A column in the Washington Post reported yesterday that the Pentagon's special operations chiefs have decided to screen The Battle of Algiers, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1965 classic film of urban terrorist insurgency, for Pentagon employees on Aug. 27. The decision to show Algiers, David Ignatius writes, is "one hopeful sign that the military is thinking creatively and unconventionally about Iraq." He even quotes from a Pentagon flier about the movie:

How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. ... Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.

It's welcome news that the military is thinking creatively about the American role in Iraq, but the lessons and pleasures of The Battle of Algiers are a lot more ambiguous than this Pentagon blurb implies. To praise the film for its strategic insights is to buy into the 1960s revolutionary mystique that it celebrates; it is the collapse of that very mystique that has contributed to the film's current obscurity and made screenings "rare."

Even so, The Battle of Algiers remains a fascinating artifact of its time. But when the film came out, viewers required a lot of context to understand it properly. Here's a primer about this famous and controversial film, and about how the ever-shifting moral of its story relates to the Battle of Baghdad.

What is The Battle of Algiers?
The Battle of Algiers was the premier political film of the 1960s. It was studied by the campus left for its lessons in revolutionary-cell organization and was obligatory viewing for Black Panthers.

The first part of the film depicts the campaign of terror launched by the National Liberation Front (FLN, called "the organization" in the film) against French colonial rule in 1956.* The story is built around a criminal-turned-revolutionary known as Ali La Pointe, and it details his political epiphany and his terrorist career. The movie's second half concerns the reaction by the French military, which consists primarily of a campaign of torture and murder, and focuses on the leader in charge of that campaign, "Col. Mathieu." Mathieu is by far the best-realized character in the film; his is the only role filled by a professional actor.
From its first release, the film was extremely controversial: When the film was finally shown in France, theaters were bombed. In Italy, viewers were attacked.

**Is the movie accurate?**

Within broad limits. Ali was indeed the hero of the Casbah, the Muslim section of Algiers; as the film suggests, his death marked the end of the real battle for the city. The French did torture and murder their way to tactical victory. Mathieu, for his part, is based mostly on the real-life Gen. Jacques Massu, who devised the counterterrorist strategy. Many sequences are meticulously accurate, such as the famous one referred to by the Pentagon in its flier, in which Algerian women put on Western clothes and makeup and then plant bombs at civilian French targets. Unsurprisingly, many characters are composites, and numerous details are fudged, made up, or altered. Among them is Ali's powerful last line in the film, directed at the French: "I do not negotiate with them." The line is actually appropriated from a speech by then-Interior Minister François Mitterrand, who had directed it at the insurgents.

**Is there anything important that the film leaves out?**

The film leaves out the insurrection that was taking place in the rest of Algeria, which makes it impossible for viewers to judge how the FLN finally succeeded in driving out the French, much less what was wrong with French military strategy. (Even now, some blame defeat not on the military but on Charles de Gaulle.) The movie also omits the struggle between the FLN and other anti-French factions for control of the revolution. It took an Algerian filmmaker, not a European, to tell the story of insurgents killing each other (Okacha Touita's 1982 film, *The Sacrificed*).

Instead of offering an explanation for the ultimate triumph of the FLN, Pontecorvo offers a poetic picture of Algeria's revolutionary resilience. "Even though some rivers seem to disappear," he once told an interviewer, "they run underground instead and always reach the sea." That's an appealing metaphor, but it's neither politically nor militarily instructive.

**What does any of this have to do with Baghdad?**

Terror. The Mideast learned the efficacy of insurgent terror from Algeria. The PLO, Hamas, and other groups are indebted to the Algerian strategy of so-called "people's war." Its lessons are now apparent in Iraq, too. Yet the film treats the Algiers terror campaign as a failure: Its later bombings and shootings are made to appear increasingly desperate and strategically pointless. "Wars aren't won with terrorism," says one key revolutionary. "Neither wars nor revolutions." But that depends at least in part on how the other side reacts to terror, whether the other side is France in Algeria or the United States in Iraq. Wars may not be won with terror, but they can be lost by reacting ineffectively to it.

