



French Counterinsurgency in Algeria: Forgotten Lessons from a Misunderstood Conflict

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While Henry Kissinger encouraged President Bush to read Alistair Horne's seminal study of the Algerian War of Independence, *A Savage War of Peace*, during the debate on the troop surge to Iraq, this conflict remains largely ignored as a source of inspiration for the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.¹ Iraq and Afghanistan have generated a new body of literature on the subject but authors studying the pre-9/11 era continue to look for lessons largely through the American and British experience of fighting communist insurgents in the jungles of Vietnam and Malaya. Much less exists when it comes to drawing lessons regarding the conduct of operations in a large, desert-like, Middle-eastern country where a widespread insurgency is conducted in both urban and countryside environments by different elements of a Muslim population often motivated by diverging tribal, nationalist and Islamist aims.

The Algerian War of Independence does provide such similarities in terms of geography and topography, social makeup, as well as military and insurgent forces at play. The French, however, lost Algeria after eight years of bitter fighting and the subject is further obscured by the emotions surrounding the atrocities by both sides, thus making the collation of objective testimonies difficult. Most confusing, though, are the circumstances specific to a troubled France at the time, such as the profound tensions that existed between citizens in the *métropole* and French immigrants in Algeria proper, the continued effort to resume its former place as a major power in the world, the collapse of the Fourth Republic in 1958, as well as the return to power of de Gaulle amidst popular turmoil and threatened *coup d'état* by the military.

Nevertheless, once these various elements are peeled away, one realizes that the Algerian conflict offers an indispensable insight, truly relevant to the conduct of counterinsurgency operations (COIN) in today's security environment. While avoiding the political debate over the validity of France's claim over her North African possession, this article will demonstrate that French military forces actually waged a successful campaign in Algeria, virtually eliminating the insurgent forces in the field but losing the war at home. Such success was long in the making, following years of trial and errors before culminating in the required, all-encompassing structure under the *plan Challe* of 1959. Before drawing such conclusions, however, the reader must be introduced to the conflict that started rather innocuously in the morning hours of the *Toussaint* of 1954.

¹ Associated Press, "Bush's History Lesson", *The Boston Globe*, 21 January 2007.

Genesis of the Conflict

French troops wrestled control of Algeria from a decaying Ottoman empire in 1830 and, in 1848, the constitution of the Second Republic proclaimed that territory an integral part of France. This led to the designation of its three main regions (Oran, Algiers and Constantine, from west to east) as metropolitan departments. Algeria was France, not a colony. This widely-held belief and the presence of an ever growing number of inhabitants of European extraction that relocated to Algeria, the *pieds noirs*, led to a much more emotional attachment to that African possession than in the case of remoter territories, such as in sub-Saharan Africa and Indochina.

Despite this very particular bond, Algeria could not escape its geography nor its history. By 1954, the one million of *pieds noirs* were surrounded by ten times that number of Muslims.² These were either of Arab extraction, descendants of the Ottoman occupiers and migrants from the Middle East mainly found in the cities, or belonged to two indigenous groups. The *Kabyles* were settled in the mountainous terrain immediately inland of the coastal plain while the *Berbers* maintained their nomadic lifestyle in the vast expanses of the Sahara.³ Resistance waxed and waned through the first century of occupation as France easily exploited tensions between these groups in order to "divide and conquer". This approach faced a new challenge, however, when nationalism took on an intellectual dimension in the 1930s as Algerians grew more educated and many found their way to continental France for employment.⁴ The Second World War proved pivotal as a humiliated France wrestled to maintain control of her North African possessions, refusing petitions for greater recognition despite the important contribution made by native Algerians to the French war effort.⁵

Divisions once again plagued the nationalist movements in the wake of the war. Mainstream parties promoted moderate views, leaning towards peaceful negotiations for political association with the French, but a small band broke ranks in 1946 and militated for independence through armed insurrection. Although this group was rapidly broken up by the French police, its leaders escaped and found refuge in Egypt within the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood. There, they witnessed first hand the rise of the pan-Arab nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser while France experienced a humiliating defeat in Indochina, withdrawing in the summer of 1954. Algerian radicals saw their opportunity and took it. They publicly announced the founding of the *Front de libération national* (FLN) on 10 October and secretly called for a general insurrection to be triggered on the morning of the *Toussaint*, All Saints' Day.⁶

Confused Offensive, Uncertain Reaction (1954-55)

The FLN badly played its hand on 1 November 1954. Although it succeeded in coordinating murders and bombings on a wide scale that morning, the general uprising did not occur as the

² The *pieds noirs* numbered 1,025,000 at the outset of the war, or 10.4% of the total population. See Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace – Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), p. 23-79, for an excellent introduction to the Algerian conflict in his description of the French occupation from 1830 to 1954.

³ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Brooks, 1991), p. 434-435.

⁴ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 39-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73-79.

proclamation issued from Cairo failed to reach the masses.⁷ Faced with such apathy, rebel forces quietly withdrew in the mountainous interior, waiting for a counter-offensive by the authorities.⁸ Not that French intelligence performed much better during these events. They ignored the founding of the FLN, instead decapitating the moderate nationalist movement by arresting its leadership and 2,000 militants, and focused their effort on a police response in the few, larger urban centers.⁹ Within weeks, however, it was realized that the bulk of the opposition had escaped to find refuge in the mountains. The Army was then tasked to undertake a series of sweeps through the Aurès region through the first months of 1955, eventually developing the tactics of *ratissage* ("combing" through an area) and *accrochage* ("hooking" opposition forces) in order to find and engage the enemy in their hideouts.¹⁰

Three elements weakened the counterinsurgency campaign at that stage. First, French authorities refused to treat it as such but, instead, waged uncoordinated police operations in the cities while the military was combating so-called *banditisme* (banditry) in the country side. This came as a result of a serious flaw in the French system, that of the absence of unity of command. The civilian Governor General was nominally in charge of all French forces in Algeria but his actual influence over the Army Commander-in-Chief was greatly undermined by political instability in Paris. Disunity was compounded by distrust. Governor Jacques Soustelle, appointed in January 1955, was reluctant to let the military loose on the insurgents, fearing repeats of past atrocities, such as the "Sétif incident" of May 1945 when V-E day celebrations in that small Algerian village resulted in the massacre of one hundred *pieds noirs* by native mobs followed by army retributions to the cost of 3,000 Muslims killed.¹¹

Such suspicions towards the military were confirmed when Soustelle learned that the military leadership hid from him that *ratissage* operations often included the indiscriminate bombing by planes and artillery of villages suspected of providing support to the ALN (*Armée de libération nationale*, the military branch of the FLN).¹² By the summer of 1955, the war had come to an awkward draw. The French, still building up their forces, could not eradicate the insurgents. These were firmly implanted in the Aurès Mountains but they could not make inroad in the cities nor rely on widespread support in rural villages. Both sides had to rely on terror: the French to obtain information and prevent support to the *maquisards*, the ALN to obtain food and shelter among the villagers. Worse, for the FLN, the majority of the *pieds noirs*' daily lives continued unperturbed while news of the insurgency was barely noticed in metropolitan France. As the first phase of the conflict was marked by uncertainty, the next period would require radicalization.

⁷ There were 60 separate incidents that resulted in a dozen killed. Philippe Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française de 1914 à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1999), p. 414.

⁸ Saïd Ferdi, "Les débuts de la guerre d'Algérie" in *Stratégie de la guérilla – anthologie historique de la longue marche à nos jours*, ed. Gérard Chaliand (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 119-122.

⁹ Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 100.

¹⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 100-103.

¹¹ Ignored in France, Sétif left an indelible mark on the Algerian psyche. Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française*, p. 415-416; Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 23-28.

¹² Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 114.

FLN Radicalization, French Innovations (1955-56)

Insurgents sought to break the deadlock by provoking the French into a cycle of violent reprisals such as that had occurred in Sétif. On 20 August 1955, they infiltrated the coastal city of Philippeville and organized large demonstrations that rapidly degenerated into the massacre of seventy *pièdes noirs* and close to a hundred pro-French Muslims. The ensuing crackdown resulted in the death of at least several hundreds, if not thousands, of fighters and local villagers.¹³ Philippeville was a success for the FLN in the opprobrium it brought to French leaders at home and abroad but it also resulted in a dramatic re-assessment of the war in Paris and Algiers. Through consolidation, granting independence to the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, and expansion, withdrawing troops from Germany for employment in Algeria and deploying conscripts to fight in North Africa, French forces grew to more than 300,000 by the spring of 1956.¹⁴

