

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS CLASSICS
AN EXCERPT FROM ALISTAIR HORNE'S
PREFACE TO THE 2006 EDITION OF
A SAVAGE WAR OF PEACE

Following September 2001, whether in Paris or London, intelligence evolving about the terror networks of al-Qaeda indicated numerous links with Algeria. In turn there were roots of jihad laid back in the Savage War—though it was not of itself a conflict rooted in Islam. It was, in effect, first and foremost, an anti-colonial war of national liberation. One cannot stress this fact too often. Nevertheless, in many ways the horrors suffered in Algeria's own civil war do read like a paradigm, a microcosm of present-day Islam's frustrated inadequacy to meet the challenges of the modern world, the anger generated thereby finding itself directed into lashing out against the rich, successful West.

Generally, the old saw about history never repeating itself holds true. Nevertheless, its bad elements may well do so if national leaders pay no attention to its lessons. A few years back the Israeli press reported that Ariel Sharon's favourite bedside reading was the Hebrew translation of *A Savage War of Peace*. Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Amos Elon commented that "[Sharon] must have tragically misunderstood it. That book could not tell him what to do, but it could have told him what *not* to do." The lessons surely apply today. At the time of writing, one feels that Bush's Washington (and Blair's London) also went blindly into Iraq—and into collision with the Islamic world—without the kind of necessary preparation, where study of Algeria in 1954–62 might have helped. At the very least its lessons might have imposed caution before getting involved in Iraq in the first place. There are at least three areas where the echoes are particularly painful, if not deafening.

ONE: In the early days of the Algerian War, once the FLN realised it was not strong enough to take on the powerful French Army, it concentrated its attacks on the native police loyal to France. Result: a deadly loss of morale among the police, with defections to the FLN, and the French Army defensively reduced to protecting the police, instead of concentrating on active "search-and-destroy" missions. The "insurgents" in Iraq have learned from this strategy with deadly effect.

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TWO: The benefit of porous frontiers. In 1954–62, the winning French Army was paralysed by its inability to pursue its FLN enemy across into its friendly bases in neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco. This is what, in effect, led to the collapse of the French government and the advent of de Gaulle in 1958. In their turn, the Iraq insurgents have been able to use Syria—and now, much more dangerously, Iran—to similar advantage.

THREE: The vile hand of torture; of abuse, and counter-abuse. In the Algerian War what led—probably more than any other single factor—to the ultimate defeat of France was the realisation, in France and the world at large, that methods of interrogation were being used that had been condemned under the Nazi Occupation. At the dawn of the new century, the ugly ghosts of torture returned to plague France. In 2001, an eighty-three-year-old former general, Paul Aussaresses, published a book in which he unashamedly, indeed proudly, admitted to having tortured—in a good cause, he claimed. After a trial which gripped France, the aging general got away with a fine of one hundred thousand francs, on a uniquely worded charge “in the name of respect for the victims.”

Because of the slowness of communications in the 1950s and 1960s, it took a year or more for the message of abuses perpetrated in Algeria to sink in. Now, with the Internet and al-Jazeera, one set of photos from Abu Ghraib is enough to inflame hatred across the Islamic world against the West, providing excuse for all the beheadings and atrocities carried out by al-Qaeda. From the Inquisition to the Gestapo and the “Battle of Algiers,” history teaches us that, in the production of reliable intelligence, regardless of the moral issue, torture is counter-productive. As a further footnote to my tenet, learned in Algeria, that torture should *never, never, never* be resorted to by any Western society, I draw readers once again to the testimony of Prefect Teitgen of Algiers (see pp. 203–204) which—three decades on—I still find deeply moving. Teitgen had been informed by the Algiers police that they had intelligence of a bomb which could have caused appalling casualties. Could they put a suspect to “the question”? Himself a deportee in World War II, Teitgen told me he refused:

... I trembled the whole afternoon. Finally the bomb did not go off. Thank God I was right. Because if you once get into the torture business, you're lost. ... All our so-called civilisation is covered with

a varnish. Scratch it, and underneath you find *fear*. . . . When you see the throats of your *copains* slit, then the varnish disappears.

How applicable this still is to the dilemmas facing the West in the war on terror!

In passing, one should also note France's painful discovery that, fifty years on, many former "torturers" in the armed services were having to resort to psychiatric "counselling." The inflictors of torture as well as their victims remain grievously impaired.

In 2005, at the suggestion of his staff, I sent a copy of *A Savage War* to US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, underscoring the evils of torture—and, not least, the propaganda value even the least substantiated rumours of it can arouse. I received a flea in the ear—courteous, but a flea nevertheless—for my trouble.

After all the hopes generated for a free, happy and prosperous Algeria at Evian in 1962, within years of the departure of the French Army she was tearing herself apart in the most senseless and bloody civil war (between fellow Muslims) of recent times.

Does much more need to be said about the relevance of Algeria's Savage War to contemporary Iraq? History continues to take its toll.

We historians, perhaps fortunately, are not permitted to see the future. Certainly when I started writing *A Savage War* back in 1973, I had not the least thought that it might find a new relevance, or modernity, in the twenty-first century. At the time it seemed a very tragic story sufficient within its own bounds. Now, for all the lessons it may contain—not just for the conflict in Iraq, but for wider issues in the world at large, and those as yet unforeseen which may still lie ahead—it affords me great satisfaction humbly to offer this book up once again.