Square Pegs and Round Holes: The F-105 Thunderchief

After a suitably long delay, here comes a look at the fighter-bomber F-105 Thunderchief, known as the “Thud” by its air-crew. Much like the B-58 Hustler, the F-105 fell into a gap between its original intended design and what it ended up being used for. Unlike the B-58, the F-105 saw extensive use in the bombing campaigns in South and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and suffered a staggering 47% loss rate (Of 833 built, 334 were lost to enemy action, and 61 to accidents), resulting it being pulled from service towards the end of the conflict.

Originally, the F-105 was designed with the European Theater of Operations in mind: A huge supersonic low altitude fighter-bomber capable of carrying a tactical nuclear weapon into the beating heart of a hypothetical Soviet advance into the Fulda Gap. Theoretically the speed of the
beating heart of a hypothetical Soviet advance into the Fulda Gap. Theoretically the speed of the F-105 was supposed to allow it to survive entering contested airspace, deliver its payload, and return to base (as long as said base wasn’t overrun by Soviet troops or nuked into radioactive dust), but reality would likely have made it a one way trip due in part to its delivery system: the “idiot loop.”

I’m sure that you, as you’re reading this, have often wondered how aircraft can survive deploying a nuclear weapon, and there are two options. The first is to fly high enough that the time between your plane dropping the nuke and it detonating can give you enough time to get out of immediate danger, and “hopefully” not cook your eyeballs in the bargain. However, flying high meant you were exposed to both enemy air-defenses AND high flying interceptors, so the likelihood of you getting to the target area in once piece remains low. The trials and tribulations of the B-58 demonstrates the challenges faced by these kinds of designs.

The other remaining approach is to go in low and fast, hoping that you can use the terrain to mask your approach from enemy fighters, and zip past the targeting envelopes of air-defenses fast enough that they cannot track you effectively. Now, if you are moving low, and fast, surely there must be some way of ensuring that a nuclear weapon both detonates on target AND make sure that (in theory) the pilot isn’t immediately killed by the explosion. The solution, my friends, is “toss bombing,” otherwise known as the “idiot loop.”

It sounds simple, in theory. Toss the bomb high enough that you don’t have to slow down your plane enough to get targeted by local air-defenses, while lofting it to buy you time to make your getaway in one piece. However, the delivery of a tactical nuke to a high value target is tricky under ideal circumstances, let alone one where you’re executing a high-G maneuver to fling a bomb over your shoulder like a bride throwing a bouquet. Thankfully, we haven’t needed to see this execution in action.
With American intervention in Vietnam, the F-105 found itself filling a slot it was never intended to fill, going from nuclear interdiction in Central Europe to conventional bombing in a highly unconventional war. Using low-altitude dive bombing placed F-105 pilots in the sights of increasingly elaborate Vietnamese air-defenses for an extended time, and at the same time Vietnamese MiG fighters could easily outmaneuver (but not outrun!) the F-105 and their escorts. Combined with exacting and at times ridiculous rules of engagement in North Vietnam, F-105 pilots often felt they were fighting both the North Vietnamese and policymakers in DC as their sorties took them from downtown Hanoi one day, and bombing paths in the jungle to the next with little rhyme or reason.

In sum, F-105 pilots found themselves engaged in dangerous missions that were barely in the performance envelope for their aircraft. From nuclear interdiction to bombing car parks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the F-105 served gallantly as a bomb-truck, but ultimately earns the dubious honor of being the only American aircraft phased out due to combat losses.

Square Pegs and Round Holes: The B-58 Hustler

Probably one of my favorite periods of jet design is the early Cold War period. Not only was every branch trying to make sure they kept a piece of the nuclear delivery pie, resulting in the navy having subs capable of launching nuclear cruise/ballistic missiles AND carrier-launched bombers jerry-rigged to drop nuclear payloads, the Air Force controlling ballistic missile systems and strategic bombers, and the Army being left with, uh, I guess nuclear artillery that would par-boil its users, but produced some hilariously impractical designs that were forced into new roles as the strategic situation with the Soviet Union changed. My first beloved example is the B-58 Hustler.

For me, the B-58 was always this bizarre flipper-baby mach-2 strategic bomber that in many ways represented the bleeding edge of Cold War jet design, that wonderful period between 1945 and 1960 before things like computer aided design and common sense smashed the “weirdness” out of what amounted to drawings on gin soaked cocktail napkins from a bar down the street from General Dynamics. The first truly supersonic jet bomber, the B-58 was designed to fly high and
fast, avoiding Soviet fighters, and then drop up to five nuclear bombs before running for home. The reality was… less than impressive.

But, I mean, come on, look at this thing!

With its first flight in 1956, the complicated B-58 proved to be a maintenance queen, costing significantly more per flight hour than the venerable B-52 (which will likely remain in service for another few decades). Furthermore, it had a shorter range and smaller payload than the B-52, with the added benefits of having a smaller, overworked crew of three managing a notoriously difficult to handle air-frame. In other words, despite the aesthetics, the B-58 proved to be problematic compared to its sibling. The nail in the coffin proved to come from Soviet advances in air defense: Accurate, high-altitude surface-to-air-missile systems like the ones that shot down Francis Gary Powers’ U-2 spyplane the same year the B-58 entered service. With the U-2 shootdown, the B-58 was reassigned to low-level penetration strikes where its engines underperformed, resulting in its retirement from service in 1970.