This is where *The Battle of Algiers* is potentially most valuable and most dangerous as a point of comparison for the U.S. military. While *The Battle of Algiers* has next to nothing to say about overall French strategy in Algeria, its most obvious military lesson—that torture is an efficient countermeasure to terror—is a dangerous one in this particular instance. Aside from its moral horror, torture may not even elicit accurate information, though the film seems to suggest it is foolproof.
The French military view of torture is articulated by Col. Mathieu in the course of a series of exchanges with French journalists. As reports of torture spread, the issue becomes a scandal in France. Mathieu, however, is unavering in defense of the practice: To him it is a military necessity. Informed that Jean-Paul Sartre is condemning French tactics, for example, Mathieu responds with a question that would warm Ann Coulter's heart: "Why are the liberals always on the other side?"

At one point Mathieu challenges the hostile French reporters with a question of his own: "Should France remain in Algeria? If you answer 'yes,' you must accept all the necessary consequences." Mathieu might as well be addressing the American military and the American public. Is the United States to remain in the Middle East? If so, what are the "necessary consequences"? Do they include working with former members of the Baathist secret police, as recent news stories have suggested? Do they include the nighttime invasion of Iraqi homes and the inevitable shooting of innocent civilians?

To raise such issues is not necessarily to condemn the continued presence of troops in Iraq; there would be disastrous "necessary consequences" to an American withdrawal, too. But moral compromise, according to the film, was inherent in France's position in Algeria. The United States is not France, Iraq is not Algeria, and whatever the sources of resistance in Iraq, none is the equivalent of the FLN. But to listen to Mathieu is nevertheless to be challenged on whether moral compromise is also inherent in the American role in Iraq.

Moral compromise, finally, was also inherent in the FLN's campaign, and not only as a result of terror. Although the FLN was a group of secular revolutionaries, it frequently tried to rouse Algerians with Islamic rhetoric, mostly to appropriate the anti-French movement led by Algerian clerics for decades. And yet upon taking power, the FLN betrayed the promises they'd implicitly made to Muslims. (The Islamists engaged in the current civil war in the country represent a different, Wahhabized strain of Islam.)

So who ultimately won the Battle of Algiers?
No one. The French won the battle, but in 1962 they lost the war. French soldiers, most of whom hated the idea of torture, were tainted by the association. Algerians got rid of the French but in their place got an authoritarian regime that, before it fell, was itself guilty of torture. In the meantime, French interests maintained substantial control of the nation's resources. The revolutionary left got another regime that lost the support of a culturally suffocated and economically deprived populace. The triumphant FLN was even at war with itself; in 1965 one faction surrounded another with tanks and ousted it from power.* The people of the capital literally thought another scene was being shot for The Battle of Algiers.

Ultimately, the film evades answering its own moral challenge. It justifies its support of FLN terrorist murder over French torture by rewriting history. According to the film, terror was futile; it didn't work. What finally drove France out, it suggests, was a spontaneous explosion of popular resistance. That scenario, however, is a fantasy. What drove France out was sustained and bloody insurrection.

As a portrait of revolution and of a war of ideas, The Battle of Algiers suggests that the French went
wrong by denying they were foreigners; they treated Algeria as an extension of France. At least one lesson for the United States seems obvious: A liberal Iraqi order is going to have to develop within Iraqi terms, and only the Iraqis themselves can establish those terms.

**Correction, Aug. 28, 2003:** This article originally stated that the first part of *The Battle of Algiers* was set in 1954. In fact it was in 1956. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

**Correction, Aug. 28, 2003:** The article also noted that one faction of the FLN had ousted another in 1967; in fact the ousting occurred in 1965. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

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Interestingly, the man who was in charge of torture in Algiers, Gen. Paul Aussaresses, has recently published his immensely controversial memoirs (*The Battle of the Casbah*), and in that he offers alternative versions of several of the film's events. The most astonishing claim he makes concerns the betrayal of Ali La Pointe. Ali, writes Aussaresses, was betrayed by a comrade, Saadi Yacef. As it happens, Saadi is in the film; he plays Ali's FLN mentor. Moreover, Saadi was the film's Algerian co-producer. Aussaresses offers no evidence for his claim, and Saadi has dismissed the charge.

Charles Paul Freund is a senior editor at *Reason* magazine. He writes regularly for Beirut's *Daily Star* about cultural issues in the Middle East.

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