This expanded military effort was sustained by a new understanding that native opinion was very much up for grabs, as the population waited to see which camp could guarantee their safety and prosperity. In May 1955, Governor General Soustelle had instructed the army to create the *Sections administratives spécialisées* (SAS).¹⁵ Also known as the *képis bleus* due to their distinctive headgear, French personnel were deployed for extensive periods in designated villages across the Algerian countryside. The corps grew to 5,000 personnel across 800 rural centers by 1959. Their role was to counter the chronic lack of a central administrative presence outside of the cities. These officers and senior enlisted personnel conducted widely different tasks, ranging from providing medical care and schooling to training and leading security detachments of local inhabitants, shielding the population from ALN terrorism to win them over to the French cause.

Authorities also employed local auxiliaries in the fight. These *harkis* served in independent military formations officered by Europeans. By the end of the war, some 20,000 native Algerians were serving in the army as career soldiers while another 40,000 conscripts served under the French flag.¹⁶ Another category of *harkis* was employed with the SAS. A section of 25 *mokhaznis* was usually attached to each SAS detachment, living with their families in the villages they were assigned to. Their duty was to provide armed protection to French personnel while serving as their eyes and ears on the ground. As well, local villagers were employed as *Groupes d'auto-défense* (GAD). These self-defense units were armed and trained in order to provide security to their communities. They received weapons and strong points were fortified, allowing them to sustain an ALN assault until the nearest garrison of French troops could intervene. It is estimated that more than 200,000 *harkis*, be they enrolled in the French army,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 118-123.

¹⁴ Alban Mahieu, "Les effectifs de l'armée française en Algérie" in *Militaires et guérilla dans la guerre d'Algérie*, ed. Jean-Charles Jauffret et Maurice Vaïsse (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2001), p. 41.

¹⁵ Noara Omouri, "Les Sections administratives spécialisées et les sciences sociales: Études et actions sociales de terrain des officiers SAS et des personnels des Affaires algériennes" in *Militaires et guérillas dans la guerre d'Algérie*, ed. Jean-Charles Jauffret et Maurice Vaïsse (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2001), p. 383-389.

¹⁶ Martin Evans, "The *Harkis*: The Experience and Memory of France's Muslim Auxiliaries" in *The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954-62: Experience, Images, Testimonies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 120.

mokhaznis or GAD members, had taken up arms and were actively fighting the insurgents in some form or the other by 1959.¹⁷

These troops, however, were never considered more than useful auxiliaries by the French command as European soldiers remained responsible for carrying out the main effort, which continued to experience much difficulty. Units' reliance on indiscriminate artillery barrages and slow moving vehicles confined to the rare roads in the Algerian countryside often contributed to the failure of the *ratissage* and *accrochage* tactics of the period. General Henri Lorillot, Commander-in-Chief since June 1955, recognized the requirement for French forces deployed to Algeria to train specifically for that theatre of operations. He established in the summer of 1956 the *Centre d'instruction et de preparation à la contre-guérilla* (CIPCG) in the city of Arzew, near Oran. The school "... was intended to instruct officers and non-commissioned officers in the singularities of the place, and the special characteristics of the type of warfare that was taking shape there."¹⁸ The institution could not instruct all of the troops pouring into Algeria at the time but it succeeded in imparting much needed knowledge on those bound to lead forces in the field. The curriculum eventually grew to include not only fighting techniques but psychological warfare as well and provided insight into the foundations of an all-encompassing counterinsurgency campaign.¹⁹

Urban Terrorism, French Counter-Offensive (1956-57)

Despite such positive impact, these French innovations did not prevent the insurgents from taking a new initiative in promulgating the *Directives de la Soumman* following an extensive conference of the FLN leadership in the valley of the same name in August 1956.²⁰ These documents amounted to the first attempt by the Algerians to create a unified political and military policy as well as consolidating the organization's structure in Algeria. Another momentous decision was that of undertaking a large-scale campaign of urban terrorism. While not using these exact terms, the FLN came to the conclusion that public opinion in metropolitan France constituted the enemy's centre of gravity and that Algiers amounted to a critical vulnerability. Focusing terror on the capital would allow the ALN to open a new front in the war while continuing to fix and harass their military opponent in the field. Again taken by surprise, French authorities were slow to react to this wave of bombings and murders, allowing a climate of fear to develop in Algeria through the fall.²¹

The inability of the *Gendarmerie* to handle the situation led to the militarization of police work during what became known as the Battle of Algiers, from January to September 1957. Governor General Robert Lacoste (who had replaced Soustelle in February 1956) accepted in December to grant combined civil and military power to the new Commander-in-Chief, General Raoul

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120-121; and Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française*, p. 418.