Personally, my favorite story to come out of the B-58 program was the difficulties faced by engineers as they tried to design a way for the crew to eject from the craft without being immediately killed or injured by the shock. The solution was separate escape capsules that enclosed each crew member. In what I can only assume to be a fever-dream fueled by a cocktail lunch, engineers designing the capsule tested them by sticking an anesthetized bear into the capsule and ejecting them from an airborne test craft. I can only imagine the guys running the test drew straws to see who had to pull the drugged and probably furious bear out of the capsule.
For me, the B-58 program neatly encapsulates the key planning problem facing military jet design during this period: The assumption that the Soviets were years behind in air defense systems produced a series of bombers that were obsolete almost as soon as they were introduced, and were hurriedly crammed into new roles at odds with their original performance envelope. Luckily, the B-58 just wasted money and didn’t get anyone killed. Designs like the F-105 Thunderchief (article forthcoming) however put pilots in the line of fire in Vietnam doing a job for which the plane was never intended.

What Can We Learn from Early Modern Insurgencies? Part Two: “We Burned and Broke Heads Like Usual” Counter-Insurgency in Revolutionary France 1793-1799

In the popular imagination any mention of the French Revolution inevitably conjures up images of crowds storming the Bastille, innocents awaiting the guillotine, soon followed by Napoleon Bonaparte astride a wild-eyed charger dominating the Alps themselves. While certainly a romantic image, and one that has proved lucrative for playwrights and painters, the general view of the French Revolution has a marked tendency to gloss over a core conflict inherent to the very nature of successive revolutionary governments[1]: popular resistance in the countryside to the dictates of the Parisian government. In the Vendée we can see the clash of revolutionary values with the profound religiosity of the French peasantry, and the consequences of a hardline counter-insurgency policy focused on body counts over effective pacification.

The particularly intractable insurgency in the department of the Vendée has been called “perhaps the first, and certainly one of the earliest, of the modern ideological insurgencies”[2] that, while ultimately subdued, acted as a bloody dress rehearsal for counter-insurgency tactics employed, for better or for worse, in more well-publicized conflicts like Napoleon’s occupation of Spain.[3] Unlike the guerilla war in the Spanish countryside the Vendée rebellion amounted to a civil war, with all the attendant savagery amplified by the all-or-nothing ideological divide between the two belligerents. For the Republicans, the backwards priest-ridden peasants were “a people so strangely blinded and so bizarrely misled that they took up arms against the Revolution, their mother, against the security of the people, against themselves.”[4] In contrast, the insurgents viewed themselves as fighting to defend their liberties and traditions against an overbearing and distant central government that had killed their king, taken their young men to fight on the eastern frontiers (the sons of Republican officials always found exemptions), and tried to replace their parish priests with heretics who knew nothing about their daily struggles. The collision of these two competing worldviews created an atmosphere where both sides recognized the other only as traitors no longer subject to the rules of war. Furthermore, the nature of fighting in the bocage country guaranteed that any fighting would consist of short, sharp ambushes and skirmishes: la
petite guerre at its worst.

It was the tone-deafness of the representatives of the First Republic that caused the major rebellions in the west of France in the Spring of 1793, and their refusal to countenance any legitimate challenge to their sovereignty as the embodiment of la Patrie which turned swathes of the countryside into a no-mans'-land for anyone wearing the Revolutionary cockade. Adding to this sense of crisis was the collapse of the French war effort along the eastern frontier, where the Duke of Brunswick’s army positioned like a dagger at the heart of the Republic in Paris. Torn between two crises, the Republican government “trying to douse several fires at once, starved the Vendée of troops, and those they did provide were all too often ill-trained volunteers who tended to desert and to panic under fire.”[5] led by newly promoted officers selected for their political connections rather than battlefield experience. The success of the insurgent Catholic and Royal Army, therefore, was due to the inability of various levels of the local command structure to cooperate[6] and a shocking lack of supplies that created an unruly and starving command. The end result on the ground was a soldiery prone to violence against the local population, regardless if they were sympathetic to the insurgents, thus depriving Republican forces of desperately needed local intelligence.
Despite a few stunning victories against isolated Republican columns, the Vendéans were unable to solidify their position as an insurgent force. By Fall 1793 the situation in the East had stabilized, allowing the transfer of seasoned troops to the region. Crucially, with the arrival of the harvest, many peasants were obliged to desert the Royal and Catholic Army to tend to their crops, accelerating the rate of attrition for the insurgents. Soon, the insurgents found themselves beneath the critical mass necessary to maintain conventional military operations, and after a decisive clash at Cholet that isolated the Vendée insurgents from the possibility of British support, in the coming weeks would more closely resemble a camp of refugees[7] than an army on the move. By the winter of 1793-1794, General Westermann wrote to his superiors in Paris, in typically overheated rhetoric that “There is no more Vendée, citizens. […] I have crushed children under the hooves of horses, and massacred women who, these at least, will give birth to no more brigands. I do not have a single prisoner with which to reproach myself. I have exterminated everyone.”[8] While conventional military operations ended by the end of 1793, suppression of what Republicans called “brigands” would take the lives of many more civilians and belligerents.

It is worth stressing Westermann’s reference to the insurgents as “brigands” here, as it is strongly indicative of how Revolutionary authorities viewed insurgents: at once anti-revolutionary as well as anti-social, a threat not just to the Republic but to the social fabric at large, and thus exempt from protections conferred even to enemy soldiers.[9] Incessant rhetoric like this enabled horrific crimes to be perpetrated on the local citizenry with an unnerving level of innovation.[10] To carry out the Parisian government’s scorched earth policy a number of *colonnes internales* were unleashed on the rebellious region, burning farms and villages, and summarily executing suspected rebels. This rhetoric combined with the inexperience of both officers and men under
Republican arms resulted in many generals linking the progress of pacification with high body counts. The brutal treatment of civilians by Republican soldiers, instead of breaking the will of insurgents, only perpetuated a seemingly endless cycle of atrocity and counter-atrocity with no end in sight.

