AMBUSHES, IEDS AND COIN: THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE

Mr. Eric Ouellet, Ph.D.

The aptitude which such opponents as regular armies have so often in these campaigns to cope with, display in harassing the troops who have penetrated into their fastnesses, is known to all. They revel in stratagems and artifice. They prowl about waiting for their opportunity to pounce down upon small parties moving without due precaution. The straggler and camp follower are their natural prey.[1]

The Canadian Forces' (CF) involvement in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kandahar province has been a reminder to Canadians of how asymmetric enemies can be effective. Among the enemy's actions, one of the most prominent is its extensive use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Although IEDs are a serious tactical threat, they pose the greatest danger at the strategic level.

Most foreign troops involved in ISAF tend to have, in their respective homelands, limited or qualified political support for their mission. In some countries, every casualty caused by IEDs, and more generally ambushes, carries with it the potential to weaken public support for troop deployments. Ultimately, weakening public support may lead to a political decision to withdraw troops, and eventually to the collapse of the ISAF mission. The tactical use of ambushes and IEDs should not let us forget that their ultimate purpose is to generate effects at the strategic level. Any comprehensive decisions on how best to deal with ambushes and IEDs should therefore recognize the strategic effects sought by our adversaries and not only attempt to counter these effects tactically but also at the strategic level. But this can be very tricky.

A recent example of this problem is the approach used by Dutch forces in Afghanistan. They have limited their movements to areas that they control well and have emphasized reconstruction in those areas, hence reducing the risk of falling victim to ambushes and IEDs.[2] This may have been a tactically and operationally sound approach, but a strategically questionable one. On the one hand, by limiting their losses and focusing on humanitarian work, the Dutch military is alleviating pressure from the Dutch public to pull out of Afghanistan. On the other hand, this tactical decision ensures that the insurgents will have an easier time in other parts of Uruzgan province and makes it likely that the counter-insurgency fight will be more difficult in the long run.

Some may think that because a technical or tactical solution to IEDs would eliminate their strategic threat, all our energies should be directed at finding such a solution. It is, without a doubt, imperative to do everything possible to protect our troops against ambushes and IEDs. However, it is equally imperative to avoid the dangerous illusion that anti-IED techniques constitute a strategic "silver bullet." In insurgencies and other asymmetric conflicts, beyond the enemy's resolve, imagination and cleverness are their greatest strength. New measures to defeat our countermeasures will be found, and the cycle of measure and countermeasure will continue.

This paper proposes to shed strategic light on the issues of ambushes and IEDs in the context of foreign interventions in counter-insurgency missions through a series of short case studies, showing how armed forces have dealt with ambushes, IEDs, mines and booby traps in various eras. The purpose of these case studies is not to conduct a systematic analysis of tactical or even operational level solutions or to provide a full

description of the political events surrounding them. It is instead to illustrate that tactical and operational level solution to ambushes and IEDs have contributed to setting the conditions for strategic success in past conflicts, but unfortunately they have not been the determining factor. In other words, tactical and operational level solutions are crucial but not sufficient to deal with such threats.

Three cases studies are presented below: the 19th and 20th century French operations in Algeria, and the French Indochina War. These are followed by a discussion of the key elements that they have in common with respect to the strategic dimension of ambushes and IEDs. Some concluding remarks complete the study.

Combat camera AR2005-A01-344a

Case Studies

This text focuses on substantial counter-insurgency operations in different parts of the world, namely Algeria and Indochina. The successful 19th century operations in Algeria provide a contrast to 20th century operations in Algeria and Indochina, which in spite of having much greater access to technical and human resources, were failures. These two modern cases were selected to illustrate that tactical and operational level success in dealing with ambushes and IEDs must also be accompanied by a strategic level solution. In other words, ambushes and IEDs, when used effectively by insurgents, should be also considered as strategic weapons. As well, all three French cases were selected to provide a contrasting perspective to better-known counter-insurgency operations, particularly the Malaya Emergency and the Vietnam War.[3]

Some may argue that more recent cases of success might yield better insights into present-day challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq. This may be correct, but there are good grounds to ask whether these cases are applicable to our contemporary challenges. Although there were several successful domestic counter-insurgency operations in the 20th century—including those against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, the Shining Path in Peru and the Chechens in the Russian Federation—they are situated in a different strategic environment because they involved a direct challenge to the authority of the counterinsurgent state. Expeditionary counterinsurgencies pose a different challenge, as strategic priorities and essential state interests are much more difficult to define.

Since 1945, only one major expeditionary counter-insurgency operation involving Western armed forces was successful: the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). This operation is of questionable relevance to the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts because it was unique in many ways. The insurgents in Malaya were mostly from a minority group that was easily identifiable: Chinese Malays. They received relatively little external support so that the international dimension of the conflict remained limited in scope. The British government had already sold its solution, independence, to the majority of the population before the insurgency became a serious problem. Finally, the British public was not much involved or interested in the counter-insurgency or aware of its fate, and thus had a limited impact on the campaign's conduct and outcome. In other words, the Malayan insurgency, in contrast to most counterinsurgencies involving Western armed forces in an expeditionary operation, is not good example by which to approximate the more complex conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since the Malayan Emergency there have been some minor operations that were successful, such as those in Brunei (1962-1966) and Oman (1962-1976), but the very fact that they were perceived as minor operations limits their utility for comparison to today's counter-insurgency challenges. Perhaps keeping counter-insurgency operations outside the realm of public affairs is the key lesson to be learned from these three operations, but in our increasingly globalized world, this option is less and less probable. Furthermore, the present-day challenges are already out in the open and require strategic solutions to succeed.

