in the Kasbah was common knowledge, the French had had little success in penetrating this, the oldest section of the city. Populated by over 80,000 Muslims, the Kasbah, a labyrinth of narrow alleys and interconnected houses, had proved virtually impervious to normal police operations. With the first breaks in the ZAA organization, however, Massu moved to isolate this section of the city.

His first step was to ring the Kasbah with troops and to allow entry and exit only at certain specific points. Standing in long lines in order to have their identification (ID) cards checked soon became a way of life for the inhabitants of the Kasbah. Once this system was functioning, Massu was able to employ effectively the Muslim informers who were beginning to come forward. Guarded by French troops, the informer stood at the controlled entry or exit point. As a Muslim who was known by the informer to belong to the ZAA passed through the control point, he was pointed out and arrested. To protect the informer from retribution, he was usually covered by a blanket in such a way as to ensure that his identity remained a secret. An aggravating inconvenience for most Muslims, the long entry and exit lines proved to be fatal for many members of the ZAA.¹³

Concurrent with the sealing of the Kasbah was the conducting of a census and the issuance of new ID cards. Family booklets were issued to each household in order to facilitate house-to-house control, and the head of the family was made responsible for reporting all changes. This proved to be an important source of intelligence, as the census indicated who was related to whom. As in most other insurgencies, adherence to the rebel cause was often along family lines. Quite expectedly, the ZAA members attempted to falsify the information that they provided to the census taker. To counter this, Massu required that every man subject to

the census be vouched for by two guarantors from outside his family. The guarantors were responsible, under severe penalty, for the veracity of their statements. An added consideration was that the failure to possess a valid ID card was considered a serious offense. This was important in that it provided all Muslims with an alibi in case they should be pressured by the ZAA for having participated in the French census.¹⁴

Once the census had been accomplished, Massu was then able to institute his "Ilot System." Under this system, one person in each family group was made responsible for knowing the location of all other family members. The head of each family was responsible to a floor chief (in an apartment building) who in turn was liable to the building chief. The chain extended upward through a series of block leaders, precinct leaders, and so forth. Employing this technique, the French military could determine the whereabouts of any of the Kasbah's 80,000 inhabitants in minutes.¹⁵

Agents. While the above mentioned methods were quite effective in obtaining information on the ZAA, Massu desired a more active source. He, therefore, quickly took steps to establish his own clandestine intelligence network. With the rapidly increasing ability of the French forces to protect the population, informers began to come forward in ever-increasing numbers. By the end of February 1957, a large number of Muslims were actively functioning as agents for the French Army. This network functioned as follows: Agent A, in apartment building A, reported anything of interest to agent C; Agent B also lived in building A, but reported to Agent D. Agents A and B were not aware that the other was a member of Massu's intelligence organization. The same was true of Agents C and D who both reported to Agent E. Thus, the system progressed up the hierarchy of the network. This modus operandi was effective in rooting out any possible double agents, as Massu had two independent agents at each level. Any treachery was normally quickly spotted and, conversely, very few of the agents were identified by the ZAA. This network was, therefore, a very potent arm in Massu's arsenal of counterinsurgency weapons.¹⁶

Quadrillage. With his population control methods functioning well and with his intelligence network beginning to take shape, Massu decided that the moment was at hand to go on the offensive. The tactic employed was that of "Quadrillage" or the Grid System. Basically, this technique entailed establishing combat units at each level of the civil

administration, (for example, a precinct might have a platoon, a ward would have a company, and so forth). The mission of these units was to provide sufficient security to permit the normal functioning of the civil administration. While the accent was on establishing security, the "grid troops" also conducted psychological warfare operations. "Quadrillage attempted to put French troops, to the last man in direct contact with the Muslims, turning each into a kind of ambassador to the Muslim population."¹⁷ Schools were renovated, clinics established and orphanages adopted by units. Special teams were organized to provide work and housing for the thousands of refugees crowding into the slums. These teams also attempted to strengthen the available social services and to mobilize the population on the side of the French cause. Called the Sections Administratives Urbaines (SAU), these units served as an intermediary between the combat units and the Muslim population. As such, they were a most important part of the Quadrillage System.

