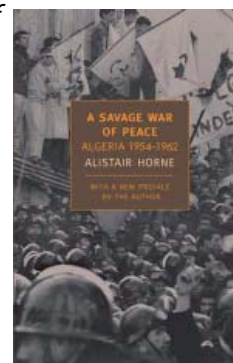


Misguided wars: Comparing the lost French cause in Algeria with the US debacle in Iraq

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It has been said that the war in Algeria offers some thoughts and lessons for the US dilemma in Iraq today. An examination of the two cases, however, reveals more differences than similarities between the two conflicts. Are the similarities enough to provide a workable context and render comparisons relevant? Most of the similarities fall under the rubric of strategies and tactics while the differences are contextual, circumstantial, structural, historical and, thus, profound. However, these striking differences allow us to place Iraq in some perspective. Provided there are sufficient grounds for comparison, the exercise of juxtaposing two historical phenomena, even ones with substantial distinctions, can cast into high relief the essential aspects both. Since there are more contrasts than parallels, there are perhaps fewer lessons and guideposts for the future in Iraq, but the exercise yields some insights into the nature of the two conflicts. Are the similarities enough to overshadow the clear distinctions and render a comparison relevant? We shall venture a qualified yes.

Our principle frame of reference will be Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace. Algeria 1954-1962* (New York Review of Books, 2006). Horne will provide the springboard for comparisons and contrasts. However, given the very different historical elements and contingent factors comprising the two conflicts as well as the current pessimism regarding US options in Iraq, it is doubtful that Horne's work has much useful counsel for the future. As Horne said in a recent Salon interview: "What I worry about, and I don't know if this is a strategic or a policy disaster, is that we're fighting the wrong war in the wrong place.... because I don't know how you can get out gracefully." The interviewer, Gary Kamiya, concluded that: "... there do not appear to be many useful lessons in Horne's book for Bush except 'don't' – or perhaps we might say more precisely, "Mr. Bush, you never should have."¹



General

The verdict of Israeli academic Amos Elon on Ariel Sharon's reading of the book was that it "could not have told him what to do, but it could have told him what not to do". So it is with Iraq. The French underestimated their adversaries' commitment to their cause, the strength of their cultural identity, their willpower. Likewise, the US should have been forewarned not to underestimate nationalism, religion, and the will power of an Iraqi resistance. It is doubtful that Americans of any political persuasion would have collaborated with an invasion and occupation of their country aimed at ending even the most despicable government. Perhaps Americans placed too much emphasis on the ugliness of Saddam's tyranny as a factor to vitiate

¹ Salon, May 8, 2007

Iraqi nationalism. But just as likely, Washington's inability to imagine even a tribalistic (in the first place Sunni) chauvinism that would resist a US occupation implied a certain disdain that developing world cultures were simply "not like us".

At any rate, if the invasion and occupation of Iraq had any chance of success, it had to have an integrationist project from the start aimed at incorporating disaffected elements and certainly not alienating and disenfranchising the former Sunni ruling minority, over a fifth of the population, leaving it both aggrieved and well-armed.

Contexts

While both struggles were aimed at a foreign occupation, the historical contexts were entirely different. The Algerian war (1954-1962) was an anticolonial struggle for independence, something Iraq already had. The task of the French army was to preserve the status quo while the American army's was to change it. It can be argued that the Iraqi government installed under Washington's auspices was seen as just as illegitimate by the former ruling Sunni minority as the colonial administration in Algeria was by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) insurgents. Yet once again the historical contexts skew this parallel. In Iraq the ensuing struggle has been against a military occupation that began in 2003, not a hundred years ago as part of a colonisation of the territory. The US is in Iraq ostensibly to create an independent democratic government while official policy in Algeria was to prevent one from emerging. The growing and bloody insurgency in Iraq has thus turned the tables on the neo-conservative project of national liberation which was conceived as a democratic revolution imposed from without.

Both Algeria and Iraq were exploited economically by the occupying forces. The French expropriation of land from local people parallels to some degree the US decrees and US-sponsored Iraqi laws to privatise Iraq's economy and franchise it out for the particular benefit of US transnational corporations and private contractors.

France from 1830 saw the Algerian colony as a key piece of a larger ambition to dominate north Africa to the Suez, aiming to balance the British domination of the Middle East. This compares on some level with the US neo-con dream of reconfiguring the geopolitical map of the Middle East. It would begin by using Iraq as the launching pad for transforming political arrangements and the correlation of forces in the rest of region. But the French ambition was historically rooted and founded in realpolitik. The neo-con project in the Middle East was based on a capricious, romantic idealism quite unprecedented in its scope and dimension.

This almost adolescent arrogance was captured when a presidential aide told the author, Ron Suskind, that "guys like me [Suskind] were 'in what we call the reality-based community', which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore', he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality - judiciously, as you will - we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'"² Rhetoric aside, the US mission was never so straightforward or clear-cut as the French one. In fact, in retrospect it seems downright hare-brained. Francis Fukuyama, a former cheerleader for the war now repentant, has likened it to taking a baseball bat to a broken television set. "This would jar something loose and make the television set

² Suskind, R. 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', New York Times Magazine, New York, October 17, 2004.

work. It wasn't more sophisticated than that. The idea was that the shock of overthrowing an Arab dictator and replacing him would stir things up. In certain ways it has. But it's a very, very blunt instrument and the television is as bad as ever."³

Obviously Iraq never did nor will it approximate the place of Algeria for the French, as an extension of French territory. It might be said that the US with its permanent bases and privatisation of the oil revenues in the hands of US companies is replicating and condensing the hundred year-long French colonial experience. But Iraq is not a colony; it is a territorial prize in a military empire or global garrison state - where canons substitute for colonies. Thus, while Algerian independence was nearly unthinkable the opposite was true with a US "liberation" of Iraq. Using military force to topple the dictatorship of Saddam and putting the country right (save it as the French saw themselves saving Algeria) - at least until 9-11 - was, if not unthinkable, a far-fetched notion outside of a small circle of neo-cons and allied hawks in the US and Israel. Overthrowing the Iraqi government was not part of the public's consciousness nor was it part of the broader national security establishment's thinking in any way comparable to the issue of Algeria for the French public and foreign policy establishment.

Motivation & credibility

The seduction of having at one's disposal the world's most powerful army to exact revenge might be compared with the hubris of the French martial heritage in Vietnam and Algeria. If this was a factor in the French decisions to defend its interests and credibility in Vietnam and Algeria, it was especially true for the US and the Pentagon after September 11. While far from the whole story, the issue of repairing a shattered US credibility was an important element in electing to invade Iraq. The humiliation of 9-11 would be met with an act of counter-humiliation. Henry Kissinger had this to say about why the invasion of Iraq was necessary, according to Bob Woodward: "Because Afghanistan wasn't enough,' Kissinger answered. In the conflict with radical Islam, he said, they want to humiliate us. 'And we need to humiliate them.'"⁴

Insurgencies compared

French troops arrived in Algeria after an insurgency had appeared. The army then acted as a kind of gendarmerie to protect French colonists and maintain order. The US army created the insurgency by invading and occupying Iraq. In the end the French came as firemen to protect their people and maintain the credibility of the French state. Although the restoration of US credibility after 9-11 was a factor in the decision to invade Iraq, the Bush administration was more like the bully on the block, gratuitously picking a fight with a weaker opponent in order to embellish his reputation in the neighbourhood.

Unlike Algeria, the US military triggered the resistance but like Algeria its strategy and conduct during the ensuing period inevitably contained the seeds of its own defeat. In Iraq the post-invasion insurgency in its many manifestations had multiple goals: (1) The assertion of Iraqi nationalism and the expulsion of the occupying forces as well as revenge against their Iraqi allies. (2) The restoration of Sunni supremacy and opposition to this by the Shiites. (3) The creation of a radical Islamist state. (4) Extending to Iraq a militant holy war waged by foreign jihadists against the West. The sum of these went well beyond the question of national sovereignty which was the all-encompassing objective in the Algerian struggle.

There was always the possibility that those Iraqis unhappy with the end of the Saddam regime or simply rejecting the idea of foreign intervention to end even a bloody dictatorship would violently resist. This fact made it imperative that the US have an administrative plan for

³ Fukuyama, F. *Der Spiegel online*, March 22, 2006.

⁴ Woodward, B. 'State of Denial', p408.

averting the appearance of an alien government, for avoiding egregious political errors and for socio-economically integrating Iraqi society. But the delusion that we would be greeted with flowers as many Panamanians greeted invading US troops in 1989 seemed to override this consideration. "Debaathification" and dismantling the army (leaving soldiers with guns but not money) turned out to be disastrous mistakes, out of which the insurgency was born. The French faced a considerably less complex, if ultimately no less daunting, task in Algeria in the mid-1950s. The French also made costly strategic and tactical mistakes but in retrospect the need for such stringent political calculus and administrative precision was not nearly so incumbent on them as on the US in Iraq.

At the same time US goals in Iraq were murkier than those of the French in Algeria. Iraq was about regaining credibility after 9-11, the neo-con romance with regime change and regional reconfiguration, and only lastly about securing the fourth highest proven oil reserves in the world. Public justifications stressing fear of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism to justify the invasion were continued afterwards by the administration's manipulation of a war/fear paradigm together with a belated stress on democratisation. For political operators like Karl Rove waging a permanent war on terror and keeping it alive through a real war in Iraq would allow Republicans to hijack the national security issue and ensure the party's political preeminence for years to come. The real US game plan went well beyond urgent and immediate national security needs which were paramount in the ideology of the French response to the Algerian challenge until the end of the 1950s.

Racism and the Mailed Fist

The French occupation of Algeria in 1830 was justified with depictions of Muslim society in North Africa as weak and uncivilised, a "backward and imperfect" culture. It was argued that an internally unstable Algeria was too weak to defend itself externally or develop properly without the tutelage and protection that came from French colonisation. The US prior to 2001 had no need for such racist thinking. Iraq was not a US colony even of the "neo" kind, as in Latin America in the 20th century. Still, the Bush administration's attitude contained a peculiar neo-colonial mentality toward what it regarded as a rogue state in need of the "gift" of a force-fed democracy.

French racial attitudes and colonial paternalism made settlers in Algeria forceful advocates for tough responses to attacks by the FLN-led independence movement. Again, there is at least a shaky parallel with the US response to Iraq. The invasion option was hyped by a neo-con coterie backed by reductionist ethnic prejudices in public opinion after 9-11, which resulted in rather primal impulses of blind revenge against Muslims and Middle Easterners. However, the US avoids the worst aspects of French racism toward Algerian Muslims simply by virtue of Iraq not being a traditional colony but a militarily occupied country. Still, the US came up with its own version after 9-11 in which the world was seen in Manichean terms and Arabs/Muslims constituted part of "the other" in a clash of civilisations.

Certainly Iraq was painted as internally unstable under the bloody tyranny of Saddam, its people incapable of evolving democratically without the intervention of the West. This Western paternalism has echoes during the period after the Spanish-American war when the US justified turning Puerto Rico into a US territory, Cuba into a protectorate, and colonising the Philippines. The posterior emphasis on democratisation of Iraq - and by extension the entire Middle East - may be seen as a new twist on the notion of the "White Man's Burden" in US overseas expansion. The effort to date has come a cropper not least because of the black eye given democratisation and reform by a US discredited through its human rights abuses against

Muslims and its bloody catastrophe in Iraq⁵. The simultaneous propagation of democracy and violence has proven to operate at cross purposes for the US.

Perhaps the perceived hypocrisy of France's return to "colonialism as usual" in Algeria as well as in Vietnam after defending freedom and democracy against fascism in WWII reverberates in the dissonance between the Bush administration's democratic rhetoric and its cavalier abuse of human rights at home and abroad.

Mistakes and failures

There is a certain coincidence in the errors the French and Americans made in their respective occupations. For example, there was a French failure, as Horne says, "to meet or comprehend the aspirations of the Third World". The French committed the historical mistake of trying to hold onto a colonial empire against the emerging forces of third world liberation. It had terrible immediate consequences and left Algeria with problems it wouldn't have had if the war had not been waged. On the other hand, the strategic errors of the US, beyond the conceptual error of deciding to attack a country which represented no verifiable threat to US security, have not only devastated Iraq but have most likely saddled the region with years of violence and suffering. It has already encouraged the spread of militant jihadism and threatened the world with the prospect of evermore deadly terrorist attacks. Algeria was a bloody debacle; Iraq has been a catastrophe of heroic proportions.

The insurgency in Iraq was in fact created by Bush administration errors and the wounds largely self-inflicted. Washington failed to understand what the Iraqis wanted or needed after the invasion, displaying an abysmal ignorance of the history and culture of the country. Second, and much before any consideration of representative democracy, the Iraqis - like the Afghans - needed security in their daily lives in order to commit to the American project there. A misplaced belief in the omnipotence of the US military blinded policymakers to the complex social and political situation in Iraq and rendered these considerations secondary to establishing force control.

The resulting sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shiites as well as the separatist aspirations of the Kurds are only the most obvious difficulties created by this approach. A disdain for the adversary's capacity to resist was in part responsible for the lethal mistake of disbanding the army, leaving nearly half a million ex-soldiers with weapons but broke and jobless. To that was added the astonishingly short-sighted error of initiating a "deBaathification" process which weakened the administrative infrastructure and, more seriously, disenfranchised the Sunnis and facilitated the emergence of a government dominated by the rival Shia sect.

Errors aggravating the situation include the incompetence displayed in managing the Iraqi economy and maintaining its energy infrastructure and social services. Oil production has yet to achieve the levels attained before the invasion. The manifestly underfunded and corrupted process of reconstruction has achieved well below expectations. While the US so far gets a failing grade for material success in Iraq from most observers, the French left Algeria having managed some notable achievements in roads, railroads, airports, utilities, medicine, infrastructure like ports, urbanisation, and education.

As in the Algerian case the war in Iraq has produced a high level of unemployment generally (estimated at more than 50%) and sectarian estrangement from the ruling bureaucracy. The French never developed an indigenous administrative class in Algeria; the US destroyed it in Iraq and for the first two years usurped its functions with the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority.

⁵ Currently the US has backtracked and is reemphasising security and stability over democracy, especially with allies Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The stained US image has also undercut moderate reformers in the region because of their association with the US.

These conditions in both cases provided fertile ground for the recruitment of insurgents. And because of successive layers of incompetence the US, like the French, disillusioned and discredited the moderates, opening the way for extremists.

Finally, the failure to provide an adequate plan and sufficient resources for public security has been enormously costly to the US effort to stabilise Iraq and gain support among the populace. Four years after the invasion, for example, 60% of school age children do not attend classes because of insecurity and a majority of the people think that they were better off under Saddam's dictatorship than they are now under what passes for democracy in the government of Nouri Maliki.

Insurgent and counterinsurgent forces

Despite the general similarities of an anti-Western, anti-occupation struggle, the historical circumstances of the two insurgencies and the nature of the insurgents and their political goals are quite different. Post-invasion violence in Iraq began as a paramilitary struggle of resistance to foreign occupation and has evolved into a sectarian religious/tribal conflict. Unlike Algeria, the Iraq war today is rooted in an Islamist project. Moreover, although there were reprisals against collaborators, the movement in Algeria never became an ethnic struggle for dominance within the framework of an anti-colonial independence movement.

The size of the forces are not really comparable. The French at the peak in the 1950s had 400,000 troops in a country of less than 10 million; the US has 150,000 in Iraq - a country of 25 million and a vastly superior technological apparatus. In this sense Algeria in the 1950s resembles more the US war in Vietnam in the 1960s. The FLN was more centralised, highly structured and politically organised than the insurgency in Iraq and it evolved by 1957 into a disciplined fighting force of nearly 40,000 with thousands of part-time irregulars. In spite of these differences, the frustrations and negative results experienced by the occupying armies are quite similar. The dynamics produced by military invasion, the essential nature of the resistance, its willingness to use ruthlessly violent and terrorist methods, and its ability to provoke an overreaction by the occupation forces are all common factors in the two wars.

Strategy and tactics

Both wars exhibit the characteristics of a protracted and ceaseless war of attrition, and the notion that the only thing the Arabs understand is force, that they respond to weakness with aggression and only respect power and displays of toughness, has been expressed by both the French and the Americans. Of course, this particular facet of racial stereotyping runs counter to the elementary principles of classic counterinsurgency doctrine which argue against the use of blunt force, so as to win the allegiance of the local populace and avoid creating more insurgents than you can kill. More than just futile, French and US overkill in their "anti-terrorist" wars proved counterproductive, having the effect of spreading the insurgencies. The portion of the French-Algerian war that most corresponds strategically to the war in Iraq is the urban battle of Algiers. To draw more international and domestic French attention to its struggle, the FLN decided to bring the conflict to the cities. The FLN carried out an average of 800 shootings and bombings per month through the spring of 1957, resulting in many civilian casualties and inviting a crushing response from the authorities. The FLN's ability to strike at France in the capital of Algeria, appeal to urban Muslims and the overreaction of the French gave the FLN a moral victory in the way we see happening with the insurgents in Iraq.

Other parallels between the two conflicts include the following:

1. The insurgents' strategic focus on attacking local police and security forces as softer targets than the occupying military power.
2. The internationalisation of the insurgencies and benefit to the insurgents of porous borders. The Algerian rebels used Morocco and Tunisia as safe bases and received support from both countries in the form of arms and money. They were also aided (although not as much as they would have liked) by Middle Eastern countries, especially Nasser's Egypt - as well as the Non-Aligned Movement. The Sunni and Shiite insurgents today receive material support, financing and training from Iran, and sympathetic elements in Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's concern with Iraqi Kurdish separatists in the north is growing and may result in direct military intervention at some point to check the establishment of an independent state with links to Turkey's 15 million Kurds. Predictions are for regional involvement in Iraq to increase after the eventual withdrawal of US troops.
3. The war's frontline became everywhere all the time - 360 degrees around each French and US soldier, every day, 24 hours a day. However, the generalised violence against the civilian population in Iraq is quantitatively much greater than it was in Algeria.
4. Both conflicts made use of aircraft in waging an air war, the French making considerable use of attack helicopters for the first time in warfare. The US air war in Iraq is massive but gets little coverage and there is a curtain drawn over casualties.⁶

Finally, Horne notes that in Algeria the mere fact of surviving a much more powerful enemy confers enormous prestige on the insurgents. Herein lies a crucial lesson for the US in Iraq and the US and NATO in Afghanistan: that "the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win". The notion is a counterinsurgency doctrine commonplace, ignored - perhaps fatally - for too long by the Bush administration.

Terrorism

The Algerian rebels essayed for the first time the broad use of terrorism - a weapon which "was to become the accepted technique of proven efficacy" - to demoralise the enemy, both colonists and army, but perhaps more important, to provoke the enemy into an overreaction that would gain them more sympathy and support than they could hope for otherwise, thereby damaging the enemy more than they could through direct military confrontation. Algerian civilians seen as collaborating with France became targets of terrorist attacks and reprisals from insurgents. While this is also true in Iraq, insurgent terrorism there differs in two respects: first, the extensive use of suicide bombing attacks in Iraq (now in Afghanistan as well) has no precedent in Algeria; and second, the internecine attacks and reprisals by Muslim religious sects, mainly between Sunnis and Shiites is a uniquely Iraqi phenomenon.

The French, to a greater extent than the US, employed their own version of terrorism in an attempt to counter the savagery of the guerrillas and cow the local population. Thus, General Jacques Massu, who was told to use all means necessary to restore order during the battle of Algiers, frequently fought terrorism with torture and his own brand of terrorism, which was dubbed counter-terrorism. The Iraq bombing campaigns, like "Shock and Awe", as well as other dramatic military manoeuvres and wanton killing and abuse of the civilian population should

⁶ Solomon, N. 'The Silence of the Bombs', Truthout, June 12, 2007.

all qualify as forms of terrorism. The Bush administration likewise justifies this overkill as either part of its counterterrorist arsenal or regrettable “collateral damage” in the all-important war against terror.

With the increase in rebel atrocities, Horne writes that “the time was approaching when the army would regard almost every Muslim as a potential killer” (ibid. p115). In both cases collateral damage involving innocents was deplorable but tolerated by all sides. Speaking of the French brutality, but as well for our post-9/11 times, Pierre Leulliette writes, “Fear engenders cruelty; cruelty fear, insanity and then paralysis. In the centre of Dante’s circle the damned remain motionless” (ibid. p104). If the US is as yet not paralysed, the dizzying circle of cruelty and fear on both sides has prevented it from winning the hearts and minds so crucial in counterinsurgency strategy and increasingly demoralised US soldiers as they mistrust and abuse the general population.

In both Algeria and Iraq the willpower of the enemy and his willingness to employ the savage tactic of terrorism have been woefully underestimated by the insurgents’ conventional military adversaries. These were and remain in both cases the most powerful weapon against an increasingly ambivalent and divided occupier.

All sixteen US intelligence agencies now admit that the US military invasion of Iraq has “helped spawn a new generation of Islamic radicalism” and thereby heightened the risk of Islamism⁷. Representative Jane Harman of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee declared: “Every intelligence analyst I speak to confirms that the Iraq war had contributed to the increased terrorist threat.” It is not surrendering to terrorism to believe that both terrorism and unbridled anti-terrorism need to be restrained if we are to avoid corroding the thin veneer of contemporary civilisation and providing an environment conducive to violence.

The Assault on Human Rights

The French disregard for human rights and civil liberties in its war in Algeria contains parallels with the Bush administration’s record on human rights, including the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in Iraq and the ongoing shame of the extra-legal detentions at Guantánamo, Cuba. The centrepiece of the administration’s flouting of legal and constitutional restraints is the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which the *New York Times* dubs “odious” and which legal scholars and now the US Court of Appeals considers unconstitutional⁸. Among other abuses of executive authority and disregard for international standards of human and civil rights, the White House insists in the MCA that it - and it alone - has the legal right to decide who are “enemy combatants” and imprison them indefinitely without trial. Moreover, reflected in its language is the contention that this authority to seize and detain certain citizens as they see fit is an inherent prerogative of the presidency, not merely an emergency power.

The Appeals Court decided that this posture threatens the US Constitution and clearly warned that the administration had already gone too far in subverting the rule of law with these policies. There is no indication there will be a constitutional crisis of the order that brought down the French Fourth Republic, primarily over Algeria and the use of extra-legal methods including torture. But there is a crisis of sorts that can be usefully compared with that of France in the 1950s.

⁷ Mazzetti, M; Shenon, P, ‘Study of Iraq War and Terror Stirs Strong Political Response,’ *The New York Times*, New York, September 25, 2006.

⁸ Editorial: ‘A Ruling for Justice,’ *The New York Times*, New York, June 12, 2007.

Torture

The French Armed Forces regularly and indiscriminately employed the techniques of torture during the Algerian War. Like the US, the French defended torture's use as a means to extract life-saving information from the enemy. But underlying this pretext is its purpose as a weapon to dehumanise and terrorise the opposition.

Although the FLN also engaged in gratuitous violence and abused prisoners, it was never systematised and developed as it was by the French military. Similar to US justifications for abuses today, the French military defended the use of torture as a necessary weapon to combat FLN terrorism. Revelations of the torture of suspected insurgents and savage reprisals against the Arab civilian population helped swing Algerian sentiment in favour of independence. It should be said there were also some instances of French official revulsion when these practices were uncovered by the army itself,⁹ unlike in the US where revelations produced mainly official denials and defensive explanations, and only then after exposure by the media.

The most damaging political ramification came as a result of French citizens' horror at the news that torture had become official policy in the war. It was a factor in the public turning sour on the war and ending the Fourth Republic in 1958. Horne claims that the revelations of torture of Algerians by the French are "what led - probably more than any other single factor - to the defeat of France". Thus, Horne concludes that the French may have won the battle of Algiers through the use of torture, but it cost them the war.

Today, the use of severe torture by US military and security forces may be less evident than was the case with the French in Algeria. However, the publicly known human rights abuses in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, to cite only the most egregious examples, and the practice of extraordinary rendition - transporting suspected terrorists to third countries like Azerbaijan and Egypt to be tortured - arguably place the US in the same boat as the French in the 1950s.

Moreover, the revelations of torture linked to the US in the post-9/11 world has produced less public dismay and more official equivocation - not to say official support - at the highest levels of government than was ever true for the French. Nevertheless, US credibility and international prestige has plummeted in the Muslim world, in no small measure owing to US misconduct in the area of human rights and the practice (and defense of) torture. These injustices have encouraged Islamist militants to infiltrate Iraq to engage in a "defensive jihad". Thus, Horne's epitaph on the Algerian war may eventually be applied to Iraq: US strategies toppled Saddam's regime but the terrorism and human rights abuses unleashed in Iraq may have lost them the war there - as well as the larger war to contain terrorism in the short term.

Among certain academics, legal analysts and moral philosophers there has been a disconcerting acceptance and intellectual justification of torture and its "normalisation" as a necessary evil against the greater evil of terrorism. For example, Michael Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard University, admits to the necessity of some form of torture as a weapon against terrorism - "a key issue for the US and an enemy which has changed the rules of the game".¹⁰ Mariano Aguirre, accusing Ignatieff of tendentiously "mixing history and propaganda" notes that "the issue then [in Ignatieff's argument] becomes not whether torture can be prevented, but whether it can be regulated".¹¹

⁹ p117.

¹⁰ Ignatieff, M, 'The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror', Princeton University Press, 2005.

¹¹ Aguirre, M. 'Exporting Democracy, Revising Torture: The Complex Missions of Michael Ignatieff', Open Democracy, July 7, 2005.

Horne correctly denounces torture as both immoral and impractical. In the end it is counterproductive - the quintessential negation of the fundamental rules of counterinsurgency: to win the support of the people. He underscores the French public's realisation that these were the very methods of interrogation condemned under the Nazi occupation and steeped in the historical example of the French war in Algeria, the author warns us today that "torture should never, never, never be resorted to by any Western society".

Horne concludes that "the resort to torture poses moral problems that are just as germane to the world today as they were to the period under consideration (Algeria 1954-1962). As Jean Paul Sartre wrote in 1958, 'Torture is neither civilian nor military, nor is it specifically French: it is a plague infecting our whole era'".

Conclusion

Alistair Horne declared that the war in Algeria is the prototype of the modern war of national liberation. This may be so, but Iraq is much more complex than the kinds of national liberation struggles the world witnessed in the 50 years after World War II. In the end, the Iraq war is sui generis, both in its ill-founded origins as well as its mismanaged execution. It is also different because of its evolution from anti-occupation insurgency to an internecine struggle for power among Iraqi groups, with hostility to the US remaining a common denominator. Moreover, the insurgency's regional and international dimensions must be placed within the global phenomenon of terrorism and the globalised response of the US. Thus, Iraq in the first decade of the 21st century is not only different from Algeria half a century earlier, but historically unique.

While the international prestige of France was shaken by the loss of Algeria, US credibility has been devastated in Iraq. The finest and most technologically superior military machine ever is being held at bay by roadside bombers, suicide attacks, a disparate, decentralised group of Iraqi and foreign jihadists, and the sheer resolve of the enemy to resist. Washington's grievous underestimation of the willpower of the weaker adversary is a forgotten lesson from the French experience in Algeria. The insurgent's ability to compensate for his inferior military power with zealous commitment and willingness to suffer while also applying savagely violent means to his ends have arguably doomed the US effort just like that of the French.

Charles Dettaille once said that "War gives birth and brings death to nations". The neo-con project, defended publicly as an enterprise to give birth to democracy in Iraq, has brought mainly death, destruction and suffering to that nation - and the tragedy is still unfolding. The destructive energy unleashed by the invasion and the mishandled occupation is far from having run its course.

However many bomb-makers are eliminated, however many cells broken up, the social and religious forces driving angry young men in Iraq and indeed across the Muslim world into this sort of fight are not about to die down. The US has more than likely helped frame future wars in the region, pitting religious, national and regional forces against each other within a global Islamic struggle against western political and cultural domination. There is thus an apocalyptic dimension to the Iraq war that did not inhere in the least in the Algerian case.

Moreover, a US withdrawal, rather than resolving the issue of self-determination as French retirement from Algeria did, may result in a calamitous fragmentation of Iraq into violent factions. As Mokhtar Lamani, the former representative of the Arab League in Iraq said this year,

“There may be more than 300 different groups fighting in Iraq for perhaps as many reasons. We are not talking about a civil war, but a series of civil wars”. Casualties rather than diminishing or ceasing will probably increase - at least in the short run. Finally, unlike the Algerian case, an adjacent state - Iran, now a major regional player - is perhaps the true beneficiary of the misbegotten US war.

Already, there are perhaps more than half a million Iraqis dead and a million wounded, and nearly 32,000 US soldiers dead and wounded as a result of the war. Four million Iraqis are in exile (including an estimated 40% of the middle class), have become internal refugees, or are dislocated and homeless. The number of displaced is increasing by 100,000 a month. Despite the recently touted successes in quieting Anbar province for the present, the heavy costs of the war have produced only a generally worsening situation. Iraq has emerged as the world's second most unstable country, a failed state registering only slightly better than Sudan. (It might have made No.1 if the Iraqi health ministry had not stopped providing a count of civilian casualties). Almost four-and-a-half years after President George W. Bush ordered the US invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi conflict shows no sign of abating and gives every indication that it will be with us for years, if not decades. The country has become the focus of a crisis of Islamic civilisation that is closer to its onset than its conclusion.

The United States for all its military power has had a jarring and demoralising encounter with the region's historical forces. It is no longer obvious that they can be contained, much less rolled back as Washington proclaimed in 2002. The US military campaign has already been lost. What was true of the French in Algeria is even more evident today regarding the US occupation of Iraq: a political - not military - solution will ultimately determine the fate of this tortured nation.

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