

Let's Take the French Experience in Algeria Out of U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine

Geoff Demarest



This article is an adaptation of an earlier student paper. The author thanks Captain Steven W. Knott, U.S. Army, campaign analysis instructor at the U.S. Army War College, for his assistance and insight.

Geoff Demarest is director of research at the Foreign Military Studies Office, Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army War College, and he holds a B.A. from Colorado University and an M.A., Ph.D., and J.D. from Denver University.

PHOTO: French troops seal off Algiers' notorious Casbah, 27 May 1956, in Algeria, prior to an 18-hour raid that turned up a cache of military material. (AP Photo)

THE U.S. ARMY and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, is not written from a perspective of classic strategy or strategic principles.¹ Most of the standard terms of military strategy are wholly absent, and where present they are used outside the confines of traditional military usage. While rejecting classic terms, a new conventionalism appears in the manual with lessons from the French experience in Algeria featured favorably in that convention. Together, the words Algeria, France, French, and Galula (surname of a French officer and author frequently referenced in the manual) are used at least 42 times. The FM's annotated bibliography includes several books on the Algerian counterinsurgency.²

But, to what end? Why do the manual writers put so much emphasis on that French experience, given that the French failed strategically, engaged in immoral conduct during the war, provoked a civil-military crisis in France, and tolerated genocide and mass population displacement in northern Africa after the withdrawal of French forces? It seems that the French government could not have achieved a worse set of results, nor could U.S. doctrine have chosen a worse model to admire, if admiration it is.³

Publication of FM 3-24 understandably sparked some pushback by interested commentators. *Armed Forces Journal* articles and subsequent blogging debates produced a slew of important questions.⁴ What exactly are the supposed French "lessons learned?" What is it about the Algerian case that earns special emphasis in U.S. military instruction or about David Galula that the FM should anoint him as a counterinsurgent guru? What French lessons have entered recent U.S. doctrine, and are they the right ones? Did the French view of counterinsurgency accelerate a U.S. move away from classic strategy to another set of counterinsurgent principles? Was this switch warranted?

Galula or Trinquier?

A 1965 *International Affairs* book review of Roger Trinquier's *Modern Warfare* and David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (both published in English in 1964) asserts, "Galula has a much wider view of the problem,

partly no doubt because his professional experience is wider.” Available English-language biographic information about Trinquier and Galula, however, indicates that Trinquier was older, more experienced, much more widely known in the French military and in France than Galula, and a more prolific writer.⁵ Alistair Horne, in his 1977 *A Savage War of Peace* (widely considered the seminal English-language work on the war) indexes Trinquier heavily, but Galula not at all. Jean Lartéguy modeled characters in his novels *The Centurions* and *The Praetorians* after Trinquier, but it would be problematic to assert that Galula’s life or experiences impressed him.⁶ One finds it hard to believe that Lieutenant Colonel Galula did not know Colonel Trinquier, at the time a chief of intelligence in Algeria. Still, Galula does not cite Trinquier in either of his own works, although he almost certainly read Trinquier’s *Modern Warfare* before working on his own 1963 *Pacification in Algeria* (from which his less-revealing *Counterinsurgency Warfare* was then derived). The absence of citations of Trinquier might suggest professional jealousy, personal differences, or intentional silence on Galula’s part.

Regardless of their interpersonal or professional relationship, it does not seem reasonable to assert that Galula’s writing reflects French military thinking about Algeria more than that of Trinquier, who was a more important player in the events in Algeria. It is more likely that the writers of FM 3-24 favored Galula because of the formula he presented, rather than for singularity or depth of experience. They may also have preferred Galula because he did not advocate so strongly torture and terror as methods for breaking into the cellular organization of the Algerian insurgency.⁷

Does The Algerian Case Apply Elsewhere?

The Algerian War naturally draws American attention today given that its principal insurgent group was Islamic, and the counterinsurgent a western power with a technological, logistical, and financial advantage. Like Iraq and Afghanistan, Algeria’s geography features a dominant urban area surrounded by a harsh hinterland. However, beyond these similarities, the differences are considerable. The distances challenging French logistics were one-tenth what the United

States faces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the cultural barriers to effective French counterinsurgency (notably the language barrier) were not nearly as severe as those Americans face in Iraq and Afghanistan.