However, the establishment of security within their precinct remained the primary mission of the grid troops. This was accomplished by constant patrolling, the guarding of market places and essential buildings, and the employment of a tactic known as *ratissage* or raking operation. A *ratissage* was an operation in which, during the night, a house, an apartment building, or an entire block was surrounded and a thorough search then conducted. The operation may have been generated by intelligence or the target may have been selected at random. In any case, anyone appearing the least bit suspicious was apprehended and returned to company headquarters for further questioning. This technique often worked against the goals of the civic action program, but every effort was made to make the people understand that these severe measures had no purpose other than to cause the rapid destruction of the enemy and thus to improve the security situation in the precinct.

The Quadrillage System landed like a wet blanket on the ZAA organization. While requiring a large number of troops (when later applied to all Algerian cities, more than 300,000 French troops would be assigned to Quadrillage units), it effectively checked the expansion of the ZAA and provided a large degree of security to all citizens of Algiers.¹⁸

Torture. Operations conducted against an urban terrorist organization are most often based on timely intelligence. In Algiers, where time was often critical, interrogation methods relying on rewards, patriotism, bribery and even threats as an incentive

proved to be too slow. The solution to this problem was, in many cases, to subject the suspect to torture. "That torture was used generally rather than as an exception during the 'Battle of Algiers' has been stated repeatedly by officers who took part in the actions."¹⁹ The government's own Commission for Safeguarding Individual Rights and Liberties, in later studying the Algiers situation, stated that it had found incontrovertible evidence of French disregard for the Laws of War.²⁰ But how exactly do the Laws of War apply to an urban insurgency? Massu himself stated, "Torture is to be condemned, but we would like a precise answer as to where torture begins."²¹ This quandary can possibly be better illustrated by describing an incident which occurred in February 1957. A terrorist had been caught, grenade in hand. The French were sure that he had information on several other terrorists who were ready to throw their bombs. What should the French have done? Give the terrorist a few unpleasant moments or put 300 innocent lives in danger? When one recalls that many of the French officers' families lived in Algiers, the difficulty of the dilemma becomes apparent.

However, if it is possible to abuse the use of torture, it must be said that the troops of Massu did just that. The brutal treatment of prisoners, whether they had been recently captured or not, was often motivated by considerations other than intelligence gathering. Algerians were tortured in reprisal for *FLN* actions as a means of terrorizing the rebel cadre and of influencing the population.²²

Thus, the question becomes: "Can an army claiming to defend western society and humanistic ethics employ methods which compromise the values that it seeks to uphold?"²³ Can it institutionalize atrocity? The experience of Massu in Algiers would indicate that the answer is no. While proving effective in a tactical sense, the sanctioned use of such methods resulted in serious disruption to the army. Imagine the impact. the policy of sanctioned torture had on the effectiveness of the psychological warfare teams. Picture the effect on the young officer, fresh from St. Cyr, who is ordered to summarily execute a prisoner, and is then instructed to indicate in the official report that the prisoner was killed while attempting an escape. Consider the feeling of degradation of the troops who administered beatings and water and electrical treatments, and then discovered that the suspect was innocent. These things occurred in Algiers, and the resulting bad conscience and guilt feelings, the loss of respect for superiors, and the profound division of opinion



Casualty a terrorists' time bomb.

on the question of torture all had a powerful impact on the entire army's state of discipline and morale. The use of torture may have been tactically sound, but to many Muslims, "the adoption of systematic physical and psychological brutality by the French was an admission of ultimate defeat."²⁴

Judgment

Were the methods employed by Massu effective? If the criteria for effectiveness is the accomplishment of the mission (as is normal in military operations), then the verdict is a resounding yes. By the end of February 1957, the pressure on the ZAA was so great that all the members of the Zonal Council, together with many less important leaders, had fled to the safety of Tunisia. Massu's

10th Division had succeeded in virtually wiping out the *FLN* potential for direct action in Algiers. A few statistics give an indication of the extent of the damage suffered by the ZAA: after only four weeks of Massu's counter campaign, 23 gunmen, 51 chiefs of terrorist cells, and 174 *FLN* tax collectors had been arrested; by September 1957, over 3000 members of the ZAA were dead and over 5000 Muslims were being held in prison camps; and almost 40 percent of the male population of the Kasbah had been interrogated.²⁵

Yes, it would appear that the Battle of Algiers had been disastrous for the rebel cause. The terror campaign alienated French public opinion for years. It caused the introduction of Massu's "paras" into the city. It forced the civil authorities to suspend

the normal civil rights due the Muslim. It resulted, finally, in the crushing of the ZAA.