Combat camera AR2006-A01-438

Three French Experiences in Counter-insurgency

Over the last 200 years, the French Army has engaged in many counter-insurgency campaigns. Although the best known ones, Indochina (1945-1954) and Algeria (1954-1962), were strategically unsuccessful, France had been quite successful in the 19th century, like most other colonial powers, in meeting challenges to its rule. Some contend that insurgents of the 19th century were less organized, numerous and well equipped than those of the 20th century and that it is therefore, perilous to make comparisons.[4] This study takes issue with this assertion. As the case study of France's conquest of Algeria in the 19th century shows, the enemy was able to mount an effective and well-thought-out resistance organized around an Islamist ideology. Despite the massive military advantage of the French, it was almost successful in defeating the

French forces during the general insurrection of 1845-46. France's counter-insurgency operations in Algeria in the 19th century illustrate military challenges that seem timeless if one is not mesmerized by technological issues and understands that ideology can take many forms. The later cases of French military involvement in counter-insurgency in Indochina and Algeria are also useful, for they show not only that the same themes reappear a century later, but also how the split between the tactical/operational and strategic realms became the chink in the armour that was exploited by the enemy through the use of ambushes and IEDs.

Algeria in the 19th Century (1839-1857)

General Description

France invaded Algeria in 1830, attacking and seizing its capital Algiers. Although many reasons were stated for embarking on this military operation, it was undertaken essentially for reasons of prestige.[5] After losing many of its colonies in the 1700s and the defeat of Napoleon, France sought to recover its former status as major global power. The actual conquest of Algeria was accomplished in stages, starting from the Mediterranean Sea and moving towards the south. However, France did not become involved in substantial counter-insurgency operations until 1839, by which time it had to govern large portions of Algeria's inland territory. By 1842, the French military commitment had reached 100,000 troops,[6] a major endeavour for a country that then had approximately 30 million citizens and was still surrounded by unfriendly neighbours.

Combat camera AR2006-A01-440

By 1839, the resistance to the French forces had coalesced around the charismatic figure of Emir Abd-el-Kader (not unlike Osama bin Laden). He was pursued for years in a game of cat and mouse, and only being captured in 1851. Abd-el-Kader was able to stage his insurgency from Morocco, which, like present-day Pakistan, had an ambiguous attitude towards the insurgents. Like Iraq, Algeria is a multi-ethnic country and even the capture of Abd-el-Kader did not stop the insurgency, merely displacing its centre from the Arab populations to the Kabyles who live mostly in mountainous areas. It was not until 1857 that the country (with the exception of the Great Desert in the south) was pacified, 27 years after the fall of Algiers. As in present-day Afghanistan and Iraq, the insurgents were fighting foreign troops whom they considered to be both invaders and religious infidels.

Casualties

It is difficult to determine the exact number of casualties that the French sustained during the period between 1839 and 1857, but it was quite substantial. The present-day academic literature tends to focus only on casualties caused directly by enemy fire, which serves to minimize French losses. One can suspect that minimizing French casualties plays well nowadays with those who share a strong political commitment to anti-colonialism. For instance, Lucien Bodard is quoted as estimating the death toll to be about 10,000.[7] But a quick look at the French Army archives gives a different picture. For the years 1840 to 1842 alone, the number of deaths has been estimated at 12,500.[8] As well, memoirs and letters from that era are filled with stories of casualties, providing evidence of numbers that would be considered quite large by present day standards and lending credence to the archival numbers. For example, one can read in a letter dated March 1840 that the French lost 300 soldiers during operations around the city of Oran.[9] Another letter describes the loss of 800 men from a garrison of 1,200 in August 1840 at Millianah.[10] In January 1846, in the Setif region, the French lost 150 men in a day to frostbite while engaged in the endless pursuit of insurgents.[11] This last example shows that the real death toll needs to be based on not only the number of casualties directly caused by enemy fire, but also on those caused by diseases, exposure to the elements and exhaustion attributable to the combination of ambushes and various types harassing techniques used by the insurgents. Chasing the enemy was quite deadly for the French Army of those days. These insurgent tactics were, like today's IEDs, the main cause of casualties for the counterinsurgents,[12] and dealing with them was already identified as a key problem for a conventional army.[13]

Tactical and Operational Adjustments

To deal with the insurgents' tactics, the French Army went through a lengthy learning process. Improvements were incremental, ranging from the introduction of the kepi hat to the selection of horses better suited for the Algerian climate. As well, the French created a network of offices called "bureaux arabes," which were used to improve relations in pacified regions and collect human intelligence. The main improvements were made during the command of Marshal Robert Bugeaud, who arrived in Algeria in 1841. Among other things, Bugeaud lightened the standard equipment carried by soldiers, replaced horses and carts with donkeys to carry supplies, used only light artillery and employed elite infantry to escort field ambulances (which were extensively targeted by the insurgents). These tactical improvements were accompanied by operational level changes as well.

Bugeaud's predecessor, Marshal Charles Valée, opted for multiple small garrisons. This system was effective in holding territories not too far from larger centres such as Algiers and Oran. However, when the French Army went back on the offensive and tried to extend its control inland, it became clear that Valée's model had not been effective. Bugeaud, upon his arrival, immediately modified the garrison system. He established large garrisons that were employed as staging bases for large patrolling columns and supplied a few times a year by large and well-armed convoys.[14] However, the system took a long time to set up. In 1851, French General Yusuf was still advocating the development of a system of very mobile columns assigned to a specific area and supported by well-supplied fortified positions, to crush insurgents in their own territories.[15] The system he proposed was to be used again one hundred years later under the name *quadrillage* by the French Army in Algeria.

