The French Army and the Algerian War, 1954-62
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In dealing with the events in Algeria of 1954 to 1962, there is one problem of straightforward English semantics: just as Americans and British differ when they begin to discuss 1776, what the French call 'The Algerian War', the Algerians know simply as 'The Revolution'. It will he referred to here as 'The Algerian War'. for simplicity's sake. One further complexity is that during this war (which lasted almost twice as long as the First World War) there were in fact at least seven separate wars, revolutions or struggles, going on upon different planes at the same time. There were, for instance:

(1) The fighting war itself

(2) The political war for the 'middle-ground' in Algeria

(3) A civil war between Algerians

(4) A revolutionary struggle within the leadership of the Algerian Libération

(5) A struggle between the French Army in Algeria and the Government in Paris, leading in the first place to the overthrow of the Fourth Republic and the advent of de Gaulle, and later to a full-scale revolt against tic Gaulle himself

(6) A struggle between the Pied Noir settlers of Algeria and France. culminating in open warfare under the aegis of the OAS: Organisation Armée Secrete and finally, and perhaps most decisive:

(7) The external war fought on the platforms of the outside world.

It is the first of these I he lighting war in its military aspects that will be dealt with here although, of course, it is impossible to consider it, in isolation from the other six. This paper will start by tracing the main chronological events of the war; then go back to sketching out more fully various of the mole important factors of particular military interest: and end by putting forward an analysis of some of the lessons left by the Algerian experience.

The French involvement in Algeria goes back to 1830, when landings were carried out near Algiers based closely on plans drawn up by Napoleon a generation earlier;
These were not deviated from very substantially by the Allied landings in 1942.) The motives for the occupation were partly a settlement of commercial debts, partly a redress of national frustration left over from the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire, but also largely that age-old panacea -- to provide a distraction from discontent at home by pursuit of glory abroad. (Needless to say, the reigning monarch, Charles X, fell anyway.) Pacification and colonisation absorbed much of French energies for the next half-century. In 1848, the Second Republic took the historical and fateful step of declaring this vast territory an integral part of France. This made it unique among all French overseas territories (and, for that matter, unique among those of any other Colonial power); and thus every government from 1954 onwards, from Mendès-France to de Gaulle, was lumbered with the albatross round its neck of Algeria being not a colony but an inseparable part of France herself -- like Languedoc or the Dordogne.

In both World Wars, Algerian tirailleurs fought with great bravery, and loyalty, alongside French metropolitan troops. Then in 1945, no sooner had Japan capitulated, than a war-weary and economically rickety France found herself plunged into a sale guerre to protect her empire in Indo-China. Between 1939 and 1962, France was to enjoy no more than a few weeks of true peace. In May 1954, she lost the decisive military battle of the Indo-China War at Dien-Bien-Phu.

Prime Minister Mendès-France had barely extricated the country from Indo-China, when on 1 November 1954 a handful of Algerians (some of whom had served and seen France humiliated at Dien-Bien-Phu) launched a revolt across the breadth of Algeria. Armed with almost visibly slender means, these courageous rebel nationalists called themselves Front de Libération Nationale.

The numerous contributory causes of the FLN revolt can only he dealt with in outline here, but they will not be altogether unfamiliar to anyone who has studied more contemporary events in Southern Africa: predominantly, a minority of approximately one million Europeans, nicknamed Pieds Noirs — perhaps because metropolitan Frenchmen scornfully considered their feet to have been burned black by too much sun — who were surrounded by a sea of nine million Moslem indigenous Algerians. Demographically, the Algerian birthrate was exploding; economically, the gulf between Algerian and Pied Noir expectations was widening, despite considerable French infusions of industry, capital and know-how. Politically, the Algerians had little more real power than the Rhodesian blacks under Ian Smith; reforms initiated by
Paris had been the old story of too-little-too-late, and usually torpedoed by the powerful, and conservative, Pied Noir lobby. On the other hand, when the revolt began it was supported by only a minority of Algerians.