France’s objectives were inherently different from U.S. objectives in Iraq or Afghanistan. The French government and people, and most of the citizens of Algerian northern Africa, believed Algeria to be part of France. The French government’s aim, at least at the outset, was to maintain the territorial status quo. American goals do not include long-term settlements of colonists.⁸ In other words, for the French Army, theirs was truly a counterinsurgency, while U.S. Army involvement is counterinsurgency by proxy with the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan. Because counterinsurgent operational design should have a close relationship to strategic objectives, we may attach some significance to differences and commonalities of purpose in counterinsurgent strategies, and it appears that U.S. doctrine writers did not compare U.S. objectives to those of the French in Algeria. Any comparison of French objectives in 1950s Algeria with those of U.S. efforts *outside* of Iraq and Afghanistan is likely to be weaker still. Comparing the Algerian case (as to counterinsurgent objectives, basic physical geography, social identities of the contenders, etc.) to Colombia’s insurgent conflict, for instance, would require a tremendous logical stretch.

The basic laws or principles of counterinsurgency that Galula offers to replace the classic military principles are—

- The objective is the population.
- The support of the population is not spontaneous. Only a minority within the population can obtain the support that the counterinsurgents need.
- A pro-counterinsurgent minority among the population will emerge, but only if the counterinsurgent is seen as the ultimate victor. An early success is necessary.

...it appears that U.S. doctrine writers did not compare U.S. objectives to those of the French in Algeria.

- Effort must be concentrated area by area. We must ask, “Which side threatens the most, and which offers the most protection?”⁹

This list may be descriptive of the Algerian case and useful in other conflicts, including Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Colombia, but the list’s heft is questionable. Galula’s assertions inspire questions about how, when, and where. It appears from his writing that French successes in Algeria were related as much as anything to the construction of physical barriers and checkpoints, the use of informants and interrogations, the commitment of large numbers of troops, and the employment of helicopters.¹⁰ Moreover, like Trinquier, Galula asserts that dominance by the counterinsurgent of the psychology of fear is centrally important, so even Galula’s advice about the importance of psychological operations should cause reader uncertainty regarding exactly what messages Galula felt should be sent to a population. It is hard to read Galula carefully without inferring that he agrees with Trinquier that the counterinsurgent force must be harsh in order to instill a generalized respect born of fear.

Does the United States Apply French Methods in Counterinsurgency?

We can dispose of the ugliest possibility quickly. The French used systematic torture, which some have since justified.¹¹ It is important to underscore and repeat that the U.S. manual FM 3-24 is explicit, emphatic, and unequivocal about the illegality and immorality of using torture. A typical sentence on the subject states—

Torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment is never a morally permissible option, even if lives depend on gaining information. No exceptional circumstances permit the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.¹²

In part, the incident at Abu Gharib may have occasioned this emphasis against torture in an American manual. The fact that such pointed text exists in the manual is at odds with the manual’s admiration of French counterinsurgency practices, however.

Even so, some critics of the manual point to its pedigree and its admiration for individuals who perpetrated torture. They see these as reasons to suspect the attitudes of the FM’s proponents, and note that



AP Photo/Horst Faas

A French soldier guards a street corner in Oran, Algeria, 15 May 1962. On the wall is a poster of the right-wing nationalist Secret Armed Organization, calling for citizens to take up arms against Algerian independence.

French military writers list torture and terror as significant factors in the limited success the French achieved. In a final section of *Pacification in Algeria*, Galula attributes counterinsurgency’s failure in Algeria to three principle causes, one of which was “lack of firmness toward the population.”¹³ Galula asserts that “it is necessary to punish in exemplary fashion the rebel criminals we have caught... The rebels’ flagrant crimes must be punished immediately, mercilessly, and on the very spot where they took place.”¹⁴

Leaving the question of torture aside, what are some of the positive elements of the French counterinsurgency experience in Algeria? One might be the overall strength of French counterinsurgency forces in theater. It is difficult to compare the numbers to American troop strength in Iraq or Afghanistan, given the many French national identities inside Algeria. Algerian French troops, French Foreign Legionnaires, Francophone Algerian police, and so on populated the battlespace.

Nevertheless, the numbers seem to indicate that in relation to the local, potentially insurgent population, French counterinsurgent troop strength was greater than U.S. troop strength in Iraq, and it was much greater than U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan, at least early on.¹⁵ Although the number of boots-on-the-ground has been a source of debate

Americans appear to be oblivious to the questions of real estate ownership and taxation in Iraq...

since the outset of campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, FM 3-24 does not compare this factor to the Algerian case.

Another missing lesson of the Algerian case concerns questions of equity and efficiency in land use and ownership, and inequities in the tax burden.¹⁶ The French did not act to quell insurgent energy over the basic unfairness of the Algerian social contract. Americans appear to be oblivious to the questions of real estate ownership and taxation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Field Manual 3-24 barely touches on these subjects.¹⁷ The Algerian case demonstrates that real estate ownership and taxation matters may well be basic issues to resolve in counterinsurgency, and that the French did not do so. Nevertheless, U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine does not contemplate the problem.