Strategic Context and Solution

The strategic context of the Algerian campaign is actually the source of its success. Although there were a few voices raised in France against the mission, there was a large

political consensus on the necessity of succeeding. The only real debates were about the methods to be used and the costs of the war. Eventually in 1841, the French government organized a commission, led by the famous writer Alexis de Tocqueville, to study what needed to be done. De Tocqueville produced two reports, one in 1841 and another in 1847.[16] He proposed what was construed as the "middle way." De Tocqueville's position was that the Algerians would have to submit to French rule under a unified political system; France should not try to create delegated self-rule, nor should it engage in an extermination campaign.

Combat camera AR2006-M012-0052

De Tocqueville's views were very much in keeping with the approach taken in the field by Bugeaud, in which tribes submissive to France were protected by French troops while those who opposed France were victims of systematic raids or *razzias* that attempted to destroy their livelihood until submission was gained.[17] The insurgents eventually adopted the same approach in dealing with tribes supportive of the French rule. Bugeaud's action essentially destroyed the foundation of Algerian society piece by piece until the country was pacified.[18] These methods were quite brutal, but the French public did not seriously object to them. For example, one of the darkest episodes happened in June 1845, when Colonel Aimable Pelissier gave orders to smoke out insurgents hidden in a cave near Mostaganem.[19] His action killed the insurgents as well as the rest of their tribe, women and children included, causing a major scandal in France. But Pelissier was never punished for it, and in fact, was elevated to the rank of Marshal in 1855.

This approach to counter-insurgency eventually became the standard colonial practice. As Callwell sums it, up at end of the 19th century, in colonial warfare, "warriors such as form the enemy in small wars simply disperse when they are worsted. They disappear in all directions, but unless awed by their experience into submission they are ready to collect again should an opportunity offer at a later period."[20]

Lessons Learned

The application of the Bugeaud system was initially the cause of further rebellions in the country that culminated in the general revolt of 1845-46, in which the French Army came close to disintegration.[21] The assessments that were made resembled very closely what one might read about the present American involvement in Iraq.[22] What prevented the collapse of the French Army was the destruction of Abd-el-Kader's retinue (smala) in

March 1846, in which the insurgency lost most of its command and control capabilities. Abd-el-Kader, however, was not caught for another five years, and not until the French Army launched an expedition into Morocco, a sovereign state. In hindsight it is clear that the insurgency was defeated not by the tactical success of March 1846, but for the most part by the ongoing commitment of the French government and public to pacification and colonization, combined with the systematic use of razzias that essentially exhausted the insurgency at its very roots by forcing the population to be entirely dependent on French rule for survival. This commitment survived through political turmoil in France, particularly the 1848 Revolution that led to the creation of the Second Republic, and the coup by Louis-Philippe that brought the creation of the Second Empire in 1852. Even later, after the defeat by Prussia in 1870 and the creation of the Third Republic, French commitment to the colonial enterprise remained strong.

The methods used during the colonial era were certainly morally reprehensible, and could not be used by contemporary Western democracies. Fundamental social values have changed and substantially modified the strategic environment since that time. Yet, the dynamics of the insurgency they were facing had many similarities with those of today. The insurgents used asymmetric tactics with great effectiveness. But the ruthless tactical and operational measures used by the counterinsurgents were only successful because the tacit support of the French population was available.

Combat camera AR2007-T080-042

Indochina (1946-1954)

General description

In early 1945, the Japanese took complete control of Indochina and, in doing so, demonstrated to the local population that non-Westerners could defeat the French. Following the post-war restoration of nominal French control, Indochina remained ripe for a sustained revolt against colonial rule. From 1946 to 1954, France became increasingly engaged in a major counter-insurgency campaign in Indochina. At first, the threat was not immediately recognized as being serious, but it soon became a strategic imperative for France to keep its colony, and prevent a precedent to be emulated across its colonial empire. Furthermore, after its defeat in June 1940 by Germany, France was engaged in reinstating itself as a major power, and would not allow a colonial conflict to

be lost to a gang of insurgents. Over time, the French military commitment, including auxiliaries and Vietnamese allies, reached nearly 450,000 troops.[23] As metropolitan France was still recovering from the destruction caused by the Second World War, this commitment rapidly became economically unsustainable. The conflict was eventually reframed from a colonial war to a struggle against international communist expansion in order to obtain support from the United States. By 1954, the US was paying for about 80% of the war effort.[24]

The insurgents were inspired by revolutionary Marxism, and were known as the Viet Minh. They were led by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap. Their doctrine was inspired by Mao Zedong's theory of Guerrilla Warfare calling for a phased movement from an unconventional conflict towards a conventional one. But the conflict never evolved into a full-fledged conventional war. In fact, the key strategy of the Viet Minh was typical of a modern insurgency, simply expressed by Ho Chi Minh in 1947 when he stated that "the key to the problem of Indochina is to be found in the domestic situation in France."[25] By 1949, the insurgents started to receive substantial support from Red China. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, peace negotiations moved quickly, leading to the Geneva Accord of 1954, which created four independent states in Indochina: communist North Vietnam, pro-Western South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Casualties

With the arrival of motorization, new terms appeared to describe what previous armed forces had faced when dealing with unconventional enemies. One of the best known was the expression "Street without Joy,"[26] from the title of a Bernard Fall's 1961 book describing the difficulties of the French Army in Indochina. The *Street without Joy* (the label "Ambush Alley" has been used too) was actually a stretch of Colonial Highway 1, locked between the South China Sea and the mountains of central Vietnam, where numerous ambushes and improvised mines caused many casualties to the French Army. According to Fall, the total losses for the French Union and allied forces in Indochina amounted to about 94,000 troops. Although it is difficult to find accurate statistics, as Jacques Chirac mentioned in a speech[27] commemorating those who fell at Dien Bien Phu, even during that conventional battle many casualties were still caused by ambushes. In fact, the French used to call the Indochina war *la sale guerre* (dirty war) to highlight how ambushes, mines and IEDs were so much part of the conflict. It is instructive to note that a few years later the Americans faced the same problem on the same stretch of Colonial Highway 1, and Fall himself tragically died there from a mine blast in 1967.