¹⁸ Frédéric Guelton, "The French Army 'Centre for Training and Preparation in Counter-Guerilla Warfare' (CIPG) at Arzew" in *France and the Algerian War, 1954-62: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy*, ed. Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41-46; and Sabine Marie Decup, "Operational Methods of the French Armed Forces, 1945-1970" in *The Operational Art – Development in the Theories of War* (Wesport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), p. 115-116.

²⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 143-146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183-187.

Salan.²² Salan in turn delegated security and police powers for Algiers to General Jacques Massu, commander of the *10e Division de parachutistes*. Deploying his formation to the capital in January 1957, Massu undertook a violent campaign of repression based on the widespread use of torture in order to gain the intelligence required to eliminate ALN cells in the city. This stage of the campaign was completed by September, at the cost of 24,000 arrests and 3,000 deaths in custody.²³ Salan and Massu became celebrated figures in the *pieds noirs* community but the controversy over torture greatly undermined support for the war in the *métropole* while France's image on the international scene was severely marred.

Having regained the initiative in the cities, General Salan launched a series of offensives in the countryside (October 1957 – December 1958), relying on rapidly expanding forces.²⁴ The result of this phase, however, remained ambiguous. Continuing with *ratissage* operations, Salan also implemented a *quadrillage* system similar to that he witnessed in Indochina. This approach sought to establish *points fortifiés* to hold and secure the countryside. These strongholds, however, and the convoy required to sustain them, constituted easy targets for ALN bands. Thus, each method, the *ratissage* and the *quadrillage*, resulted in localized successes and often inflicted heavy casualties on the insurgents but these victories were paid for in a slow but steady trickle of attrition in terms of French lives. Worse, when used in isolation, they often resulted in relinquishing previously pacified territory where the ALN could move back and severely punish those inhabitants that had collaborated with the authorities.²⁵

In order to facilitate the conduct of the *ratissage* operations and reduce the strain imposed by the *quadrillage* system, Salan relied on another controversial tactic. Vast areas were declared *zones interdites*, forbidden zones. All farms and whole villages were evacuated from such regions that became "free-fire areas" where personnel could be fired upon without warning. The aim was to cut off the insurgents from local support and separate the inhabitants from FLN influence. Effective in terms of denying territory to the enemy, these evacuations necessitated the accommodation of evacuees in large *camps de regroupement*. By 1958, such forced movements had resulted in more than 1.3 million Algerians, 10% of the population, living in overcrowded and insalubrious camps.²⁶ Conditions were so atrocious that they caused further outcries in France and abroad, another instance of short-term tactical gains turning into a strategic loss.

Victory was more evident in the *bataille des frontières*, the battle of the borders. The FLN established important rear positions in the former protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, the latter proving especially crucial to sustaining the insurrection in Algeria.²⁷ French authorities

²² General Salan had replaced Lorillot in November 1956. *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 183-218; and James D. Campbell, "French Algeria and British Northern Ireland: Legitimacy and the Rule of Law in Low-Intensity Conflict" in *Military Review* (March-April 2005), p. 3-4.

²⁴ French troops in Algeria grew from 366,000 in June 1957 to 412,000 a year later. Mahieu, "Les effectifs de l'armée française", p. 41-42.

²⁵ Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger, "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy" in *France and the Algerian War: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy*, ed. Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 15.