And yet ...

Interrogation and Torture. Can an army rationalize institutionalized contraventions of the Laws of War by stating that:

... *the critical question is not who was right but what was right. This is an approach that desperately engaged combatants can't allow. They must be right and what is right is what works.*²⁶

I contend that this is the argument of expediency. The seeds of sickness that these illegal methods implanted in the French Army bore their fruition in the attempted "Coup of the Generals" in 1961, and was the genesis of the OAS (secret French terrorist organization which attempted to block General de Gaulle's Algerian policy. Membership in the OAS was made up primarily of French military).

Population Control. Yes, thanks to the Ilot System the French were capable of locating any inhabitant of the Kasbah in minutes. Yes, shops were open during the period of the general strike. Yes, controlled entry and exit to the Muslim section of the city facilitated the identification of terrorists. Yes, each building was effectively surveyed by Massu's secret agents. Yet, these are the methods of a police state. To believe that a people will acquiesce permanently to the conditions of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to ignore thousands of years of recorded history.

Quadrillage. The effectiveness of this technique has been described above. Yet, when applied to the entire country, the French discovered that often a dozen guerrillas could tie down many companies of troops. Despite achieving the renowned ratio of 10 to 1 (300,000 versus 30,000); the French found permanent security impossible to maintain. Even in Algiers when the 10th Division was removed from the city in September 1957, there was a resurgence of terrorist activity.

That such a system is monetarily expensive is self-evident. However, there were other expenses as well. To employ this technique required the posting of thousands of draftees overseas. Even during the Indochinese conflict this had not been necessary. The ultimate effect of this policy on popular support for the war effort was very similar to our own recent experience in Vietnam.

Political Considerations. The study of the Battle of Algiers by the FLN leadership resulted in a change in their strategic concept.

*The FLN decided to shift from reliance on a general insurrection inside Algeria to the maintenance of a military, stalemate and the exertion of diplomatic pressure on the French to negotiate a cease fire on the basis of Algerian independence.*²⁷

History tells us of the ultimate wisdom of this change in strategy.

On the French side, Massu's triumph over the rebel network supplied kinetic energy to the pacification effort and created a sense of eventual victory. Algiers would remain French! This feeling was instrumental in bringing to pass the events of 13 May 1958. On that day, the army and the colon population of Algiers, feeling that the caretaker Gaillard government in Paris had become too flexible on the question of Algerian independence, organized demonstrations that resulted in the fall of the Fourth Republic and the return to power of General Charles de Gaulle. After some vacillation, De Gaulle, determining that an independent Algerian state was inevitable, began the process that resulted in that independence by 1962.

Yes, it must be said that Massu accomplished his mission. But considering the monetary, political, and moral costs of his methods, one concludes that the cost was too high.

Epilogue

But this is all ancient history. It has been 10 years since Algeria became an independent nation, and three years since Full General Massu, Commander of all French Forces in Germany, retired. It is no longer of any significance. To this, one responds that its value lies, as does all history, in what it can teach us. Its importance resides in the hope that, by studying the Battle of Algiers, errors can be avoided in the future. Our Army is now disengaging from a war in which many of Massu's techniques were employed. The role of the Marine civic action platoons in I Corps was not totally unlike that of the Quadrillage troops. Many of us are indebted to the efforts of the Anny's civic action teams, philosophical descendants of the SAU units employed in Algeria. Less happily, we too suffered the experience of atrocities being committed by our troops.

But now the hope must be that our Army will never be called upon to accomplish a mission such as that given to Massu. However, the British Anny in Belfast is today dealing with a situation quite analogous to that faced by the French in the Algiers of 1957, It is not impossible that the Kasbah of

yesterday could become the Harlem of 19???. If such an unhappy day should arrive, one can only hope that, in accomplishing whatever mission the Army might be called upon to perform, it will reject those methods of expediency which disregard the basic dignity of man. To fail to do so would be to dishonor our heritage and to prove ourselves unworthy of the great responsibility entrusted to us by our nation.

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