Tactical and Operational Adjustments

From a tactical standpoint, the French Army eventually improved by providing better training to its troops in detecting and defusing IEDs based on lessons learned, and by using deep patrolling in a more offensive way so that their troops were less at risk of being ambushed. The improvements were so significant that in 1951 the Viet Minh had to go back to using guerrilla tactics, and thus deviate from Mao's theory of revolutionary warfare.[28] These tactical improvements reached their optimum level in 1953 with successful operations such as Castor and Mouette, in which large areas of the Tonkin territory were cleared of the insurgent presence.[29]

These same tactical improvements were incorporated into a larger operational approach relying on the use of fortified positions and highly mobile patrol missions. After the so-called battle of Colonial Highway 4 in September and October 1950, the French Army proceeded to reduce the number of small posts across the country concentrating its forces in fortified positions. As a French officer quoted by Fall said in 1953, and reminiscent of the logic of the conflict in Algeria in the 19th century, there was a:

French fortified line around the Delta which we call the 'Marshal de Lattre Line'—about 2200 bunkers forming 900 forts. We are going to deny the Communists access to the 8 million people in this Delta and the 3 million tons of rice it produces. We will eventually starve them out and deny them access to the population. . . . Most of these villages were, in fact, controlled by the communists. . . .[30]

This operational approach, although providing a greater degree of force concentration, remained problematic, because it was personnel intensive. It was criticized for draining good troops away from aggressive patrolling missions.[31] It was only the systematic use of airborne and Legionnaire forces as part of pro-active or quickly reactive counterinsurgent operations that a measure of success was obtained. This was known as the Navarre Plan, after the French Commander in Indochina. Nevertheless, the Viet Minh were quite effective at expanding operations elsewhere, forcing the French to defend Laos as well as the Tonkin territory. A surge of troops was requested, but it was denied by the French government because any additional troops would have to be drawn from conscripted soldiers—which would have been too high a political price.[32] As Irving noted, Pierre Mendès-France's view was that "France had neither the men nor the money to solve the Indochina problem by force, unless of course she was prepared to pay the high price of sending out conscripts and retarding her own economic recovery."[33]

Combat camera AR2008-Z135-02

Strategic Context and Solution

Some may think that the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was the turning point of the war; mostly a conventional fight designed to protect Laos from Viet Minh operations. However, the war was lost in France on the political battlefield, as Ho Chi Minh foresaw in 1947.[34] Dien Bien Phu was, from a military standpoint, a minor defeat for a French and allied contingent of nearly half a million men. The Viet Minh had much greater casualties, many of whom came from their best trained troops.[35]

The *sale guerre* took its toll on French public opinion, and over time seriously challenged belief in the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise.[36] And there were an increasing number of voices calling for a negotiated solution in a context where the

French government was particularly weak under the institutions of the Fourth Republic.[37] The French government attempted to address some of the most pressing political and social problems found in Indochina, but this was mostly a matter of too little, too late.[38] The limited legitimacy that the colonial regime had among the Indochinese population was irremediably lost.

Lessons Learned

The French forces in Indochina had to deal constantly with ambushes, mines and booby traps. In spite of improving their counter-insurgency approach at the tactical and operational level, they still sustained losses that were quite substantial. The *sale guerre* was new and deeply problematic, but, unfortunately for the French, there was no strategic solution to the strategic problem that it caused. Though the strategic commitment to keeping their colony intact was strong at the onset, it weakened gradually to the point where defeat became an acceptable option.

Certainly one of the weakest points in the French approach to the Indochina conflict was the lack of political and social measures to bring the indigenous society back into a wider French partnership. It took a long time for the French to realize that handling an insurgency is about dealing with the population as much as dealing with the insurgents. The ancestors who fought in Algeria in the 19th century understood that, although they were using extreme means to achieve their end. Many mistakes were made during the conflict, but they provided a foundation for the French to develop a new approach to counter-insurgency in Algeria a few years later.

Algeria in the 20th Century (1954-1962)

General Description

In 1954, France was just coming to the unsuccessful end of a major counter-insurgency operation in Indochina when it was drawn into a second one in Algeria. This time, however, the French government perceived things differently. Algeria was just across the Mediterranean Sea, only hours from Marseilles. As well, over one million French settlers were living there among eight million indigenous Muslims. With its large non-Muslim population, Algeria was considered from an administrative point of view as an integral part of metropolitan France. Hence, in 1954, François Mitterand's slogan "l'Algérie c'est la France" (Algeria is France) was quite meaningful and illustrated the new resolve in dealing with the growing insurgency. To ensure that Algeria would remain French, the government in Paris eventually committed 400,000 troops, many of them reservists and conscripts. Lastly, it is important to note that the experience with revolutionary warfare in Indochina prompted the French armed forces to develop their own countermeasure aimed at controlling the population: counter-revolutionary warfare.[39]

The enemy eventually coalesced around the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN), which was inspired by both nationalism and revolutionary ideologies. The FLN was never able to mount any substantial military engagements, nor did it ever effectively use formations larger than a company in size. The FLN essentially employed guerrilla warfare and terrorism as its main tactics. Not only did the FLN use ambushes and improvised mines against the French Army, but it also mounted terrorist attacks against the non-Muslim population and Muslims collaborating with the French regime. As well, the FLN organized demonstrations and terrorist attacks in mainland France. The FLN received most of its external military support from Egypt, whose ruler, Nasser, was committed to fighting European colonialism. The FLN was able to use neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco as operating bases until the French Army effectively sealed the borders. The FLN strategy was aimed at increasing the costs of counter-insurgency to

an unsustainable level while using the increased repression by the French to garner further support from indigenous Algerians.[40]