The French reaction to the revolt, from extreme left to extreme right, was typified by Premier Mendes-France who, though he had got France out of Indo-China, declared of Algeria: "c'est la France!" His Minister of the Interior, a good Socialist called Francois Mitterand, took an even more hawkish line: "the only possible declaration is war for Algeria is France ... " Thus henceforth every French government had its hands tied. Successive Governors-General, like Jacques Soustelle and Robert Lacoste, tried to introduce reforms; vast sums were spent on creating new jobs and housing; but, ahead of reform, each succeeding French Government set as its number one priority first to win the fighting war. Meanwhile, for the Algerians, none of these grandiose reform programmes could quite compete with the magic amulet of freedom and total independence which the FLN offered from the first in their statement of principles — principles to which they were to adhere with quite remarkable fidelity and rigidity right the way through to 1962.

In the first two years, the war looked unwinnable by either side. The FLN had inadequate equipment to fight more than a series of guerrilla actions, devoting more energy to killing Moslem dignitaries and village policemen and terrorising the non-committed Algerians into joining their side, than to confrontations with the French Army. On the other hand, this huge rugged country of savage mountains, forests and deserts, honeycombed with ravines and caves, provided the ideal territory for fighting a technically superior, modern NATO-style army. The French had not enough troops to be everywhere in this vast territory, now the world's tenth largest nation in area. So in 1956 that other good French Socialist, Guy Mollet, took the dramatic step of first sending half a million conscripts and recalled reservists to Algeria. The most notable effect this had was to spread awareness about the war to Metropolitan France; much as the escalation of the USA's commitment in Vietnam did in America.

Meanwhile the FLN, with consummate skill in canvassing support within the Afro-Asian 'Third World', in the USA and in the United Nations, had gone far to internationalise what France determinedly maintained was a private, internal dispute. In the Autumn of 1956, also under Guy Mollet, the disastrous Suez operation took place. If Britain did not quite know what her aims at Suez were, Mollet certainly did; it was to crush the Algerian revolt by toppling Nasser — whom the
French (exaggeratedly) conceived to be its principal external prop. Almost simultaneously, by a daring coup-de-main in mid-air, of somewhat dubious legality, French intelligence hijacked Ben Bella and the entire external leadership of the FLN. But if the abortion of the first episode served only to weaken France's hand in Algeria, the second concentrated the world's gaze still more fixedly on the war, while the presence of Ben Bella and his five fellow prisoners was to prove a constant embarrassment to French policy over the next five-and-ahalf years.

In 1957, through resorting to the toughest measures (about which more will be said later) General Massu's elite paras won what looked for the first time like a clear-cut military victory in the famous 'Battle of Algiers'. By the end of the year Massu's forces had captured Yacef, the rebel leader in Algiers, broken up his whole network and severely disrupted the FLN command as a whole.

Meanwhile, on the political level, plane (2), that great Pied Noir writer, Albert Camus, had tried in vain to achieve a 'civil truce', but violence escalating into more violence only seemed to ensure the triumph of extremism on either side — with the steady erosion of the Third Force moderates who might one day have formed an anchor for a compromise peace settlement — a depressingly familiar pattern of our times.

In Metropolitan France, the country was reeling from one political crisis to another economic crisis. Governments came and went with dismal regularity, incapable of exerting any influence over events. Everybody was by now fed up with this 'absurd ballet' as de Gaulle scathingly dubbed the gyrations of the Fourth Republic. In April 1958, Premier Gaillard fell, leaving France without a government in the most dangerous power vacuum since 1945. The Algerian War had already toppled five governments, and was about to bring down the Fourth Republic itself. In May the FLN executed three French soldiers; this was the last straw for the hard-tried French Army in Algeria. As de Gaulle says of it:

Taking upon itself not only the burden of the fighting, but also the severity, and sometimes the beastliness, of the repression, haunted by fear of another Indo-China ... the army, more than any other body, felt a growing resentment against a political system which was the embodiment of irresolution."

