



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

A Conversation with Dr. Douglas Porch:

Relooking French Encounters in Irregular Warfare in the 19th Century

by Michael Few

To complement the recent interviews conducted by Octavian Manea, we reached out to the defense analysts experts at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA. In the first interview of this series, Dr. John Arquilla described how he felt that French Encounters with Irregular Warfare in the 19th Century can inform COIN in our time. This rebuttal comes from Dr. Douglas Porch, a historian in the National Security Affairs (NSA) department. This department specializes in the study of international relations, security policy, and regional studies. NSA is unique because it brings together outstanding faculty, students from the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, National Guard and various civilian agencies, and scores of international officers from dozens of countries for the sole purpose of preparing tomorrow's military and civilian leaders for emerging security challenges. Notable alumni from the NSA department include LTG William H. Caldwell.

In a July 2010 *Military Review* article “Let’s Take the French Experience in Algeria Out of U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine,” Geoff Demarest, Director of Research at the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, laments that the authors of FM 3-24 were inspired in part by French COIN practices as transmitted by Algerian War veteran David Galula. Not only were French efforts in Algeria unsuccessful, he notes; they also were anchored in terror tactics that brought discredit on French soldiers and their nation.¹

Not so fast, says John Arquilla, Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, who argues that the French pioneered three tactical concepts he believes central to the success of contemporary COIN: Information Operations (IO), “swarm tactics,” and “the need to understand how networks fight – and how to build networks of one’s own.” First, according to Arquilla, General Louis-Gabriel Suchet’s occupation of Aragon and Catalonia of which he was in charge during the Peninsula War of 1808-1813 succeeded in winning over the population with the devolution of authority, infrastructure improvements, and the Napoleonic promise of modernization, administrative efficiency and social progress. Second, General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud’s 1843 “swarm” of Algerian resistance leader Abd el-Kader’s camp, caused the latter to surrender “not too long after,” which even, in turn, heralded “over a century of generally peaceful conditions and prosperity” in Algeria. Finally, Colonel Joseph Simon Gallieni’s successful campaign against “Vietnamese criminal/insurgent networks” in northern Tonkin in the 1890s illustrates a successful network-centric COIN tactics.

¹ « Let’s Take the French Experience in Algeria Out of U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine, » *Military Review*, July-August 2010, 19-23

Alas, Arquilla's representation of these incidents as primitive versions of modern concepts are a stretch, when not total misrepresentations. At worst, his examples are lifted from context, include material factual inaccuracies, and misconstrue reasons for French "success." (The "successes" themselves are debatable.) Finally, Arquilla perpetuates the fundamental COINdanista heresies that tactics can rescue flawed policy and defective strategy, while "modernizing" Western occupations will be perceived as "liberation" by indigenous societies. I will take each of Arquilla's examples in turn to explain their context, in the process illustrating why an incomplete history can lead to misleading results.

Under Suchet, Aragon did in fact enjoy the reputation as the most pacified Spanish province in Spain. But Suchet's achievement was temporary, contingent and a "success" only when contrasted with the overall catastrophic outcome of Napoleon's Spanish project. Aragon and the sliver of bordering Catalonia over which Suchet had charge only shines in context: The French totally lost the narrative in Spain. Napoleon's deposition and imprisonment of the Bourbon Ferdinand VII -- whom he replaced with his brother Joseph Bonaparte in 1808 -- established a government regarded as illegitimate, not only in Spain, but in Europe and Latin America as well. The obligation imposed by the Napoleon that the Spaniards pay the costs of occupation meant high taxes and requisitions of Church lands. "Modern" French secular ideas taken from the French Revolution were an affront to the values of conservative Spaniards, who were horrified that Napoleon had imprisoned two Popes and annexed the Papal States to the Roman Republic. The fact that Napoleon was unable to vanquish Great Britain, and the presence of a significant and growing British army on the Iberian Peninsula kept hope of liberation alive.

How, allegedly, did Suchet make Aragon the most "pacified" province in Spain? While a crust of Liberal opinion in Madrid anticipated the French ignition of a modernizing project, in Aragon and especially Catalonia the Napoleonic invasion briefly revived Medieval autonomist aspirations, until it became apparent that Napoleon planned to incorporate Catalonia, part of Aragon and Navarre into the French state (Catalonia became a French department in 1812). The fall of Zaragoza in February 1809 after a successful resistance the previous summer followed by defeat of the main Spanish armies in the first half of 1809 stunned the population, removed immediate hope of liberation, and quieted the province. Suchet kept the Spanish administration in place because technically they still answered to the King of Spain, Joseph, not the French. Meanwhile, nobles, the Church and the administration in Aragon, concluding that France had won the war, collaborated with Suchet to keep order and preserve their property and jobs. It took two years for resistance to mobilize in Aragon and to acquire the arms and tactical skills to battle the French. Wellington's force remained small and active on the relatively distant Spanish-Portuguese frontier -- that is, the other side of the country -- which allowed Suchet to concentrate his entire 20,000 man corps on collecting resources and putting down opposition brutally, though not indiscriminately.