Casualties

The challenge caused by ambushes, booby traps, explosive devices and mines was also serious in Algeria. The death toll for the French forces was about 28,000.[41] It is difficult to determine causes of death, but the French Ministry of Defence stated that nearly 16,000 died in combat or as a result of unconventional attacks (attentats).[42] Given the FLN tactics, it is reasonable to assume that ambushes and mines caused the vast majority of those deaths. In the early parts of the conflict, the French Army, police posts and patrols were ambushed on a regular basis by FLN guerrilla units, resulting in heavy casualties.[43] Losses caused by ambushes and mines continued until the very end of the conflict.[44]

Combat camera IS2004-9001a

Tactical and Operational adjustments

The ongoing ambushes faced by the French Army, the spread of the insurgency and the terrorist attacks against the European population of Algeria forced the French to take a series of countermeasures. In December 1956, General Raoul Salan was named Commander-in-Chief in Algeria; he rapidly designed and implemented a counter-insurgency plan based on the lessons that he had learned in Indochina. A system known as *quadrillage* was put in place dividing the country into a grid. A permanent force was assigned to patrol and pacify each square created by the grid. This operational innovation was only possible because the French government agreed to build up troop numbers with reservists and conscripts.[45] Tactically, it took some time for the French Army to adjust to counter-guerrilla warfare,[46] but lessons learned and better use of human intelligence from pro-French Muslims eventually paid off. Once pacification was successful in an area, the Army was assigned to support civil-military reconstruction units known as *Sections Administratives Spécialisées* dedicated to re-establishing normal life in communities by working on projects and distributing food and medicine. To

further support the overall implementation of the plan, a counter-insurgency training centre was opened in 1957 in the Algerian town of Arzew to train incoming officers on a variety of topics ranging from booby trap detection to Muslim sociology to development of informer networks.[47]

The second major step was the creation of a *Réserve Générale* (RG) made up of elite and mobile forces striking wherever concentrations of FLN guerrillas were found. At first, the use of the RG was problematic because there was poor coordination between the RG and the forces engaged in *quadrillage*. Often times, the efforts to win over the population were undermined by the ruthless methods of the paratroopers and legionnaires that made up the RG.[48] The demands upon the RG exceeded its capacity to act, even though it enjoyed substantial air transport capability.[49] Local *quadrillage* forces had to be supported by local militias to hold up until the RG could be brought in, which gave the FLN enough time to flee. Hence, French positions could never be fully secured, even in pacified areas.

The final major step, which also called for large numbers of troops, was the fortification and sealing of the borders, particularly the Morice Line along Tunisian border. In 1957-58, about 80,000 troops were defending the borders, 300,000 were involved in *quadrillage* and only 15,000 were assigned to the RG.[50]

Combat camera IS2007-0457

Strategic Context and Solution

By 1960, the French Army had essentially won the military battle in Algeria. The country was for the most part pacified, losses were at a tolerable 30,000, and even large segments of the Muslim population were on the French side, providing about 100,000 troops known as “harkis.” The lessons from Indochina were effectively learned and implemented. However, France still lost its Algerian territory, granting it independence in 1962 with the ratification of the Evian Accord.

The tactical battle engaged in the capital of Algiers in 1957 was a success for the French Army in essentially eradicating FLN terrorism. The brutal methods used by the paratroopers, however, essentially brought strategic defeat to France. Certainly, the public denunciations of the paratroopers’ methods during the Battle of Algiers were instrumental in bringing defeat to the French, but one needs to look further.

The FLN clearly adjusted its military actions so that they fit into a plan to win politically and diplomatically from outside Algeria.[51] The FLN also waged a terrorism campaign inside metropolitan France in 1959-1960 that succeeded in showing that the war extended beyond the boundaries of Algeria and would continue until France acquiesced. In 1961, the FLN was able to organize large demonstrations in Paris that reinforced among the French the sense of hopelessness and protested the dishonourable ways in which France had conducted military operations.[52] In fact, the FLN was working on a critical fault line in French society opened by the Indochina conflict and running through its commitment to colonialism.[53] French society was profoundly divided, and the war simply widened the existing division,[54] which found its ultimate illustration when part of the French Army mutinied upon learning that the French government was negotiating a settlement with the FLN. According to some analysts, it was the extensive use of reservists and conscripts that brought the war too close to home and set the political stage for strategic defeat.[55] The Battle of Algiers was perhaps a political turning point, but it was a continuation of the same tactics that were seen first-hand by many French citizen-soldiers. French assessments of civilian casualties in Algeria range between 300,000 and 400,000 deaths, while some Algerian evaluations can be as high as 1,500,000 deaths.

Lessons Learned

The counter-insurgency effort in Algeria in the 20th century is very instructive. While effective use of tactical and operational counter-insurgency approaches can lead to military success, it cannot stave off strategic defeat. The FLN used ambushes, mines and terrorism as strategic weapons aimed directly at fuelling existing doubts about the colonial enterprise. France had no strategic response to these attacks. The French Army made the serious mistake of believing that tactical and operational responses, supplemented by various attempts to win over the population, would suffice to deal with the threat posed by the unconventional war that the FLN was waging.

Another important lesson of this conflict is that strong resolve from a country's political elite to engage in counter-insurgency is not enough. In democratic states, the political elite can maintain a show of unity for a time, but in the long run, that unity will be seriously eroded. This is particularly true in the context of counter-insurgency, which is almost by definition a type of conflict that endures for years. The use of conscripts only exacerbates pressures on politicians to pull back from overseas conflicts and reinforces the widening of the political fault lines that exist in any democratic society.