On 13 May, after emotional scenes in Algiers during which Pied Noir
ultras, led by an ex-paratrooper called Pierre Lagaillarde, seized and sacked the Government-General building in Algiers, an army-controlled `Committee of Public Safety' took over there, under the leadership of the Commander in Chief, General Raoul Salan. After weeks of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy, and a great deal of astute 'playing hard to get', plus a threat by the paras to drop on France from Algiers (a scenario alarmingly reminiscent of how Franco detonated the Spanish Civil War), de Gaulle came off his high perch and, at the ripe age of 67, agreed to form a government — but on his terms. The Fifth Republic, and the Gaullist era had begun.

De Gaulle's advent, when he came to Algeria and declared 'je vous ai compris' (in fact meaning something far less complimentary to the Pieds Noirs than they would wish to interpret!), was greeted with wildest euphoria, by Moslems as well as Europeans. All assumed that his magic presence would somehow bring peace. But it soon became tragically apparent that, beneath all the grandiloquence, de Gaulle had no more of an instant solution to the Algerian War than any of his predecessors. As he busied himself in purging the Augean Stables in France, crucial months were allowed to pass while he visibly proceeded to do nothing about Algeria. Much priceless impetus with the Moslem community was sadly allowed to be squandered. Then in October 1958 he offered the FLN a magnanimously phrased truce offer of a 'Peace of the Brave'. But it showed the soldier's fundamental miscomprehension of the political and revolutionary nature of the revolt. Consequently, the FLN leadership rejected de Gaulle's overture in the most rebuffing terms, and riposted with the establishment of their first Provisional Government, the Gouvernement Provision de la République Algérienne (GPRA).

The 'Third Force' Moslems who had so rapturously greeted de Gaulle's advent now increasingly regarded this rebuff as a fatal sign of weakness. The Pied Noir 'ultras', like Lagaillarde, were no less disillusioned. The Army began to distrust de Gaulle, as speaking with too many different voices; one French observer in 1960 said he was like Molière's Don Juan who had 'promised marriage to five or six women and absolutely had to avoid being pinned down by any of them!4 But, in de Gaulle's defence, he felt he could never quite reveal the whole truth of what he planned to his beloved army, because if he did, it might revolt and replace him with a military junta, destroying all his works, as easily as it felt it had brought him to power. This was to be the source of one of the greatest tragedies in de Gaulle's long career.

Whereas to the French Army and the Pieds Noirs Algeria was every
thing, to de Gaulle it was only one factor in his overall ambition: the resurrection of the greater glory of France — and it was on no account to get in the way of that. On 16 September 1959, he made a key-note speech, offering the Algerians, in those fateful words, ‘self-determination’. What he seems to have hoped for was that, through a referendum, they would opt for some kind of limited autonomy in ‘association’ with France, But to the Army and the Pied Noires it spelled the end of Algérie Française — and this was betrayal. More than ever before the Army was convinced that, under the brilliant General Challe, it was winning the war militarily; less than ever could it see that, in the world outside Algeria, it was being lost politically and diplomatically. In January 1960, the sixth year of the war, the loyal but bombastic General Massu remarked casually to a German journalist that the Army might have made a mistake in bringing back de Gaulle. In a cold rage, de Gaulle sacked Massu. The ‘Ultras’ had been waiting for just such a detonator, and Algiers exploded. Lagaillarde and a rabble-rousing restaurateur called Jo Ortiz set up an armed and barricaded camp in the centre of the city. When the wretched gendarmes were sent in to move them on, they were met with a withering hail of fire, killing 14 and wounding 123. A grim landmark had been reached; for the first time; Frenchmen were killing Frenchmen. Worst still, some of the elite para units showed every sign of fraternising with the ‘Ultras’ behind the barricades. Once again, it looked as if France might be facing civil war. Then de Gaulle made one of the greatest speeches of his life; the barricades melted away. But after the irremediable splits that ‘Barricades Week’ had revealed in the French camp, it was clear to him if to no one else that he had to negotiate. In June 1960, for the first time, the FLN came to the negotiating table, at Melun; but the talks ended in a frosty impasse. De Gaulle had gained nothing, while the FLN ‘hardliners’ — now headed by the future President, Boumedienne, had won a great moral victory by proving to the world that France was ready to talk. They now applied further pressure on de Gaulle by flirting with Russia and China for military aid.