Things began to unravel from February 1810 when Napoleon, in an attempt to squeeze more resources for his wars, decreed the Second Military Government. Henceforth, French commanders and the Spanish administration under them answered not to the Spanish King, but to the War Ministry in Paris. Taxes and requisitions increased amidst an "annexation scare" which made the *Afrancesados* (Francophiles) very unpopular. While the northeastern corner of Spain remained relatively quiet in 1810 and early 1811, thousands of Aragonese and Catalonians -- mainly the gentry and yeomanry -- flocked to neighboring Navarre, where an insurgency had erupted instantaneously in the wake of Napoleonic suspension of Navarre's historic *fueros* --

local rights and privileges.² Indeed, already in May 1810, Suchet complained that his force laying siege to Lerida in Western Catalonia was harassed by guerrillas, while what historians describe as Suchet's "harsh" and "crushing tax obligations" in Aragon laid the foundation for guerrilla recruitment.³ By the autumn of 1811, many of the exiles returned to Aragon and Catalonia as *partidas* to snatch the initiative in the countryside. Far from being able, as Arquilla states, to "go about unarmed amid the people," guerrillas under Espoz y Mina inflicted on average twenty-six casualties a day on Suchet's forces – who, in fact, could venture out only in large groups. Episodic "search and destroy" sweeps in 1812 had only limited impact. By 1813, Suchet's soldiers controlled only a dozen strong points and Zaragoza. The *Afrancesado* administration outside these enclaves had collapsed, French troops went unpaid and starving. The historian of Suchet's Aragon occupation, Don Alexander, concludes that the myth of Suchet's "deceptive and fleeting" success in Aragon was initiated by Napoleon's praise for his methods, reinforced by Suchet's own memoirs. The record demonstrates that Suchet was not a particularly adept guerrilla fighter while his occupation policies engendered at best a wary neutrality from the summer of 1809 to the autumn of 1811, after which the IO tilted with the military advantage toward the *partidas*.⁴ In fact, French IO had managed to unify a fissiparous country in resistance under a reactionary Bourbon monarchy and the Church.

Peninsular War veteran Thomas Robert Bugeaud provided the link between Napoleonic Spain and Algeria, invaded in 1830 by the French. As Arquilla notes, Bugeaud's contribution when he took command in Algeria in 1842 was to replace the lumbering columns that had hitherto characterized French campaigns with light "mobile columns" that replicated French practice in Spain. These formations usually worked in unison to converge on an objective from different directions. Unfortunately, even this attempt to lock down an opponent often proved unsuccessful, because, after meeting defeat on the Sikkat River in 1837, Abd el-Kader shunned pitched battle in favor of guerrilla tactics.

The example of "swarming" cited by Arquilla was the attack on Abd el-Kader's *smala* ("*zmâla*" – encampment of the extended families of the chiefs) in May 1843. Abd el-Kader was elsewhere with the bulk of his commanders and fighters when a reconnaissance party of Muslim tribesmen in French pay pinpointed the camp. The scouts alerted a group of French cavalry, who "swarmed" it. Of course, what they "swarmed" was mostly women, children and their flocks – in short, non-combatants and their livelihood. But this situation was not an anomaly – *au contraire!* "Swarming" civilians -- called the *razzia* or raid -- became standard practice under Bugeaud and fundamental to the success of French conquest. "In Europe, once (you are) master of two or three large cities, the entire country is yours," General Boniface de Castellane wrote in defense of Bugeaud's *razzias*. "But in Africa, how do you act against a population whose only link with the land is the pegs of their tents? ... The only way is to take the grain which feeds them, the flocks which clothe them. For this reason, we make war on (grain) silos, war on cattle, the *razzia*."⁵

² John Lawrence Tone, *The Fatal Knot. The Guerrilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994), 170

³ Suchet: *War in Spain*, <http://www.wtj.com/archives/suchet/suchet10b.htm> ; Don W. Alexander, *Rod of Iron. French Counterinsurgency Policy in Aragon during the Peninsular War*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1985), 102

⁴ Alexander, *Rod of Iron*, 49-61, 229-41

⁵ General le Comte de Castellane, *Souvenirs de la vie militaire en Afrique*, (Paris : 1879), 268

A “total war,” which targeted the economic and psychological underpinnings of resistance and exceeded any definition of military necessity much less respected any recognized “laws of war,” accelerated the trend by which warfare abroad increasingly departed from European norms and practices. Senior officers tolerated a different standard of behavior in some cases because they were unable to impose strict discipline on troops who acted, in the words of one observer of the French conquest of the Algerian oasis of Zaatcha in 1848, “like a pack of running dogs unleashed on their prey.”⁶

“Swarming” indigenous villages and camps also offered collateral advantages. The ability to live off the land lightened logistical demands and made the mobile columns truly “mobile.” It also made money because captured grain, flocks or women could be sold to support the costs of the expeditions. The prospect of plunder attracted tribal allies and recruits to French-led indigenous regiments – French Senegalese troops were notorious for their “wives,” women captured in battle and who were kept as sex slaves or sold. French expeditions in North Africa and the Western Sudan nourished the slave trade because abolition would alienate powerful interests and undermine the basis of French military efficiency, which hinged on giving their indigenous allies *carte blanche* to slave raid.⁷

That Arquilla interprets the loot of Abd el-Kader’s *smala* as the Austerlitz of Bugeaud’s North Africa campaign is hardly surprising as that’s how the French advertised the event. The fact that the plunder was commanded by the Duc d’Aumale, King Louis-Philippe’s son, offered a propaganda *coup* to bolster an insecure Orleanist regime. Louis-Philippe commissioned the artist Horace Vernet to commemorate *Prise de la smala d’Abd-el-Kader* in a painting of Napoleonic dimensions for an event in which nine French soldiers had perished. Although the 21 by 5 meter painting was fêted in the *Salon* of 1845, as if it failed to save the July Monarchy that in 1848 joined its Bourbon predecessor in exile.

Nor did the *Prise de la smala d’Abd-el-Kader* end resistance in North Africa, where the French required another four and a half years; an invasion of Morocco, where Abd el-Kader had sought refuge; the continued “swarming” of his support base in the Kabylia and Western Algeria that included what today would qualify as serious war crimes and which caused an uproar even at the time; and lengthy diplomatic negotiations that involved Britain and the Sultan of Morocco to settle Algerian-Moroccan frontier disputes. Abd el-Kader “surrendered” in 1847 after being “swarmed” with emoluments as he glided into gilded exile in Damascus with 150,000 franc annual French stipend, sweetened with the *grand cordon de la Légion d’honneur*.⁸

Nor did Abd el-Kader’s departure issue in “over a century of generally peaceful conditions and prosperity” in Algeria as Arquilla would have us believe. Bugeaud realized that the tactical tradeoff of scorched earth tactics was racial animosity. As he harbored no illusion that North African Muslims would ever acquiesce to French rule, perpetual repression became the price of domination. The Muslims were reduced by a settler population to the status of marginalized squatters and sharecroppers living in conditions of apartheid. The French continually suppressed rebellions somewhere in Algeria. For victorious FLN revolutionaries, the

⁶ Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l’Algérie contemporaine. La conquête et les débuts de la colonisation (1827-1871)*, (Paris : PUF, 1964), 320

⁷ A.S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Conquest of the Western Sudan. A Study in French Military Imperialism*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1968), 200-1

⁸ Julien, *Histoire de l’Algérie contemporaine*, 194-209

War of Algerian Independence did not suddenly break out in 1954. Rather, it was part of a continuum of resistance they traced to Abd el-Kader.

This is not to say that French colonial soldiers behaved worse than their counterparts from other nations. Bugeaud's *razzias*, which shared objectives in common with World War II terror bombing, were replicated by the Russians in the Caucasus, the British during the Indian Mutiny, the Germans in Southwest and East Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Indian Wars in the United States; the French reprised them during the conquest of the Western Sudan as well. Isabel V. Hull, the Cornell University expert on the evolution of German counter-insurgency, argues that the demoralization and destitution of the indigenous population is more likely to become the objective in small war where, in the absence of identifiable military or political targets, operational solutions expand to fill a vacuum of civilian control and vague war aims. What begins as a narrow focus on "mission orders" transitions into racist assumptions that an "inferior, but cruel" enemy justifies "reciprocal" ruthlessness, of which "hunger war" tactics à la Bugeaud were standard.⁹

"Jumping a half-century, to the 1890s," Arquilla cites Gallieni's campaign in upper Tonkin as evidence for the applicability of his third tactical concept, namely "the need to understand how networks fight – and how to build networks of one's own." However, the complexity of the situation in Tonkin defied a tactical fix. In 1893, Colonel Gallieni took over a mountainous region on the Chinese border inhabited by a mixed population of Chinese, Vietnamese, but principally of what the French called *montagnards* – Nung, Thai, Meo, and Mung tribesmen. The *montagnards* in particular were preyed upon by Chinese and Vietnamese, who had lairs in Tonkin's jagged mountains and who organized raids out of China using soldiers and compliant officials that captured *montagnard* cattle and women for sale in China. The French called them "pirates," which they undoubtedly were. But banditry always had a "non-heterodox," anti-regime dimension in China and Vietnam. Many "pirates" were remnants of the Can Vuong movement that had resisted the French penetration of Tonkin from the 1870s, and who, supported by peasants displaced by French colonization of the Red River Delta, fought an insurgency that the French finally extinguished in 1889.

Gallieni's strategy was three fold: first, he began to clear each valley, after which he would plant a small outpost from which he effected French influence through a *tâche d'huile* or "oil spot" expansion. Second, he attacked the "pirates'" main bases inside Tonkin – "nodes" in Arquilla-speak -- with converging columns. Not much "swarming" occurred because the "pirates" laid ambushes for approaching French columns and seldom hung around to *faire Camerone*. But at least such incursions put them on the run because Chinese and Vietnamese "bandits" had no links to the *montagnard* population, which made it more difficult for them to settle. He also armed some of the *montagnards*, on the face of it a politically low-risk strategy because, unlike the Vietnamese who might have turned the weapons on the French, the *montagnards* were judged to be too isolated geographically and ethnically to coordinate a concerted action.¹⁰

But neither destroying Chinese "networks" nor creating his own solved Gallieni's fundamental strategic problem which was the porous border, complicated by the fact that

⁹ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005) 134-35, 155-56, 324-25

¹⁰ Le Commandant Emmanuel PG Chabrol, *Opérations militaires au Tonkin*, (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1896), 251

Chinese regarded the *montagnards* as objects of plunder: “China is an inexhaustible reservoir of bandits,” Major Emmanuel Chabrol who served under Gallieni complained.¹¹ So the third arm of Gallieni’s strategy became to convince his Chinese counterpart, a Marshal Sou, to clamp down on cross-border raids. To do this, Gallieni settled an outstanding territorial dispute with the Chinese, mounted a raid into China to show that two could play that game, and patiently negotiated. Next, he convinced the French-Indochinese opium monopoly to sell the *montagnards* large quantities of opium at “dumping” prices so that the Chinese would have to deal with them on a commercial basis, rather than simply plunder them.¹² The French christened this *la politique des races* – standard ethnic/religious divide-and-rule strategies put in motion by every imperial power.

Like the myth of Suchet’s IO success in Aragon or the alleged strategic impact of the destruction of Abd el-Kader’s *smala*, Gallieni’s “networks” and “oil spot” tactics were elevated into a strategic principle by Gallieni subordinate, impresario of French colonialism, and future Marshal of France Hubert Lyautey. Lyautey, concerned that colonial skirmishes were accorded little respect in an army focused on conventional conflict in Europe, promoted Gallieni as the very soul of small war brilliance. Conveniently omitted from Lyautey’s account was the fact that Gallieni’s tactics failed to stabilize Tonkin: if pressed, “pirates” simply crossed the border, or migrated to other AORs in the region. In September 1894, Gallieni’s major enemy Hoang Hoa Tham, better known as De Tham, the “Tiger of Yen The,” shifted his strategy to attacking trains on the Lang Son (Yunnan-Vietnam) railway and kidnapping important colonists and their families, which forced the government to strike a temporary truce with him. The Forbidden City, fearful that France would leverage the 1895 Sino-Japanese War to expand its influence in China, ordered its proconsuls in the south to cease raids into Tonkin. Fighting flared again in 1896, the year of Gallieni’s departure. De Tham was reinforced by defectors from French-led Vietnamese units that he had purposely infiltrated to gather intelligence and recruits. French sweeps of Tonkin in 1897 were ineffective, which forced Hanoi to conclude yet another truce with De Tham that, according to historian of Vietnam David Marr, allowed the bandit/resistance leader “to continue for fifteen more years of plotting uprisings and assassinations and occasionally providing aid and comfort to a later generation of anti-colonial leaders.”¹³

As a further irony, Lyautey’s attempts to replicate Gallieni’s “networks” in southeastern Morocco from 1903 also failed to “dissolve the resistance” as theory predicted. On the contrary, what Lyautey christened “peaceful penetration” based on “oil spot” expansion out of French posts proved a highly destabilizing enterprise because it dislocated trade patterns, alienated powerful economic interests, and because “collective punishments” for attacks or even robberies tended to fall on near-to-hand natives who “must have known.” So, the impact of Lyautey’s “networks” in southeastern Morocco was to mobilize Moroccan resistance, first as a “boycott” of French markets in 1906, which translated into a general insurrection two years later. Thus, in the final analysis the benefit of Lyautey’s “networks” was that they provoked an insurrection that allowed the French fell back on the *razzia* to shatter a poorly armed resistance.¹⁴

¹¹ Chabrol, *Opérations militaires au Tonkin*, 250

¹² Marc Michel, *Gallieni*, (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 143-172

¹³ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism, 1885-1925*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California, 1971), 72-75

¹⁴ Porch, *The Conquest of Morocco*, 128-30, 183-88

So, Geoff Demarest is probably correct to assert that French small war tactics offer few positive models for modern COIN. On closer examination, the alleged “successes” of IO and “networks” cited by Arquilla were partial at best, when not total busts. “Swarming” is too imprecise a concept to offer any guidance. In the end, both Abd el-Kader and De Tham had to be bought off because small war tactics failed to defeat them. Hew Strachan admits that even the British, generally regarded as the historic masters of COIN,¹⁵ succeeded when they made timely political concessions, not because their tactics were superior.¹⁶ Attempts to comb French history for tactical solutions to the strategic and political conundrums of empire is an exercise in self-deception – at least Bugeaud never fell for the fantasy that better IO would overcome a subtext of defeat, racial and economic domination, and humiliation to induce Muslims to embrace the values of their conquerors. A veteran of the Peninsular War, he concluded that only *force majeure*, not appeals to “modernizing” values, had worked in Spain. “Swarming” in the French colonies was never a light infantry tactic, but a method of total war.

Like Suchet’s first months in Aragon, Gallieni’s “networks” in upper Tonkin may have enjoyed a temporary success. But they were easily furlled by an October 1950 Viet Minh offensive that cost the French 6,000 troops, a prelude to the loss of the ultimate “node” at Dien Bien Phu four years later. This was a direct, if delayed, consequence of his decision to arm groups of *montagnards* while facilitating their entry into the opium trade as a “stabilization” tactic. The result was a “network” of French-sponsored, opium-financed warlords in upper Tonkin who increasingly set their own agenda and who preyed on the population as much as the “pirates” of the 1890s ever had.¹⁷ There may be several lessons here for modern COINdanistas here: first, a “network” unsupported by a viable *politique des races* – that is, a reliable minority who allies with the occupier as a strategy of survival (see: “Anbar, the Surge”) -- is simply a yawning invitation to overthrow. Second, “networks” may easily develop their own agendas, especially if they become self-financing, that may actually undermine the goals of COIN. Finally, the importance of “networks” as anything other than a tactic is overstated. For instance, Massu’s 1957 roll up of FLN networks in Algiers failed to win the Algerian war for the French, or even assure French control of the Kasbah, which erupted in pro-independence demonstrations three years later.

So, in the final analysis, Professor Arquilla’s selection of mythologized versions of the past and cherry picked history lifted from context actually undermines arguments for the centrality of what he views as “the most important concepts in counterinsurgency today.” If they failed to work in the past, worked only in certain conditions, or at a price considered unacceptable today, why should they be considered “important,” or even considered at all? What Arquilla’s reductionist “concepts” have in common, and what his examples illustrate when their actual historical context is explored, is that in every case they failed because they offered a tactical solution to a strategic problem. But Arquilla’s failings are inherent to the COINdanista approach, which is to grasp the problem from the wrong end. A better appreciation of the strategic and political context in which the tactical technique was used would offer a far better predictor of its “importance” or centrality to success. Each insurgency is a contingent event in

¹⁵ For the classic statement of British COIN superiority, see Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-60*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990)

¹⁶ Hew Strachan: *The Politics of the British Army*, (Oxford 1997), 182

¹⁷ For the *politique des races* dimension of Dien Bien Phu, see Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995), chapters 13 and 14.

which doctrine, operations, and tactics must support a viable policy and strategy, not, as Professor Arquilla seems to believe, the other way around.

Douglas Porch earned a Ph.D. from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University. Now a Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, his books include The French Secret Services. From the Dreyfus Affair to Desert Storm (1995); The French Foreign Legion. A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force (1991); The Conquest of the Sahara; The Conquest of Morocco; The March to the Marne. The French Army 1871-1914; The Portuguese Armed Forces and the Revolution, and Army and Revolution. France 1815-1844; Wars of Empire (2000); The Path to Victory. The Mediterranean Theater in World War II (2004). He is currently working on COIN in Colombia.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).