Discussion

The cases presented above illustrate that in different eras and conflicts, ambushes and IEDs have been problematic, and various tactical and operational level solutions have been found and implemented. But in the end, it is the strategic context that has been determinant. In the 21st century, Western democracies not only continue to be very sensitive to any accusations of neo-colonialism or violation of human rights, but they are now also very sensitive to casualties. For this reason, countering ambushes and IEDs is not strictly speaking a military issue, although it occurs in a military context and calls for the use of military means. To deal with such threats effectively, one must understand that they relate directly to the political and social realms, which are the real targets of ambush and IED campaigns mounted by insurgents. Tactics such as ambushes and IEDs are used by insurgents to gradually sap the foreign counter-insurgency forces' political will, and to destabilize the social foundations of the political regime that the counterinsurgents are trying to establish and protect. If counter-ambush and counter-IED efforts remain at the tactical and operational levels, then the insurgents can keep the strategic initiative. Our inability to fully integrate counter-ambush and counter-IED

measures into a comprehensive strategic construct should be considered one of our centres of gravity (in a manoeuvrist sense). The more focused on tactical and operational matters a conventional armed force is, the weaker it is in dealing with strategic weapons such as ambushes and IEDs.

This weakness becomes quite obvious when one thinks about how counter-insurgency plays in the context of the classical dilemma in operational art between concentration and dispersion of force. Concentration of force provides better opportunities for force protection and offensive actions, but leaves large geographical areas without a significant military presence. Dispersion of force allows a greater coverage of territory, but exposes smaller formations to attack and makes offensive operations harder to prepare. Various answers to this dilemma can be found in conventional warfare, depending on a variety of factors such as force size, terrain, firepower, mobility and intelligence. However, this dilemma is much more difficult to resolve in the context of modern counter-insurgency warfare, because establishing security to re-establish social order is politically necessary, while protecting smaller units is also necessary. In other words, the local population needs to be protected locally against insurgents to win its support, so dispersion appears appropriate. Yet, Western expeditionary forces tend to have a political "domestic second front" where casualties severely affect public support for their mission. Thus, given this domestic imperative, concentration for better force protection appears more appropriate.

In societies fully committed to counter-insurgency, the strategic dimension of ambushes and IEDs does not play as much because it can be safely taken for granted. The French in 19th century Algeria were able to find an answer to the dilemma between concentration and dispersion without having to worry too much about how it played strategically. It is in this context that one can understand how Charles Callwell could argue that the ultimate solution had been found to the dilemma described above. Based on the European colonial experience, he concluded that the key was a series of fortified positions with large stockpiles (and therefore re-supplied less often), combined with highly mobile forces to strike at the enemy and supported by an effective human intelligence network. In his view:

> The "drives" instituted in the closing days of the South African war [1899-1902] may be called the last word in strategy directed against guerrilla antagonists. In principle the drives combined the system of sub-dividing the theatre of war into sections, of utilizing highly mobile troops, of acting with the utmost energy, and of getting the full benefit of fortified posts. . . . In no class of warfare is a well organized and well served intelligence department more essential than in that against guerrillas.[56]

To fully appreciate Callwell's view, however, one has to remember that for him and his contemporaries, "Guerrilla warfare, in fact, means almost of necessity petty annoyance rather than operations of a dramatic kind."[57] What was perceived in the past as "petty annoyance" has now become a major issue.

The French also found answers in Indochina and Algeria during the 20th century, but the strategic dimension was not integrated into the solution. They continued to take it for granted or, at best, delegated the issue entirely to the politicians. They failed to recognize that a new strategic era was emerging, in which full political commitment to expeditionary counter-insurgency was no longer available.

Interestingly enough, Stephen Blank in his analysis of the Soviet war in Afghanistan shows that the same approach described by Callwell was eventually put in place, almost one hundred years later. The Soviets' operational approach was as follows:

> The overall resort to a system of deeply mined and echeloned defensive strongpoints and installations guarding urban and logistical infrastructural centers helped shape the use of forces for both defensive and rapid turnaround to counteroffensive operations. Special forces and airborne forces were frequently assigned to such operations. And the continuing employment of combined active and passive defenses and fortifications successfully stymied Mujaheddin offensives in 1988-90.[58]

The Soviet Union was not what we would consider a democracy, but it was also not immune to the challenges of the new strategic era. The Soviets too, failed to see that the strategic dimension of the conflict was an issue for both the military and the politicians. Hence, victory or defeat in the end depends on strategic conditions, and this is true for both democracies and dictatorships.

These challenges are very much part of the present conflict in Iraq. It is too soon to know if the operational decision to increase the number of troops in Iraq and the apparent decrease in violence will have a permanent effect. But it is clear that the Americans again face the same fundamental dilemma of how to get the most out of concentration and dispersion while holding the ground, protecting the population and hunting the insurgents. Additional troops on the ground can also create more opportunities for insurgents to inflict casualties through ambushes and IEDs.

It is also interesting to note that the debate about how to deal with the situation in Iraq is reflective of older questions that previous counterinsurgents have had to answer. The tactical cycle of measures and countermeasures continues, as mines become bigger and are buried deeper and types of emplacements become more numerous. In response to the US surge, as *Time* reported:

> Some insurgent commanders fell back on tactics that worked before, such as moving their operations into areas where there are relatively few US troops. . . . They began to attack new targets, like US helicopters and important bridges that connect Baghdad to the rest of the country. “These were all new kinds of attacks, and there were so many of them, it was hard to keep track.”[59]

As in the historical cases presented above, the idea of using fortification systems in Iraq is being discussed as a countermeasure without taking into consideration the strategic implication of such a suggestion, as in the following passage:

> Fortifications can be an effective part of an offensive strategy in counter-insurgency and can increase the probability of success in friendly offensive operations especially when placed across enemy lines of communication (LOCs). Correctly placed, they contribute to success in the offensive by closing enemy lines of retreat, shortening the distance in time and space to enemy culminating points and lengthening time and distance to friendly culminating points by improving friendly resupply. Carefully sited fortifications can shape the battlefield for victory in irregular warfare.[60]