Dramaticized image of representative on mission Jean-Baptiste Carrier carrying out mass drownings in the Loire River at Nantes, 1793. After the fall of Robespierre, Carrier would become the boogeyman of revolutionary excess, and his trial by Thermidorian government sought to shield the remaining representatives who had signed off on the actions of Carrier and other Terrorists.

Strangely, the salvation of the region laid with moderates in Paris when they overthrew radical Jacobins who had screamed for the eradication of the Vendée in its entirety. The perpetrators of the worst excesses of the “pacification” went to the guillotine alongside most of their political masters. The Thermidorian Reaction of 27 July 1794 marked a decisive turning point in French counter-insurgency policy: The radicals led by Robespierre were replaced by moderates, just as concerned about saving their own skins from the guillotine as they were maintaining law and order in the countryside. They set about replacing the worst “Terrorist” officials in many rural departments, releasing thousands of peasants arrested originally under “generous” interpretations of the Law of Suspects, and most importantly offered a general amnesty in December 1794. In place of the ineffective colonnes infernales, newly appointed general Louis-Lazare Hoche constructed strongpoints across the rebellious departments, linked by heavy patrols that disrupted communications between various insurgent groups combined with a naval blockade to prevent foreign aid from being floated ashore. With each new line of blockhouses, he forced the rebels out of their bocage hideouts towards the coast, enacting an early form of clear-and-hold that would dominate counter-insurgency tactics in the twentieth century. Instead of eradicating the populace, Hoche systematically disarmed the region parish by parish, insisting that, in stark contrast to the sanguinary rhetoric employed by his predecessors, “the enemy is not the Vendée, the only enemy was England.” Surprisingly, Hoche went so far as to suggest that freedom of worship, the spark that had ignited the conflagration in the first place, be a central part of the final treaty between the peasant insurgents and the Republican government in February 1795. Having systematically deprived the rebels of the impetus to revolt (there were further amnesties and draft exceptions as well) as well as the physical means to do so by disarmament programs, and smothering the region with thousands of disciplined troops, Hoche broke the back of simmering insurgency in the Vendée. By taking a conciliatory approach in favor of the blood-curdling demands made by radical Republicans and their appointed generals, the exhausted populace submitted to limited Republican rule.

While popular revolts within the French Republic (and later the Empire) would flare up, none would reach the intensity of the rebellion in the Vendée. When placed into its historical context, the
rebellion itself was not an existential threat to the Republic, but taken with military setbacks against
the coalition arrayed against the First Republic and other major rebellions elsewhere, it does serve
as a valuable case study on the limitations of insurgencies in the early modern period. The region
lost up to a third of its total population during the rebellion, with most historians agreeing on
around 150,000 dead of all causes on both sides, more than the total number of Frenchmen that
had died during Napoleon’s disastrous Russian campaign. However, the “soft” approach to
counter-insurgency would linger in French domestic policy: no more mass executions, no more
demands for total annihilation of French citizens. In the aftermath of later uprisings, rebels and
suspected rebels were arrested and tried, rather than summarily executed. As a matter of
policy, extrajudicial means were to be limited as much as possible and the rule of law restored
after years of Revolutionary upheaval. By escaping the Terror, moderate Republicans hoped they
would be able to cement the legitimacy of the First Republic government in the minds of the
governed. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the experience of the Spanish under
occupation by the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte just a few years later.

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[1] In the interest of simplicity, I will refer to the various governments that ruled France following
1789 until 1804 (National Constituent Assembly, Legislative Assembly, National Assembly
[including the Committee of Public Safety], the Directory, and the Consulate, respectively) as the
First Republic.

Insurgencies*, volume 9, issue 3: 17.

[3] Reynald Secher’s *A French Genocide: The Vendée* alleges that the suppression of the revolt in
the Vendée was a forerunner to the Nazi SS, Stalin’s Gulag, and Khmer Rouge’s killing fields in its
ferocity as well as its systematic eradication of a suspect population. The larger academic
community, however, has largely discredited his findings.


[6] Even more so when deputies from the Republican government were hovering around them,
eager to root out anything resembling “moderation” in the face of an existential threat to the
Furthermore, the purging of the officer corps by radical Revolutionaries after 1789 led to the loss of personnel well versed in unconventional warfare in the Americas. Ironically, this loss of colonially experienced officers and men meant that the Vendée experience would be the milestone by which other unconventional conflicts would be judged in the French army.

[7] By this stage in the revolt, the families of the insurgents joined in with the rebel columns, as they knew they had no protection from vengeful Republican soldiers.


[10] The most famous of these excesses occurred in Nantes, where captured insurgents and priests were boarded up into barges in the Loire River, which were then sunk in order to drown the occupants. Afterwards, these barges were raised, and the next batch were loaded in and sunk ad nauseam. Accounts vary, but reliable estimates place the number drowned in Nantes between 2,800 and 4,600. Debates also occurred in the National Convention regarding the feasibility of poison gas and the placement of poisoned barrels of brandy in the region.


[12] Many of the moderates of the Thermidorian Reaction found convenient scapegoats in men like Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the man responsible for the mass drownings in Nantes.


[16] Strangely enough, military tribunals were found to be less likely to execute a defendant than their local civil counterparts, being separated from local political divides that had rendered some areas of France without effective government. See also: Howard G. Brown, *Ending the Revolution: Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon*.
The idea for this article started originally as a reaction to a particularly heated discussion in a grad class on case studies on asymmetric movements, where a colleague dismissed the utility of “historical examples.” I can only assume they meant generally older historical examples from before the 20th century, otherwise the class would have been a wasted exercise. But I use this as a microcosm for the general view within international-relations circles: history as a discipline is viewed as something to joylessly slog through before you can get to the “good stuff” of your particular sub-discipline. Naturally, as a recovering historian, I was (and still am) concerned about the tendency towards what can best be described as chronological myopia where insurgencies seem to vanish between the ancient examples of the Great Jewish Revolt and the 19th century.

