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COMMENT

WINNING AND LOSING

by Philip Gourevitch

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One day late last summer, as the tally of bombings, shootings, and acts of sabotage against the American occupation in Iraq took on the unmistakable profile of a war of guerrilla insurgency, the office of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, at the Pentagon, designed and distributed e-mail flyers with a cautionary headline: “how to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas.” The e-mail invited those involved in the “wot”—the war on terrorism—to a private screening of the Italian Marxist director Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 masterpiece, “The Battle of Algiers.” The movie, which will be rereleased in theatres next month, is surely the most harrowing, and realistic, political epic ever filmed. It depicts the conflict between Algerian nationalist insurgents and French colonial forces in the late nineteen-fifties, or, as the flyer put it: “Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar?”

For all the differences between France’s fight to keep Algeria—a country it had occupied since 1830—and America’s current dispensation in Iraq, the parallels between the drama of insurgency and counter-insurgency in “The Battle of Algiers” and our present Iraqi predicament are as clear and as depressing as the Pentagon film programmers promised. The ugly truth that Pontecorvo lays vividly bare, as his camera tacks back and forth between the Algerian guerrillas and the French paratroopers, is that terrorism works. For, although the film focusses on a chapter in the Algerian struggle when France succeeded in crushing the rebel movement, the final moments of the movie show how within a few years the French were forced to accept defeat and retreat, an outcome that in retrospect appears historically inevitable.

Such is the bind that the Bush Administration has led us into in Iraq. Appalling, intolerable—in all senses, maddening—as the terrorist tactics of the Iraqi insurgents may be, their truck bombs, donkey-cart missile launchers, and sniper rifles are tactical political instruments that have steadily and systematically succeeded in isolating American forces in Iraq. They have effectively driven the United Nations, the international staff of the Red Cross, and other aid groups from the country, and—more disastrously—they have fostered a mutual sense of alienation between the American forces and the Iraqi people they are supposed to be liberating. Triumphalist pronouncements from Washington notwithstanding, our occupying forces are now clearly on the defensive. And the more aggressive

their defense becomes, the more it serves the insurgents' purposes. When an American adviser in Iraq speaks of a new strategy of "terrorism versus terrorism," as Seymour M. Hersh reported in these pages last week, and an American lieutenant colonel tells the *Times*, "With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them," one may be forgiven for concluding that the enemy is defining the terms of the fight to his advantage.

In "The Battle of Algiers," there comes a moment when the commander of the French paratroopers, Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu, realizes that, despite a spate of strategic successes against the insurgency, he is losing the larger battle for public opinion. At a press conference, reporters confront him with allegations that his men have tortured Algerian informants. Mathieu reminds the reporters that the press had originally been unanimous in calling for the suppression of the rebellion. "That's why we were sent here," he says. "And we're neither crazy nor sadistic. . . . We are soldiers. Our duty is to win. Since we're being precise, I'll now ask you a question. Is France to remain in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, you must accept all the necessary consequences."

President Bush has consistently assured us that America will "stay the course" in Iraq, but what he means by that—what that course is—is not clear. Just as the official reasons for the war keep shifting, so does the Administration's proclaimed objective. For now, we are in Iraq because the President and his most influential advisers wanted to go to war there. Having made a misleading case for the war, the Bush team drastically mismanaged the crucial early period of the occupation, and has recently responded to the Iraqi insurgency by scrapping its original plan for political revitalization in favor of a hastier schedule of "Iraqization." With Bush's attention turning ever more urgently to holding on to the White House in next year's election, he is pushing for the election of an Iraqi transitional government by the middle of next year. "We're going to get out of there as quickly as we can, but not before we finish the mission at hand," Andrew Card, the White House chief of staff, explained the other day.

Unlike the French mission in Algeria, Washington's goal in Iraq is not to prevent the people from governing their own country but to help them to do so. Presumably, the insurgents—about whose politics, allegiances, organization, and objectives shockingly little is known—also want to see Iraqis in power, if not the same ones that Washington might favor. The question "Is America to remain in Iraq?" would ultimately receive the same negative answer from the occupiers as from the guerrillas. But, as the Bush Administration pushes for speedy elections and a speedy exit, Algeria's example is again worth bearing in mind. In the early nineties, an Islamic fundamentalist party won elections in that country by a solid majority but was prevented from taking power by the secular military, which refused to accept the democratic election of an anti-democratic government. As a result, the country descended into a civil war that is reported to have claimed a hundred thousand lives.

Right now, there is no Iraqi state and, in the absence of an Iraqi leader, President Bush holds power. Of course, Iraqis won't get to vote for him when they do eventually go to the polls, and for that, at least, he can be grateful. His apparent impatience to get out of the country suggests that he recognizes how difficult it will be to maintain the claim that he is that country's liberator even as he serves as Commander-in-Chief of an increasingly relentless counter-insurgency campaign. The President cannot afford to lose Iraq. What is less obvious, with the guerrillas setting the agenda, is

what the price would be to win it.