But as in the past, fortifications can be the object of enemy countermeasures and also create a false sense of security that can be quite counter-productive at the strategic level. As another American officer asserts:

> It is critical that an offensive mindset is maintained; adopting a defensive posture to mitigate risk to COIN personnel is ultimately counter-productive. Field Manual (FM) 3-24 states, “If military forces remain in their compounds, they lose touch with the people, appear to be running scared, and cede the initiative to the insurgents.” . . . While clearly it is important to protect the force against the effect of IEDs, more must be done to protect the force and the populace by preventing their emplacement in the first place.[61]

Whether the American forces in Iraq have found the right operational balance for the Iraqi conflict is difficult to assess. What is clear, however, is that ambushes and IEDs continue to undermine the political will to fight. The strategic countermeasures pressuring Iran to discontinue its support for the insurgents, particularly the help provided in designing and constructing new types of IEDs, are a step in the right direction. However, once again the counterinsurgents are facing a situation in which time is running out to effectively implement a strategic solution to the challenges created by ambushes and IEDs on the political home front.

Conclusion

Again, there should be absolutely no doubt that armed forces must prioritize force protection in counter-insurgency and work tirelessly at finding countermeasures to ambushes and IEDs. However, given that ambushes and IEDs are the bread and butter of insurgents, it is very unlikely that they will stop seeking new tactics to use against the foreign counterinsurgents. History shows how insurgents have been creative and imaginative in developing new ways of attacking their enemies. As in the past, it is a dangerous illusion to think that a "silver bullet" can be found against ambushes and IEDs.

Ambushes and IEDs have been and continue to be the hallmark of insurgency warfare. The present conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are no exceptions. Contrary to conventional forms of warfare, insurgency is not about defeating the enemy's armed forces. Rather, the goal is to demoralize the opponents' political leadership and undermine its public support. Ambushes and IEDs become preferred tactics when one has limited means and yet is pursuing goals that are essentially situated at the strategic level. In other words, they are the optimum solution for someone who wants to avoid fighting a militarily superior enemy, while actively engaging politically that same enemy who is relatively weak in political terms.

In this context, CF counter-IED activities need to be integrated into a genuine strategic plan that is much more than simply improving the public communications strategy. The Forces should be pushing to develop a true national strategy aimed at strengthening our national staying power. Our politicians might not be receptive to such a proposal, but it is certainly the best military advice that the CF can give them right now.

About the Author...

Eric Ouellet has a B.A and M.A. in political science from Université Laval, Quebec City, and a Ph.D. in organizational sociology from York University, Toronto. He works presently as a Defence Scientist with Defence Research & Development Canada at the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis in Ottawa. He has published on military leadership and command, and he is now doing research on the organizational challenges of counter-insurgency. He was previously professor at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto, and with the Department of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. He served as reservist with the Voltigeurs de Québec in the 1980s.

Endnotes

1. Callwell. *Small Wars*, p. 125.
2. See Chivers, C.J. "Dutch Soldiers Stress Restraint in Afghanistan." *New York Times* (6 April 2007), Internet version, consulted on 11 September 2007, at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/06/world/asia.
3. For interesting analyses of these conflicts please refer to Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War*; Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency*; Harrison, *The Endless War*; Hunt, *Pacification*; Kinnard, *The War Managers*; Nagl, *Eating Soup with a Knife*; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*; Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*.
4. Beckett. *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies*, p. vii.
5. From older historiographies like the one proposed by De la Gorce in *La conquête de l'Algérie* to recent and critical ones