From my perspective, the early modern period (rather arbitrarily described as 1452-1815) is particularly enlightening when trying to understand the mentalities underlying ideologies like the Takfiri Jihadists that make up ISIS. By keeping early-modern European examples in mind, the mindset of Jihadist terrorists become, worryingly, much less alien. Today if we imagine coming across an article in any newspaper describing the gleeful destruction of religious artifacts by religious fanatics dedicated to purging their communities of idolatry, we would assume inevitably that it is another addition to the long tally of crimes committed by Boko Haram or the Islamic State. If we turn to the beginnings of similar newspapers in the sixteenth century a contemporary reader would find the same reports as Dutch iconoclasts attacked symbols of the Catholic faith and in doing so, challenged the authority of their Spanish overlord. The dynamic interaction of religious ideology and political action proved a crucial element of the outbreak of the Dutch revolt and its ability to wage a sustained war that dragged on for eight decades. The popular rebellion evolved into a determined separatist movement in the face of overwhelming and indiscriminate
After skillful marriage alliances undertaken by the Habsburg dynasty, modern-day Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg fell under the inheritance of Charles V (r. 1519-1556), along with the dynasty’s holdings in central Europe and the Iberian peninsula. Since the fractious seventeen provinces of the Low Countries viewed Charles V as one of “their own”, the honeymoon phase of their relationship lasted surprisingly long, however as the cost of waging war against the French Valois dynasty rose and the threat of the Protestant faith loomed, taxes and other “intrusive” policies riled Dutch notables. This dual tension, of a secular authority overstepping their contractually defined limits with regards to taxation combined with action to limit heretical influence to rob Spanish authorities of political legitimacy in the eyes of their Dutch subjects.

The Low Countries occupied a sensitive spot for the Habsburg dynasty, flanked by arch-rivals France and (just across the channel) England, the region lay at the confluence of several profitable trade routes and was by far the most heavily urbanized area on the continent. Boasting more than 200 towns, with nineteen of them with a population greater than 10,000 compared to England’s three, the Low Countries bristled with both church steeples and modern fortifications. Its wealth however made it a tempting target, and the same trade routes that enriched burgher and noble alike carried insidious Calvinist influence from Geneva, Scotland, and France. With these factors in mind, the Low Countries were not just a strategic liability but placed the Spanish monarchy on the front lines of a war for salvation.

Caught in the middle of these trends lay the moderate city leadership of the Low Countries as what began as a protest regarding a feudal contract took on a religious and nationalist war spurred by unrelenting military repression. The abdication of Charles V, and the resulting elevation of his son Philip II (r. 1556-1598) to the Spanish Habsburg domain, placed a distant monarch in the unenviable position of needing to institute “innovations” in a territory far removed from his seat of power in Madrid. Having no ability to speak Dutch, no native advisors, and a decided distaste for the weather and people of the Low Countries, Philip II attempted to micromanage the affairs of the region. At each step, from the moment the first envoy left Madrid to his arrival in the Low Countries months(!) later where his half-sister Margaret ruled as his representative, Philip’s policies were undercut, misinterpreted, or outright ignored. Attempts to restructure the Catholic Church in the Low Countries to better combat the rising tide of Calvinism alienated moderate leaders, who simultaneously professed their loyalty to the Spanish monarch while protesting his meddling in their internal affairs. Dismissed as “beggars” by one of Margaret’s advisors, they embraced the title and doubled down on their earnest professions of loyalty to Philip II and (with no small amount of tension) their “contempt for Catholic religious practice.” While they managed to win a reprieve from the most repressive of Philip’s decrees due in part to the paucity of available Spanish troops, these “beggars” gradually found themselves forced into becoming the party of rebellion by the outbreak of popular demonstrations.

The weakening of the inquisition in the Low Countries brought a surge of returning Calvinist refugees and reinvigorated the “hedge preachers” throughout the countryside. Combined with a series of crop failures, this overheated atmosphere of religious fervor exploded in 1566-1567 in a fury of iconoclasm. Calvinists, convinced that the statues, stained glass, and elaborate trappings of high Renaissance Catholicism presented an immediate danger to their salvation descended on churches throughout the Low Countries. The iconoclastic storm that broke across the Low Countries was an entirely unintended side-effect of the Beggars’ protests,
fearing the “violence, disobedience, revolt, and disrespect for law and property.”[9] As iconoclasts chiseled images of the Last Judgment off of church walls they also committed an act of political protest by attacking Catholic churches in a land ruled by a most Catholic king; they struck not just at idolatry but at the authority of the Spanish monarchy itself.[10] By protesting Spanish interference in Low Country affairs the Beggars had set the stage, albeit unintentionally, for the incidences of iconoclasm, as well as the Spanish response.[11]

Before news of the mayhem of the summer of 1566 arrived in Madrid in September, Philip’s eyes were riveted on the war against the Turks in the Mediterranean. After the initial shock which rendered Philip bedbound for days wore off, he dispatched the Duke of Alba[12] with 10,000 troops and full authority to restore order and true religion. This conflation of heresy and rebellion against secular authority rendered toleration an impossibility, as negotiating with heretics who had destroyed holy relics not only sapped the authority of the state but put the salvation of the kingdom at stake.[13] Not only were the troops billeted in cities that were iconoclast centers, Alba instituted a “Council of Troubles” (memorialized by Dutch patriots as the “Council of Blood”) to prosecute suspected rebels and ensure means of funding the entire expedition.[14]