Additional areas of interest include the use of physical barriers to isolate the battlespace, population control, materiel movement, and census taking.¹⁸ The French spent considerable sums fencing borders, and both Trinquier and Galula stress the importance of detailed knowledge about the population. Field Manual 3-24 does note the importance of census data, but is considerably less clear about the benefits of physical barriers (though they have been used extensively in Iraq).

A preferred FM 3-24 “lesson” from Algeria concerns the use of nonmilitary forces. From the manual:

David Galula wisely notes, ‘To confine soldiers to purely military functions while urgent and vital tasks have to be done, and nobody else is available to undertake them, would be senseless. The soldier must then be prepared to become . . . a social worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, a boy scout. But only for as long as he cannot be replaced, for it is better to entrust civilian tasks to civilians.’¹⁹

Galula’s last sentence is important. Military forces can perform civilian tasks, but often not as well as the civilian agencies with people trained

in those skills. Further, military forces performing civilian tasks are not performing military tasks. Diverting them from those tasks should be a temporary measure, one taken to address urgent circumstances.

Considering how many aspects of counterinsurgent efforts *Pacification in Algeria* touches upon, the above seems a relatively minor point. The weight FM 3-24 gives to it may be a clue as to why the Algerian case gets the play that it does; the notion of broad American interagency involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has enjoyed some recent popularity. Whether it is really a good idea to involve multiple U.S. federal agencies in foreign interventions is another matter, but attaching the Algerian case to either side of the argument does no good.

For one thing, Algeria was part of France proper. “Civilian agencies” would not be “expeditionary” in nature, just assigned. They were *in France*. The idea that some degree of multi-agency French participation (or lack thereof) either caused the immense failure in Algeria or delayed it is implausible. Galula does not attribute French failure to the decision to not attack insurgent sanctuaries in neighboring countries, the failure to address land ownership inequities, or the ultimate resolve of Charles de Gaulle to release Algeria. These three factors are immense compared to whether or not enough civilians were involved administratively, or whether the Muslim population was sufficiently threatened. It remains open whether there is anything in the historical record that shows why Galula’s comment on appropriate soldier roles and tasks was “wise” rather than gratuitous and tangential.

Does the French Model Endanger Classic Strategy?

The United States should not have dismissed many of the classic principles of warfare so completely. The supposed principles Galula and some other French writers offer are an insufficient replacement, stemming as they do from a completely failed counterinsurgency operation. Field



AP Photo

Armed French troops ready for action in the Bab-El-Oued district of Algiers after the area has been sealed off by the military, 26 March 1962.

Manual 3-24 seems to make the implied argument that the French succeeded to the extent that they applied Galula-esque principles and failed to the extent they did not. This is an argument with little historical support. Galula was a small cog in a failed enterprise. His critical observations afterward, while well-stated and in some instances useful, are participatory and not yet attuned to the scale of the disaster then unfolding. Note that the term “lines of communication” appears about 26 times in the text of FM 3-24 but is almost never used in relation to the insurgent’s lines of communication. Neither is the word “pursuit” nor the term “culminating point” found at all, even though one expects the counterinsurgent to pursue the insurgent. It seems, however, that the Galula way of war so displaced classic strategic thought that the terms attending those classic principles disappeared. The French identified widespread use of the helicopter, which extends the counterinsurgent’s culminating point during the pursuit, as helpful in Algeria.²⁰

Favorable mention in American doctrine of the French experience in Algeria is justifiable when a specific tactical or operational example applies to operations. Otherwise, the total strategic failure

of the French counterinsurgent campaign and its leaders’ actions with regard to captured enemy combatants argue that references to the Algerian episode be made economically.

This article admittedly simplifies available U.S. doctrinal literature on “low intensity warfare” by using FM 3-24 as a single guiding reference and foil. It also shortchanges the richer set of influences that the development of FM 3-24 itself enjoyed.

However, the point of this article is not to malign U.S. “low-intensity” warfare doctrine or even FM 3-24, or to discourage study of the French experience in Algeria. Rather, it is to suggest we temper our enthusiasm for drawing lessons from this particular conflict. Better that we respect the wider communicative consequences that its inclusion entails. Nothing from experiences in Algeria should compel us to supplant still-applicable lessons of classic strategy. We should study the insurgent war in Algeria, but when it comes to including lessons drawn from it in our counterinsurgency doctrine—if the choice of lessons to include is so thin, and the best lessons overlooked—we might do better to just leave it out altogether. **MR**

NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, FM 3-24 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 15 December 2006).