proposed by researchers like La Cour Grandmaison in *Coloniser. Exterminer*, there are no substantial discrepencies on the origins of the 19th century Algerian campaign.
6. De la Gorce. *La conquête de l'Algérie*, p. 94.
7. See on Internet www.quid.fr/2007/Defense_Nationale/Guerres_Francaises/1, consulted 16 November 2007.
8. Compilation from Nicot and Carré. *Algérie: Inventaire de la sous-série 1H*.
9. "Voilà, mon général, quelle a été l'affaire du 13 mars qu'on fera passer pour une victoire et où, cependant, nous avons été forcés d'abandonner le champ de bataille avec une perte de 300 hommes . . . ." In Beaulaincourt-Marle. "Lettre du capitaine Brayer." *Campagnes d'Afrique*, pp. 188-189.
10. MacMahon. *Mémoires*, p. 151.
11. "Lettre du lieutenant-colonel Canrobert" in Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 452.
12. For instance, in a 17 November 1845 letter, Lieutenant-Colonel Canrobert wrote, "Les Arabes suivant la tactique de leur chef Abd-el-Kader, n'attaquent plus les colonnes un peu fortes, ils les harcèlent de loin, leur cause des fatigues inouïes, les forces à se diviser et se ruent sur les petits détachements." In Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 441.
13. A February 1841 letter by Chef de Bataillon De Lioux reads: "Je ne crois pas que ce soit en Algérie que l'on apprenne l'art de la guerre ; c'est une partie de chasse sur une grande échelle, où les régiments viennent s'user, se fondre en peu de temps ; trois mois après leur arrivée, ils ne savent plus s'aligner, tout ce qu'on a appris s'en va bientôt . . . ." In Sophie Beaulaincourt-Marles, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 221.
14. See De la Gorce. *La conquête de l'Algérie*, p. 89. Bugeaud actually closed almost two-thirds of French forward posts in 1841, see Rousset. *La conquête de l'Algérie*, Vol. 1, p. 11.
15. Yusuf. *De la guerre en Afrique*, p. 7-8.
16. Tocqueville. "Travail sur l'Algérie" and "Rapport sur l'Algérie (1847)," in *Œuvres complètes*.
17. In the words of Colonel Dubern in a March 1846 letter, "Les chevaux, les bœufs et même les moutons vont manquer totalement: la guerre a détruit les premiers et entravé leur reproduction ; les razzias alternatives des Arabes et les nôtres ont achevé l'extinction de la race bovine, déjà commencée par la consommation imprudente des veaux et des vaches ; il en a été de même pour les moutons. Au résumé, nous détruisons le pays que nous prétendons coloniser et civiliser." In Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 476.
18. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 166.
19. De la Gorce. *La conquête de l'Algérie*, p. 113.
20. Callwell. *Small Wars*, p. 86.
21. Alarmist letters from those days were common. For instance, in a letter from Henry Mallarmé of February 1846, one can read "C'est le plus grand désastre qu'ait éprouvé l'armée d'Afrique depuis vingt-cinq ans. […] La position est grave, la guerre est devenue plus sérieuse que jamais. " In Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, pp. 464-465. Colonel Flô wrote in March 1846: "A aucune époque, depuis 1830, cet état n'a été moins rassurant, et il l'est devenu d'autant moins dans ces derniers temps qu'il n'est plus possible de prévoir désormais quelle sera l'issue de la crise." In Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 477. He later added, "les deux causes principales de cette impuissance tiennent à la dispersion extravagante de notre armée, divisée en une multitude de petites colonnes sans lien, sans force, manœuvrant au hasard . . . ." Ibid, p. 481.
22. For instance, a letter from a senior civil servant involved in Algeria in 1846 reads: "On a donné à M. Bugeaud cent mille hommes et cent millions [francs], deux ou trois fois plus qu'à ses prédécesseurs et, au bout de tout cela, il se trouve que notre cavalerie est détruite, notre infanterie exténuée, qu'aucun résultat n'est obtenu, que le désordre est partout dans la guerre, dans la politique, dans l'administration, et que le découragement s'empare de tous les esprits." In Beaulaincourt-Marle, *Campagnes d'Afrique*, p. 474.
23. Windrow. *The French Indochina War 1946-1954*, p. 11.
24. Kinnard. *The War Managers*, p. 16.
25. Devilliers. *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952*, p. 371.
26. Fall. *The Street Without Joy*.
27. Speech given in Paris, 7 May 2004, by then French President Jacques Chirac on the 50th anniversary of the end of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. On Internet at http://www.elysee.fr, consulted 23 October 2007.
28. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 49.
29. Irving. *The First Indochina War*, p. 118.
30. Fall. "The theory and practice of insurgency and counter-insurgency", p. 52.
31. Pierre Dallier wrote: "Mais le général de Lattre décidait aussi de couvrir le Delta tonkinois par un système fortifié essentiellement composé de blockhaus bétonnés, qui allaient immobiliser une vingtaine de bons bataillons opérationnels, de tirailleurs en particulier, qui manqueront à nos forces mobiles." In *Le 4e R.T.M.*, p. 18.
32. Irving. *First Indochina War*, p. 93; Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 52.
33. Irving. *First Indochina War*, p. 81.
34. Thompson. *No Exit from Vietnam*, p. 77.
35. Harrison, James P. *The Endless War*. New York: Free Press, 1982, p. 126.
36. Irving. *First Indochina War*, p. 109.
37. Irving. *First Indochina War*, p. 119.
38. Irving. *First Indochina War*, p. 89.
39. Most sources used for this section are drawn from English language historical analyses to ease future reference for the reader. However, recent French sources are also used to update older analyses.

40. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, pp. 168-169.
41. According to Jean-Paul Mari, in an article in the *Nouvel Observateur* of 28 February 2002.
42. According to Jean-Paul Mari on Internet at http://www.grands-reporters.com/Guerre-d-Algerie-Les-derniers.html, consulted 23 October 2007.
43. Alexander and Keiger. "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, operations and diplomacy", p. 8.
44. In the unofficial history of the 4e Régiment de chasseurs, one can read that by 1960 even when the French Army ceased major operations, "Le Régiment s'adapte rapidement. Il prend un rythme de vie particulier: vivre la nuit. Car c'est à la faveur de l'obscurité que se manifestent les tentatives de l'adversaire: approche du réseau à dessein de le saboter ou d'installer des embuscades, essais de franchissement, et aussi harcèlement. Ces derniers ne seront jamais très dangereux, mais bazookas et mines nous causeront des pertes. " On Internet at http://www.4rch.fr/images/imagehistorique_l/historique_l.htm, consulted 21 November 2007.
45. Alexander and Keiger. "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, operations and diplomacy", p. 9.
46. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 181.
47. For more details see Guelton, Frederic. "The French Army's 'Centre for Instruction and Preparation in Counter-Guerrilla warfare' (CIPCG) at Arzew."
48. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 176-179.
49. Alexander and Keiger. "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, operations and diplomacy", p. 14.
50 . Alexander and Keiger. "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, operations and diplomacy", p. 15.
51. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 171.
52. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 240.
53. Kelly. *Lost Soldiers*, p. 250.
54. Already in 1956, a quarter of the French population believed that Algeria would not remain French. Polls quoted in Merom, "The social origins of the French capitulation in Algeria", p. 615.
55. Merom. "The social origins of the French capitulation in Algeria", p. 618.
56. Callwell. *Small Wars*, p. 143.
57. Callwell. *Small Wars*, p. 127.
58. Blank. *Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan*, 1979-90, p. 50.
59. Ghosh, Bobby and Mark Thompson. "The enemy's new tools." *Time* (25 June 2007), p. 26.
60. Demarest and Grau. "Maginot Line or Fort Apache," p. 35.
61. Church. "Assuring mobility in a COIN environment," pp. 22-23.

The Canadian Army Journal
Visit us online at...
http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/caj/
Le Journal de l'Armée du Canada