With 12,000 trials, 9,000 condemnations, and 1,000 executions, the overwhelming show of force ended the first revolt, but acted as the first step on driving together the disparate provinces of the Low Countries into a cohesive nation-state known as the United Provinces. By executing prominent (and outwardly loyal) Beggar nobles Alba created martyrs, by dismantling local governments and by levying new taxes he alienated moderates and appeared to act as a tyrant.[15] For Alba’s fury, the Beggars were indistinguishable from the iconoclasts, and the two camps were driven together and soon became inseparable. The hard line advocated by Alba held an even sharper edge when the troops stationed in the Low Countries had their payment postponed repeatedly, and took to extracting their pay directly from the inhabitants of the cities upon whom they were billeted. In doing so, they simultaneously hamstrung Philip’s war efforts and fueled the ardor of rebels.[16] The nature of sixteenth century siege warfare alone drove Alba to demand the submission of the cities before restoring their property and liberty.
brutality on both sides, and the cost of maintaining the war effort in the Low Countries drained the Spanish treasury while reinforcing a sense of nationalism amongst the provinces of the region.

As Alba’s war effort dragged on, and Spanish resources distracted with fighting in the Mediterranean, the term “to put a pike in Flanders” became synonymous with an impossibly expensive task. Despite bankruptcy, a peace could not be honorably sought out due to the religious question, as “Spain still refused to tolerate Protestantism in a reconciled Netherlands state, and the Dutch rebels would not recognize the king’s authority again without it.”[18] By this stage, a military victory was no longer possible in the heavily fortified Low Countries, and a negotiated settlement remained a non-starter. In these circumstances, the remainder of the Dutch revolt remained a bloody stalemate until the mid-seventeenth century, with repeated interventions by French and English forces.[19] Ultimately, the fighting in the Low Countries would only end with the recognition of the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic as an independent state in 1648, with the heavily Catholic southern provinces partitioned away to remain under the Habsburgs.

The first nineteen years of the revolt between 1566 and 1585 marked the most formative period of the Dutch Revolt, as what began as a particularistic dispute regarding feudal obligations was forged into a nationalistic war of liberation through the unexpected intercession of radical Calvinists. These Calvinist insurgents, acting outside the power of even local officials, provoked an overwhelming military response from a deeply religious monarch, whose political authority was steeped in the sacred, and was thus unable to differentiate between rebels and heretics. By dispatching men like the Duke of Alba, Philip’s determination to reclaim the Low Countries for the one true faith alienated loyalists and drove together the fractured polities of the Netherlands, and ultimately created a novel political system: the Dutch Republic.

References


[2] The marriage politics of the Habsburgs would result in the intense downward spiral of their Spanish inheritance. Surprising no one, three generations of uncles marrying their nieces produced offspring decidedly unfit to rule.

[3] For an idea of the extent of his holdings, aside from his office of Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, his demesne included four kingships, one archdukedom (Austria), six dukedoms, and nine counties. His abdication in 1555 in favor of his brother (who took the German Habsburg lands) and son (who took the Spanish domains) marked a sea change in Low Country policies.


The selection of officials to fill these new bishoprics was made in Spain, depriving local officials the opportunity to expand their network of clients and, to put it more bluntly, wet their beaks. Mackenney, *Sixteenth Century Europe*, 300-301.


Fittingly enough, these refugees were “radicalized” in France and Geneva, and returned to the Low Countries armed to the teeth with theological justifications for resistance and revolt.


In some cases, iconoclasts visited the same tortures upon statues that Catholic authorities had inflicted on Calvinist martyrs.

One of the great ironies of the Beggars lay in the fates of some of its most prominent members: The Duke of Egmont, often included in the hagiography of Dutch Republican martyrs, was actively prosecuting (and executing) iconoclasts up until his arrest and execution by Philip II for aiding iconoclasts.

To give an idea of his counter-insurgency policy, Alba’s advice to his successor in 1573 stated “These troubles must be ended by force of arms without any use of pardon, mildness, negotiations or talks until everything has been flattened. That will be the right time for negotiation.” Mackenney, *Sixteenth Century Europe*, 300.


Arnade, *Beggars*, 220.

The siege, destruction, and re-taking of Antwerp alone in 1572-1574 produced enough fodder for reams of cheap broadsheets and woodcuts to be circulated throughout the Low Countries. A tragedy for one province was felt by all seventeen. Arnade, *Beggars*, 242.

Parker, *Grand Strategy of Philip II*, 140.

Parker, *Grand Strategy of Philip II*, 140-144.
To describe it as a media oriented operation would be an understatement. When the Islamic State raised a flag on the Syrian-Turkish border near Kobane it represented a propaganda coup for ISIS, a clear message of dominance to Syrian refugees just across the border in Turkey. From a tactical standpoint, it was a non-issue, as the outpost consisted of a handful of fighters with small arms around a makeshift flagpole, but on October 23, 2014 the USAF responded with an overwhelming show of force, obliterating the outpost with thousands of pounds of bombs to cheers on the Turkish side of the border.[1] This spectacular overkill resonated with Western audiences[2]: air strikes (referred to as kinetic action) could allow the US to attack ISIS without direct involvement of ground troops. This belief in the decisiveness of air strikes have largely overshadowed the equally vital elements of air power, those of surveillance and mobility. Playing the long-game in counterinsurgency is significantly more important than weekly highlight reels of air strikes, but runs at odds with a political culture that expects immediate kinetic results.
The belief that kinetic airpower has the ability to cheaply and easily defeat insurgencies has a pedigree as old as airpower itself. During the period between the World Wars, British experiments with “aerial policing” in its far flung colonial holdings produced mixed results on the ground and over-heated rhetoric amongst staff officers seeking to justify the continued existence of an independent air arm. For example, in place of the old colonial policy of dispatching a punitive expedition by foot to “pacify” hostile tribes, men like Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard enacted a policy of “air control” whereby uncooperative tribes would be punished from the air by bombing attacks. For an administration as cash strapped as the War Office in the interwar years, the possibility that “within 45 minutes a full-sized village… can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five planes which offer them no real target and no opportunity for glory,”[3] seemed a tantalizing proposition, and with a £750,000 savings from the budget in Iraq, air-policing was extended to elsewhere in the British empire.[4] In reality, the ineffectiveness of air-policing taken without close cooperation with ground troops went unnoticed by most officer-academics, who opted for a rose-tinted view that justified their branch of service.