2. Among the titles missing from the bibliography in FM 3-24, and which express the spectacular French failure, see Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830-2000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paul Aussaresses, *The Battle of the Casbah: Counter-Terrorism and Torture* (New York, Enigma Books, 2005); Gérard Chaliand, ed. *Guerrilla Strategies: An Historical Anthology from the Long March to Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Edgar O'Ballance, *The Algerian Insurrection 1954-1962* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977); and Irwin Wall, *France, The United States and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). In *The Battle of the Casbah*, Aussaresses, who had worked directly for Trinquier, confessed the widespread use of torture. Gérard Chaliand is easily the most prolific and personally knowledgeable French writer on issues of guerrilla warfare and insurgency, so absence of mention of this author is by itself a curiosity. Wall's book lends a missing strategic and diplomatic context to the Algerian case. The United States, for instance, was greatly responsible for the rapid rebuilding of the French Army, an army the United States had intended for the conventional defense of Europe. The pored-over condition of the numerous copies of the O'Ballance book on the shelf at the Combined Arms Research Library bespeaks long-term interest in the subject among American student-officers and their instructors. It is not as though the Galula perspective on the war in Algeria dominates intellectual space at Leavenworth.

3. David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006 reprint of a 1963 publication); FM 3-24 *Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964); Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (New York: Viking, 1977); Jean Larteguy, *The Centurions* (New York: Dutton, 1962); Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* translated from the French by Daniel Lee (New York: Praeger, 1964).

4. See Ralph Peters, "Dishonest Doctrine," *Armed Forces Journal*, December 2007 online at <<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/12/3144330>> (4 May 2008); LTC Gian Gentile, "The Dogmas of War," *Armed Forces Journal*, December 2007, online at <www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/11/31558364> (4 May 2008); Mark Grimsley, "Why We Hate the New Counterinsurgency Manual," *Blog Them Out Of The Stone Age*, online at <<http://warhistorian.org/wordpress/?p=688>> (4 May 2008).

5. See Wikipedia, "Roger Trinquier" online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Trinquier>; according to Wikipedia, Trinquier's publication list is much greater than that of Galula, and Trinquier was born about 10 years earlier (in 1908) than Galula (1919).

6. As the Wikipedia article and many other sources note, characters in Jean

Larteguy's novels, including *The Centurions* (referenced in FM 3-24) *The Praetorians*, and the *Hounds of Hell*, were based in part on the life of Roger Trinquier.

7. Galula may have simply been more coy than Trinquier. Note for instance, the comment "Under the pressure of a press campaign against 'tortures' (in my view 90 percent nonsense and 10 percent truth), a special unit was created in the fall of 1957 under the name of D.O.P." Galula, 183.

8. This assertion bars the contentious argument of some radical Islamists that Israel constitutes an American or at least Western colony analogous to the Francophile population in northern Africa.

9. Galula, 247.

10. On the subject of helicopters in Algeria, see Charles R. Shrader, *The First Helicopter War: Logistics and Mobility in Algeria, 1954-1962* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); On the value of physical barriers, see O'Ballance, 215.

11. Of this there has been little doubt. See Aussaresses, 4.

12. FM 3-24, 7-28.

13. Galula, 262.

14. *Ibid.*, 268. I use the term "apparently" because the sentence comes from an appendix, a letter written by Galula in 1956 when still a captain.

15. See, Robert Riggs, *Counter-Insurgency Lessons from the French Algerian War* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2004) 2, citing Martin Alexander and J. Keiger, ed., *France and the Algerian War 1954-1962: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2002) 9. French troop strength, according to these figures, exceeded 415,000 in 1957.

16. See generally, chap. 1, "A Town of No Great Interest" in Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, (NY: New York Review of Books, 2006), 23-44.

17. Personal investigation into the question of how much knowledge existed within the Defense Intelligence Agency regarding land ownership and taxation in Iraq revealed that such knowledge was, institutionally speaking, nil as of late 2006.

18. On the use of barrier fencing see Galula, 62, 149, 180, and 181. It is no small detail that the fencing was heavily land-mined. As for census-taking see, Galula, throughout.


19. FM 3-24, 2-9.

20. Mention in FM 3-24 of the word "helicopter" centers around medical evacuation and occasional airdrop of supplies to remote bases (8-8, 8-9, E-1). There is also mention of fire support (E-2), but the only, indirect reference to the use of the *helicopter* for movement and positioning of troops is in a paragraph on building host-nation airpower capability (E-5).

What if a single Warrior had the knowledge of thousands?

Battle Command Knowledge System
Providing Full Spectrum Knowledge Management
In Support of Full Spectrum Operations
Professional Forums KM Training
KM Products and Services

AKO: <https://bcks.army.mil> Public Page: <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/BCKS>

 **BCKS**
U.S. ARMY **BATTLE COMMAND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM**