

fighting words**Guerrillas in the Mist**

Why the war in Iraq is nothing like *The Battle of Algiers*.

By Christopher Hitchens

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Having been screened by the special operations department of the Pentagon last August (see [Charles Paul Freund's piece in Slate](#)), *The Battle of Algiers* is now scheduled for a run at the [New York Film Forum](#). Unless I am wrong, this event will lead to a torrent of pseudo-knowing piffle from the armchair guerrillas (well, there ought to be a word for this group). I myself cherished the dream of being something more than an armchair revolutionary when I first saw this electrifying movie. It was at a volunteer work-camp for internationalists, in Cuba in the summer of 1968. Che Guevara had only been dead for a few months, the Tet rising in Vietnam was still a fresh and vivid memory, and in Portuguese Africa the revolution was on the upswing. I went to the screening not knowing what to expect and was so mesmerized that when it was over I sat there until they showed it again. I was astounded to discover, sometime later on, that Gillo Pontecorvo had employed no documentary footage in the shooting of the film: It looked and felt like revolutionary reality projected straight onto the screen.

When I next saw it, in Bleecker Street in the Village in the early 1970s, it didn't have quite the same shattering effect. Moreover, in the audience (as in that Cuban camp, as I later found out) there were some idiots who fancied the idea of trying "urban guerrilla" warfare inside the West itself. The film had a potently toxic effect on Black Panthers, Weathermen, Baader-Meinhof, and Red Brigade types. All that needs to be said about that "moment" of the Left is that its practitioners ended up dead or in prison, having advanced the cause of humanity by not one millimeter.

Those making a facile comparison between the Algerian revolution depicted in the film and today's Iraq draw an equally flawed analogy. Let me mention just the most salient differences.

1) Algeria in 1956—the "real time" date of the film—was not just a colony of France. It was a department of metropolitan France. The slogan of the French Right was *Algérie Française*. A huge population of French settlers lived in the country, mainly concentrated in the coastal towns. The French had exploited and misgoverned this province for more than a century and were seeking to retain it as an exclusive possession.

2) In 1956, the era of French and British rule in the Middle East had already in effect come to an end. With the refusal by President Eisenhower to countenance the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt at Suez in November of that year, the death-knell of European colonialism had struck. There was no military tactic that could have exempted a near-bankrupt France from this verdict. General Massu in Algiers could have won any military victory he liked and it would have changed nothing. Frenchmen as conservative as Charles de Gaulle and Raymond Aron were swift to recognize this state of affairs.

Today, it is Arab nationalism that is in crisis, while the political and economic and military power of the United States is virtually unchallengeable. But the comparison of historical context, while decisive, is not the only way in which the Iraq analogy collapses. The French could not claim to have removed a tyrannical and detested leader. They could not accuse the Algerian nationalists of sponsoring international terrorism (indeed, they blamed Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt for fomenting the FLN in Algiers itself). They could not make any case that Algerian nationalism would violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty or even threaten to do so. Thus, French conscripts—not volunteers—and Algerian rebels were sacrificed for no cause except the lost

and futile one of French reaction. The right-wing generals of the Algeria campaign, and some of the extreme settlers, actually did conduct an urban guerrilla rearguard action of their own, in Paris as well as Algeria, and did try to bring off a military coup against de Gaulle, but they had been defeated and isolated by 1968.

I would challenge anybody to find a single intelligent point of comparison between any of these events and the present state of affairs in Iraq. The only similarity that strikes the eye, in point of guerrilla warfare, is that the toughest and most authentic guerrilla army in Iraq—the Kurdish *peshmerga*—is fighting very effectively on the coalition side. Not even the wildest propaganda claims of the Baathist and jihadist sympathizers allege that the tactics of General Massu are being employed by General Abizaid or General Sanchez: Newspaper and political party offices are being opened not closed, and just last month the Saddam ban on Iraqi pilgrims making the hajj to Mecca was rescinded.

If one wants to make a serious Algerian analogy, however, there are far more recent events on which to base a comparison. During the 1990s a very bitter war was fought, in the casbah of Algiers and Oran as well as in the countryside, between the FLN (now an extremely shabby ruling party) and the forces of Islamic jihad. A very great number of people were slaughtered in this war, which featured torture and assassination and terror of every description. I have seen estimates of deaths that exceed 150,000. The FLN eventually won the war with the backing of three forces: the Algerian army, the secularized urban middle class, and the Berbers or Kabyles who make up one of the Arab world's largest non-Arab minorities. It wasn't very pretty, and it involved the use of some repulsive measures, but if Algeria had fallen to the fundamentalists the bloodbath would have been infinitely worse and the society would have been retarded almost to the level of Afghanistan. Millions of people would have left or tried to leave, creating a refugee crisis in France and perhaps giving M. Jean-Marie Le Pen (a brutish and boastful veteran of the first Algerian war) an even better shot at the presidency than he managed in his upset first-round triumph in 2002. Fascism would have been the all-round winner.

That

"Battle of Algiers," not Pontecorvo's outdated masterpiece, is replete with examples and parallels that ought to be of great interest and relevance to ourselves. Can an Arab and Muslim state with a large non-Arab minority and many confessional differences defeat the challenge of a totalitarian and medieval ideology? In this outcome, we and our Arab and Kurdish friends have a stake, whereas in the battles of the past (as of the present) one can only applaud the humiliation of French unilateralism and neocolonialism, whether it occurs on-screen or off.

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