In contrast to the growing public perception of the usefulness of kinetic airpower after the Second World War, the Royal Air Force’s actions during the Malay Emergency (1948-1960) demonstrated the non-kinetic values of airpower in the form of air mobility, resupply, reconnaissance and psychological operations all in cooperation with ground forces.[5] According to one RAF officer, non-kinetic airpower tasks “combined to multiply the number of troops and police deployed on productive jungle patrols by a factor of not less than four.”[6] While less cathartic than videos of bombing runs, the employment of airpower as a force multiplier to isolate insurgents from the general population and rob them of initiative. Combined with a patient political program, the British were able to neutralize Communist forces on the Malay peninsula and produce what is widely regarded as the gold standard for counterinsurgency operations.

Public perceptions of the effectiveness of air strikes reached a fever pitch after the experiences of the 1991 Gulf War. Precision guided munitions combined with global news networks produced a culture of highlight reels of bombs being guided straight into windows from miles away. While the conventional effectiveness of precision munitions is clear, their usefulness in counterinsurgency operations is questionable. Videos of laser and GPS guided munitions striking targets in Iraq and Afghanistan are widespread, and the wider public equates these strikes with counterinsurgency, expecting immediate results.

This has leaked into American political rhetoric, as one only needs to look at how promises by former presidential candidate Ted Cruz’s promise to bomb Raqqa flat strike such a chord amongst the American electorate that for the past two decades have been conditioned to expect immediate and spectacular outcomes. Even the most hawkish politicians are loath to deploy ground troops into the Middle East, expecting the full weight of the USAF to overwhelm ISIS.[7] With this experience in mind, the B-1 strike near Kobane becomes as much an act of support to the Turkish government as it is to the American people.
But is this a useful approach? According to one French general on the USAF doctrine in Vietnam: “First, it has been confirmed once again that air power, when it is armed only with classical bombs, has not the strength that too many theorists grant it... [Moreover], the airplane needs ‘paying’ objectives which guerrilla warfare hardly affords.” These objectives do not just “pay” in the military sense, but in the public’s perception of the strike as well. Splashy operations like the Kobane strike demonstrate as explicitly as possible to the greater public that the government is taking the fight to ISIS in an effective way, but may lead to a lack of appreciation for airpower’s non-kinetic effects. Simply the presence of aircraft can significantly hamper insurgent activities with the threat of observation and retaliation, and the employment of unmanned drones can provide nearly 24/7 areas of observation. In essence, the unglamorous work in the air when undertaken with proper support on the ground, prove to be a decisive element in counterinsurgency action.

In sum, the deployment of kinetic force can be a double edged sword, it can act as a tool to demonstrate the potency of a government fighting an insurgency to its domestic base on one hand, and fostering the politically difficult expectation of immediate victory on the other. This can form a post-modern normative gap, where the public perception of what is being done to fight a group like ISIS is one of ineffectiveness and demands actions counter to the basic precepts of counter-insurgency operations. In other words, shows of force by the US military can simultaneously demonstrate its potency and its weaknesses. Experience has shown that even with an overwhelming air presence, if the political and civil elements of a counterinsurgency effort are not there, the military effort is a castle built on sand. A cultural shift, not just within the USAF but with the expectations of a country combating insurgencies needs to realign with reality.

[1] It should be no coincidence that the incident was caught on a high definition video camera and posted online later that day.

[2] Note, considering the scope of this paper, the term “public” is largely intended to represent the general political rhetoric around the issue of ISIS, and is largely impressionistic.


Bibliography


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“Here We Drown Algerians” Counter-Insurgency and the Pieds-Noirs in Algeria, 1954-1962
For more than six decades the Algerian War of Independence served as a case study in how to achieve military success against an insurgent nationalist movement while still losing the larger political war. The eight-year war broke the back of the Fourth Republic and very nearly resulted in paratroopers launching a coup d’État against a government they felt had abandoned them. Ultimately the political cost of maintaining control in Algeria proved too steep to the French Republic despite very nearly annihilating the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (Henceforth FLN) as a coherent fighting force. A key element in this failure to secure Algeria lay in interference by the white settler population: the pieds-noirs. Numbering roughly one million alongside eight and a half million Muslims, the pieds-noirs placed constant pressure on the French government to dedicate more resources to “pacify” the local population on one hand, and actively antagonized native Muslims on the other. In doing so the white settler population introduced a brutal racial conflict that undermined every aspect of attempts by French authorities to reassert control in the face of a nationalist insurgency fueled by religious fervor and a century of resentment. As a result, the French military found its freedom of action steadily limited by mutual antagonisms between native Muslims and settlers, often forced into decisions that alienated both and guaranteed a cycle of ever increasing violence.[1]

In many ways Algeria occupies a curious position in the history of wars of decolonization. First, the presence of a very large settler population consisting of roughly 10-15% of the total population (Kenya and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe’s white population measured significantly less) dramatically altered the locus of political power in the country, and it provided a particularly inviting target for the FLN. This population, outnumbered in hostile territory clamored for more troops and more repressive measures to guarantee their security. Second, Algeria was considered a fundamental part of metropole France, not just an overseas possession like French Indochina or even elsewhere in French Africa. “Ici, c’est la France!” was a particularly common refrain amongst the pieds-noirs, and in the wake of the débâcle at Dien Bien Phu, the French military was especially determined to not let Algeria fall to nationalist rebels.[2] These two factors guaranteed that the French could not afford to let Algeria go peacefully in the same manner as its other colonial holdings, and forced the military to balance precariously the demands of settlers for security, the demands of native Algerians for self-determination, and the expectations of mainland French for an honorable exit.[3]

Immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War a riot against European settlers in the town of Sétif spread across Algeria like a wild brushfire as Muslims attacked settler-owned businesses and government functionaries, leaving a hundred Europeans dead. This outburst, fueled by post-war deprivation, was reported in lurid detail amongst the white population who then set out on the bloody work of repression and revenge.[4] In response to rumors of a general Muslim uprising, settlers in Guelma struck first, massacring 1,500 Muslims in the city own their own initiative.[5] With the direct assistance of the French military, thousands more were killed in
summary executions and naval and aerial bombardments of suspect villages. Here, in the first uprisings connected to Algerian nationalism, we can find the general pattern that will dominate the remainder of the conflict. A terrorist attack by Algerian nationalists (later the FLN) followed up by extensive reprisals by both white settlers and the French military that further alienate the remaining Algerian population from the French cause. For many Muslims, the events of the summer of 1945 were events which “each of them felt… that some sort of armed uprising would sooner or later become necessary.”

The uprisings at Sétif and elsewhere presented an existential threat to the white settlers as many found themselves under siege by people they had employed for years. In this way, the repression following Sétif reflects the interplay of two different dynamics, a French state eager to reassert its control over a significant portion of its territory and a white settler population terrified at the prospect of losing their position of supremacy in Algerian society. For the pieds-noirs, the aftermath bolstered their determination to refuse any reform that ran the risk of placing Muslims on an equal footing, as it would inevitably lead to nationalist rule and their annihilation. The French military, as a result of settler political lobbying, was obliged to place the restoration of order above and beyond any political or economic reform. Ironically, their intransigence made full-scale conflict inevitable in the following decade.

The repression following the uprisings in the summer of 1945 largely subdued the fragmented Algerian nationalist movement for the better part of a decade, however the root of the issue remained unresolved as Algerians continued to live in crushing poverty despite the post-war economic boom in France. This environment of resentment and deprivation provided fertile ground for the FLN, which was emerging slowly as the preeminent nationalist movement amongst Algerians. The FLN took the experience of Sétif to heart, acknowledging that as a tiny vanguard they could not go toe-to-toe with even isolated French military forces, and instead concentrated their efforts on the populations most crucial to the French effort: white settlers and moderate Muslims loyal to the French regime. By attacking pieds-noirs, the FLN guaranteed an outsized military (and in many cases, backed up by rioting settlers) response that inevitably caught other Muslims in the crossfire, driving more into the ranks of the FLN. When the FLN attacked Muslims cooperating with the French administration, not only did they destroy potential vectors of intelligence, they eliminated political moderates who could seeking a democratic solution to the Algerian War. These ever elusive interlocuteurs valables with whom the French pinned their hopes on to negotiate an honorable peace by cutting out the FLN vanished from the scene. Caught between two fires, they were killed by the FLN or by settler vigilantes.

In August 1955 the FLN launched another offensive targeting white settlers across northern Algeria referred to as the Philippeville Massacres. This offensive represented a significant step up from the All Saints’ Day rising the previous November, as more than a hundred were killed, often in brutal face-to-face fashion. According to the FLN, the French response resulted in 12,000 Algerians were executed by French authorities. For many, this marked the end of the “low-intensity” period of the conflict, and transformed it into an open war. For the FLN the attacks proved to be a massive psychological victory. Not only was the formula of baiting the French into bloody reprisals successful, it internationalized the conflict by making the FLN the only genuinely popular Algerian nationalist movement. Moderate Muslims in the Algerian Assembly condemned the blind repression, and ultimately resigned en-masse, rendering the Assembly as a white settler mouthpiece and robbing it of any political legitimacy in the eyes of native Algerians. The “third way” of negotiating a path between settlers and Algerian nationalists was well and truly blockaded.

As the FLN concentrated its efforts in Algiers, a stronghold of white settler power, they directly...
attacked civilian targets from January to March 1957. For one FLN operative “a bomb causing the death of ten people and wounding fifty others is the equivalent on a psychological level to the loss of a French battalion” entirely justified their efforts.[15] The responsibility of policing the city fell into the hands of hardened French paratroopers, who all too eagerly took the same tactics they learned in fighting FLN guerillas in the interior and placed them in an urban context. Through the extensive use of terror backed by extrajudicial torture, the paras were able to penetrate the FLN’s networks in Algiers and forced them to implode in a welter of self-inflicted purges.[16] In a way the experiences of 1957 acted as a laboratory for larger offensives in 1959-1960 that proved immensely profitable for the French military. As in the “Battle of Algiers,” however, the means by which the military victory was achieved had profound political costs. Elsewhere the paras had hit their stride turning FLN agents and embarking on a program of forced resettlement to, in keeping with Mao’s dictum, separate the water from the fish. The paras felt they were on the verge of victory, but in reality, they had badly miscalculated the political reality. Despite the near-annihilation of the FLN they were no longer the miniscule vanguard of Algerian nationalism. Their two-pronged approach of instigating French reprisals to drive others into their ranks, and murdering those who tried to remain neutral, had won the population over to their side.[17]

Despite military successes the pieds-noirs’ aspirations of a French-Algeria were not shared by metropolitan France, who as time went on sought an honorable exit from the war. When Charles de Gaulle, after returning to power on a wave of support from conservatives in France as well as the pieds-noirs’ political lobby, proposed “self-determination.” For many, Algeria was as close to “pacified” as it ever was going to get, and that the time was right for the long-promised elections to determine Algeria’s future.[18] For the pieds-noirs it embodied the most grievous betrayal of their hopes and dreams. Fearing Algerian reprisal, and sensing the shaky loyalties of some para regiments, a number of settlers established their own militias such as the Front National Français.[19] With their roots in the counter-terrorist reprisals during the Battle for Algiers the FNF embarked on a campaign not just against FLN operatives but against Frenchmen as well. For these “ultras,” no negotiation with the perpetrators of the bombing of the Casino was possible. Instead, they faced the choice of either the “suitcase or the coffin,” believing that “to yield to majority rule would inevitably mean leaving Algeria either as corpses or refugees.”[20] An abortive “week of barricades” in January 1960 was only a dress rehearsal for a officers’ putsch that temporarily gained control of northern Algeria and shook de Gaulle’s government to the core. In a “war of transistors”, de Gaulle appealed directly to the soldiers in Algeria to remain loyal to the government, and only 25,000 out of the 400,000 soldiers stationed in Algeria defected to the rebel officers.[21] While the putsch was a failure, it clearly demonstrates the multi-layered tensions that were driving a wedge between metropolitan France and the pieds-noirs in Algeria.

Despite the failure of the putsch, which rather fancifully envisioned paratroopers dropping around
Paris to the support of the remaining French army, the “ultras” continued operations. Reorganized as the Organization de l’Armée Secrète (OAS) their goal was to render untenable the ceasefire negotiations underway at Evian and “regain Muslim confidence from the FLN, and carry along the Europeans . . . to seize power in Algeria, in order to assume it one day in France.”[22] What it failed to realize was that after fifteen years of violent repression spearheaded by pieds-noirs, Muslims had no confidence to gain let alone reestablish the status-quo ante of white settler supremacy. Not content to act only in Algeria the OAS embarked on a bombing campaign in mainland France on a scale to which the FLN could only aspire.[23] As murder squads roamed Algiers machine-gunning cafés indiscriminately, a four-year-old child was badly disfigured by glass from a bomb set off by OAS in Paris. “Although the atrocity against Delphine would have been regarded as little more than an everyday event in contemporary Algiers… it provoked a wave of horror and condemnation of the OAS.”[24] The OAS had gone too far, and soon the French government employed the same tactics against them that were perfected against the FLN, that of torture, turncoats, and imprisonment. Their goal of rendering Algeria ungovernable had backfired and in fact guaranteed that their fellow settlers would have to make their final choice following Algerian independence: the suitcase or the coffin.

In sum, the French experience in Algeria is particularly unique in the larger framework of wars of decolonization. Unlike many Algeria possessed a large settler population that was extremely reactive to any reforms that may have rendered a revolutionary war unnecessary. Furthermore, upon the outbreak of hostilities, the outsized power the settler population had over metropole France demanded harsh measures against rebels. When compounded with the bitterness of many professional soldiers in the French Army over their “betrayal” in Indochina, an environment of alienation and suspicion permeated both the settler community and some levels of the French military. As a result, in spite of eliminating the FLN as a conventional fighting force, the concept of Algerian nationalism could not be stomped out, and ultimately overwhelmed efforts to stem the tide by force.

[2] This was further complicated by the large number of officers in the French military with pied-noir roots, such as Marshal Alphonse Juin, who found himself cashiered after the abortive putsch in 1962.
[6] As per Horne, the total count will probably never be known, a report following the uprising “placed the figure at between 1,020 and 1,300; while Cairo radio immediately claimed that 45,000 had been killed.” Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 27.
[8] Evans, *Algeria*, 94. One of the major obstacles was the Algerian Assembly, which needed to approve legislation from mainland France, and was dominated by white settler representatives. As a result, repeated attempts to pass reform proposals by successive governments of the Fourth Republic were rejected by procedural jiggery pokery.
[9] Evans, *Algeria*, 112. By 1954 roughly one million Muslims were underemployed with a further two million totally unemployed. Pied-noir obstructionism, however, isn’t solely to blame, as the first half of the 1950s the French government was distracted by other international affairs in Indochina, as well as within NATO.

[10] Inevitably, as reservists from mainland France were called in to Algeria, the pattern of FLN ambush and vicious reprisal by young, scared men who knew nothing of Algerian culture, created its own internal logic.


[12] Evans, *Algeria*, 140-141. One of the victims, notably, was the leader of a more moderate faction of Algerian nationalists.

[13] In many cases, Algerians were lynched by white settlers while the army stood on.


[23] It reached such a slang term developed to describe the employment of plastic explosives to destroy a building: *plastiqué*

RAF Pilot with Monkey, Libya 1942

After a bit of cajoling from friends/colleagues/people-who-probably-want-me-to-fail-as-publicly-as-possible, I’ve decided to take the step of starting a blog as a repository for my writing. This will most likely include anything ranging from older academic papers to responses to current issues in national security and the military, with a scattering of my favorite examples of weird Cold War era technology. As always, the views represented here are my own and in no way, shape, or form should be construed as anything resembling the official position of anyone.

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