²⁶ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 335-339; and Robert Ageron, "Une dimension de la guerre d'Algérie: les regroupements de populations" in *Militaires et guérilla dans la guerre d'Algérie*, ed. Jean-Charles Jauffret and Maurice Vaisse (Paris : Éditions Complexe, 2001), p. 220-221

²⁷ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 264-265.

undertook in 1957 to construct static lines along the borders in order to prevent the flow of arms and personnel. These lines included fortified positions as well obstacles and sensors along the length of both borders. The Morice Line, on the frontier with Tunisia, grew into the most formidable complex. While taxing in terms of personnel and material, it imposed a perilous cost on those insurgents attempting the crossing. Repeated large-scale attempts by the ALN to punch through the line from March to May 1958 were beaten back in what is sometimes called the Battle of the Morice Line, when the guerilla suffered 3,000 casualties while another 20,000 combatants admitted defeat and remained confined to Tunisia for the rest of the war.²⁸

End of a Republic, Hope of a New Regime (1958)

These developments were undermined by popular unrest and political instability in the *métropole*.²⁹ The constitution of the Fourth Republic, established in 1946, provided for weak executive powers while radical parties actively undermined each others and prevented the formation of lasting coalitions. These tensions came to a head in 1958, largely as a result of the war in Algeria. The conflict was exercising such a burden in terms of personnel and capital that France was unable to fulfill her collective defense commitments under NATO while rebuilding the national economy was considerably affected.³⁰ Paris was increasingly denounced in international fora for the conduct of the war and even close friends, such as the US and Great Britain, questioned her methods in Algeria and reliability as an ally in Europe.³¹

The political dynamic went out of control on 15 April 1958 with the fall of the conservative Gaillard cabinet.³² The socialist Pierre Pflimlin appeared poised to form the next government but his position on Algeria, favoring negotiations with the rebels, was not acceptable in the eyes of many. Unrest in the streets of Paris and Algiers followed, leading to the formation of *Comités de sécurité publique* in Corsica and Algeria. As military leaders such as General Massu joined these "committees of public safety", the prospect of a military coup became genuine. On 15 May, Charles de Gaulle came out of retirement and made a grandstanding declaration of his willingness to "... assume the powers of the Republic". The National Assembly endorsed the World War II savior of France on 1 June and he, in turn, put forward a new constitution granting vastly expanded powers to the President, a proposal endorsed through a national referendum on 28 September. By the end of the year, de Gaulle was firmly in charge of the newly formed Fifth Republic and determined to find a solution to the Algerian problem.³³

De Gaulle's position on Algeria remains a matter of debate to this day, as to whether he had already accepted the loss of this prized possession when he came to power or rather came to this

²⁸ Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française*, p. 424-425; and Jacques Vernet, "Les barrages pendant la guerre d'Algérie" in *Militaires et guérilla dans la guerre d'Algérie*, ed. Jean-Charles Jauffret and Maurice Vaïsse (Paris : Éditions Complexe, 2001), p. 253-268.

²⁹ Jean-Marie Donegani and Marc Sadoum, *La Ve République: Naissance et mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 34-79.

³⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 538-539.

³¹ Charles G. Cogan, "France, the United States, and the Invisible Algerian Outcome" in *France and the Algerian War, 1954-62: Strategy, Operations, and Diplomacy*, ed. Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), p. 138-158.

³² Donegani and Sadoum, *La Ve République*, p. 65-79.

³³ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 267-298; and Éric Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002), p. 601-626.

conclusion later.³⁴ While resolving this debate is not required for the purpose of this article, one must understand that, either way, de Gaulle required subordinates he could control in order to implement the unified strategy required to act from a position of strength. His first measure was to separate civil and military powers in Algeria, which had been held by General Salan since December 1956. The latter was replaced as Commander-in-Chief by Air Force General Maurice Challe, who was clearly subordinated to the new Delegate General of the government, the career civil servant Paul Delouvrier. Note this humbler title in contrast to that of Governor General, implying a closer control of Algerian affairs from Paris.³⁵ Delouvrier and Challe, dedicated *gaullistes* since the Second World War, understood and accepted these new relationships and set about forging the campaign plan that came to be known as *vaincre et convaincre*.

Plan de Constantine, Plan Challe (1959-60)

"Win and convince" outlined the requirement for an all-encompassing and unified strategy to simultaneously defeat the insurgents and win over the general population. Army initiatives did not by themselves address the more galling effects of the blatant disparity that existed between *pieds noirs* and Muslim Algerians, especially in the cities. The *plan de Constantine*, announced in that city by Delegate General Delouvrier on 5 October 1958, laid out the blueprint of a five-year economic and infrastructure investment programme, unprecedented in scale.³⁶ It comprised wide-ranging measures that included the construction of one million low-rent apartments; an agrarian reform aimed at redistributing 250,000 hectares of land; renewed emphasis on education and school building throughout the territory; and the initial attribution of 10% of governmental posts to Algerians of Muslim descent. The immense cost of such a project to an already depleted French treasury underlined the commitment of the new administration to the promotion of a more equal Algeria.

This aim was further emphasized at the political level on the occasion of the previously mentioned referendum of 28 September 1958, which endorsed the constitution of the Fifth Republic.³⁷ The Algerian departments, constituent parts of the French policy rather than mere colonies, participated in the national consultation as the *pieds noirs* always did in presidential elections and votes to the National Assembly. This time, however, de Gaulle used this opportunity to extend the franchise to all Algerians, granting the right to vote to Muslim men and women for the first time. The FLN actively promoted a boycott of the referendum but a surprising 80% of the non-European population did vote, with the vast majority supporting the new constitution and later endorsing de Gaulle in the presidential election of 21 December 1958. Such participation was a flagrant affront to the FLN as Muslims overwhelmingly demonstrated their willingness to participate in the French political process.

As these initiatives moved forward, it remained General Challe's challenge to deliver success on the battlefield. The new Commander-in-Chief intended to do just that by improving those successful but disjointed measures implemented by his predecessors while leveraging the vast

³⁴ For contrasting assessments of de Gaulle's position on Algeria in 1958, see Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française*, p. 430-431; Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 299-305; and Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle*, p. 603-604.

³⁵ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 310-311.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 340-341; and Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*, p. 148-149.

³⁷ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 304-305.

forces at his disposal³⁸, in what became known as the *plan Challe*. First, he took the *quadrillage* system to the next level. While maintaining dispersed formations of *troupes de secteur* in static garrisons under subordinate commanders, he took personal control of the *réserve générale*. Thus far, this force composed of elite units, such as the Foreign Legion and airborne regiments, were distributed piecemeal in company- or battalion-size elements assigned to different sectors where they were employed to rescue fortified posts and convoys under attack, and to block enemy formations once they were detected in the open.³⁹ Challe grouped these units in a lesser number of larger formations and assumed their direct command, turning the *réserve générale* into a highly mobile, self-sustaining and massive heliborne force made up of the most experienced troops in theatre. While retaining a counter-strike role to react to ALN initiatives, they were at the heart of much larger offensives planned and led by the Commander-in-Chief instead of smaller efforts at the sector level.⁴⁰

General Challe undertook a series of rolling offensives that swept through northern Algeria from west to east, from those sectors where the ALN was weakest to those where it was more firmly implemented, next to the Tunisian border. This new concept, which one could compare to today's "oil-spot strategy", allowed to expand the short-term gains of earlier *ratissages* into meaningful, long-term effects. First securing urban centers and villages in a given sector, troops of the *réserve générale* then combed through the countryside for much longer periods of time than before, as much as three to four months, in order to truly sanitize those areas. As important though, terrain was then turned over to the *troupes de secteur* in an expanded system of fortified positions while the local network of SAS and *harkis* remained in place to continue providing local security. Tremendous losses were inflicted on insurgents while static infrastructures such as weapons storage, food caches, workshops and armories were seized and FLN-run local councils, schools and training centers were eliminated.⁴¹ ALN bands were further isolated through continued vigilance along the border fortifications while the French Navy expanded its efforts offshore. An average of twenty surface combatants, supported by a variety of smaller patrol craft, operated at any given time to intercept vessels of all sizes trying to smuggle weapons and personnel into Algeria. It is estimated that the Navy seized 1,350 tons of military equipment during the course of the war.⁴²

By 30 March 1960, when General Challe left for his next assignment, military victory was at hand in Algeria. Leveraging the tremendous resources in men and material made available by de Gaulle and more closely coordinating the tools implemented in the preceding years, the *plan Challe* succeeded in executing the "win" element of the *vaincre et convaincre* strategy. While Delegate General Delouvrier promoted political inclusion and economical prosperity, Challe

³⁸ Army troops in Algeria reached a peak of 412,000 in December 1958. Mahieu, "Les effectifs de l'armée française", p. 41.

³⁹ Jean-Charles Jauffret, "Une armée à deux vitesses en Algérie (1954-1962): réserves générales et troupes de secteur" in *Militaires et guérilla dans la guerre d'Algérie*, ed. Jean-Charles Jauffret and Maurice Vaïsse (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2001), p. 30-31.

⁴⁰ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 332-333.

⁴¹ Jean-Philippe Talbo-Bernigaud, "Rouleau compresseur en petite Kabylie" in *Stratégie de la guérilla – anthologie historique de la longue marche à nos jours*, ed. Gérard Chaliand (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 256-265.

⁴² Bernard Estival, "The French Navy and the Algerian War" in *France and the Algerian War, 1954-62: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy*, ed. Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), p. 84.

fashioned a campaign that eliminated thousands of fighters and left but a few bands of insurgents on the run in Algeria proper, isolating them from the population while the border *barrages* and naval patrols cut off outside support while close to 20,000 enemy troops remained out of action in Tunisia.⁴³

Victory in the Field, Defeat at Home (1960-62)

Once provided with this long sought-after victory in the field, de Gaulle proved willing to negotiate with the FLN when he proposed a *paix des braves*, a warriors' peace, whereby talks would be held as a cease-fire was implemented.⁴⁴ This approach proved catastrophic. As the insurgents realized that time was now on their side, resistance continued while popular support waned in the *métropole* regardless of Challe's military successes. Worse, the *pieds noirs* and their supporters in the military felt betrayed by de Gaulle. They embarked on a course of protest that led from passive resistance in 1959 to "Barricade Week" in January 1960, to the failed putsch of April 1961, to Frenchmen killing Frenchmen as the *Organisation armée secrète* (OAS) terrorized those partisans of a withdrawal. Such course of action completely discredited the legitimacy of a French Algeria. Secret negotiations led to the Evian Accords of March 1962, resulting in France officially recognizing the Republic of Algeria on 3 July as returning ALN troops and their supporters massacred tens of thousands of pro-French Muslims, abandoned to their faith as *pieds noirs* and French forces escaped unharmed.⁴⁵

Conclusion

This further stain on French honor marked the end of a long odyssey where disastrous political developments in Algiers and metropolitan France negated military success. The roots of those victories in the field have since been difficult to determine due to the many intricacies of the Algerian War of Independence but one can more easily comprehend them by focusing on the execution of the *plan Challe* at the operational level. Building on the foundations laid by his predecessors, he successfully asphyxiated the insurgency in three ways. He isolated enemy forces from the local population through the deployment of static *troupes de secteurs* to hold terrain once the mobile *réserve générale* had cleared an area, providing continued security to the inhabitants. He further weakened the ALN by cutting off its access to external support through control of the borders and the sea approaches to the theatre of operations. Lastly, he completed these wide-ranging military dispositions with a vigorous programme of civil action and the formation of large auxiliary forces composed of native troops.

Such civil action was integrated in the larger economic and administrative reforms put forward in the Constantine Plan, underlining the requirement for an all-encompassing strategy and the unity of command required to counter an insurgency. The first phase of the war clearly showed that French dispositions were inadequate, whereby police and military actions were not coordinated while successive Army Commanders-in-Chief were not compelled by directives from the Governor General. This lack of civilian oversight led to the adoption of disputable measures early in the war, such as the indiscriminate bombing of villages and the instauration of free-fire

⁴³ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 337-340.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 533-538.

areas through the forced relocation of large segments of the civilian population to squalid camps. This was made even worse in 1957 when police and military powers were vested in General Salan, who unleashed Massu and his *parachutistes* to eliminate the terrorist threat in the Algerian capital.

Winning the Battle of Algiers through torture and resorting to reckless tactics in the countryside, a French military unhindered by civilian oversight abandoned the moral high ground and laid the course for the eventual demise of *l'Algérie française* despite victory in the field. Such conclusion greatly contributed to the lack of interest in the war as a source of inspiration, both in terms of what can work and what does not as well as the considerable costs in terms of personnel and capital required to wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Much remains to be done in order to fully leverage these forgotten lessons from a misunderstood conflict.

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