In December 1960, de Gaulle visited a riot-torn Algeria, in wretched contrast to the euphoric days of two-and-a-half years previously. He narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by a Pied Noir. In a powerful backlash, the Moslems appeared on the streets brandishing for the first time in public the green and white banners of the FLN, in their hundreds of thousands, in a turnout that surprised even the FLN. Then, on 21 April, under four senior generals, the Army of Algeria raised a
standard of revolt and seized power in Algiers. One of the rebel generals was Satan, the former Commander in Chief who had first opened the door to de Gaulle in May 1958, but of far weightier significance was the leader of the 'Generals' Putsch' — Maurice Challe.

Chalk was one of the most esteemed and honourable officers in the French Army — or, for that matter, any army. He had come closer than any other Commander in Chief to winning the war on the ground; but in so doing he had in the name of de Gaulle — given undertakings to the Harkis, or loyal Muslim levies, that France would never abandon them. Chief among his other motives for revolt, Chalk felt that the Harkis had been traduced (and indeed, in the 'night of long knives' that followed the war their fate was to be a particularly atrocious one) and that honour left him no alternative. Poorly prepared, the revolt lasted four days; but during that time France edged closer to the brink of Civil War than ever before. Ancient tanks tottered out onto the Concorde, and momentarily Parisians expected to see the paras fluttering down from the skies. But once again a superbly timed broadcast by de Gaulle won the day. In the mass, the servicemen and conscripts heeded de Gaulle, rather than their rebel officers, in what became known as the 'Baffle of the Transistors'.

However, in spite of De Gaulle's speech, the French Army, 'his army', was badly split — the effects of which can still be seen today. Many of its finest officers had their careers ruined. Challe, expecting the death sentence, spent many years in prison. His was a personal tragedy that should perhaps be pondered by the leaders of other modern democratic armies should they ever come to impose too great a burden upon the conscience of their generals. As for Salan, he went underground as titular leader of the Organisation Armée Secrète which, for the remaining months of the war waged a murderous and desperate rearguard action — no longer in the now hopeless cause of Algérie Française, but in the wild hope of somehow creating a Pied Noir dominated Algeria, independent of the mother country. When that hope vanished, they launched a campaign of scorched-earth destruction.

With his bargaining hand gravely weakened by the army revolt, and the need to end the war exacerbated by the mounting atrocities of the OAS, de Gaulle now started to negotiate from a position of total weakness; and with what some considered almost indecent haste. Like the peeling of an onion, de Gaulle was forced to abandon the terms he had once hoped to impose one by one; first of all any notion of 'association' with France, then his refusal to negotiate solely with the FLN — thus jettisoning the last surviving Algerian 'moderates'.
Next went the Sahara and its oil. Finally he renounced any valid guarantees for the future of the Pieds Noirs.

By its extraordinary, rigid consistency the FLN had won every point it had demanded right back at the beginning of the revolt, leaving de Gaulle shorn even of honour. On 18 March 1962, a ceasefire was signed. By July most of the one million Pieds Noirs, in scenes of unparalleled heartbreak, had left behind the homes in which between them, the OAS and the FLN made it impossible for them to remain, in a mass exodus for France or Spain. On 4 July 1962, the tri-colour was lowered in Algiers for the first time in 132 years, curiously enough to the strains of a victory march. The last French High Commissioner, Christian Fouchet, later explained that the music was indeed symbolic for it represented a great victory of the French over themselves. Not everybody would agree with that magnanimous construction. There are undoubtedly those, like former Governor-General Jacques Soustelle, who still consider the French withdrawal from Algeria to have been one of the greatest post-war defeats for the West -- along with DienBien-Phu and the USA’s abandonment of South Vietnam.

Next, certain specifically military aspects of the war will be examined in greater detail. First, and perhaps most important of all, there is the nature of the French Army itself. The army that fought in Algeria was fundamentally different in character to either the US Army in Vietnam, or the British in Malaya, Kenya, or Cyprus, and this placed its own very particular stamp on the whole of the war – and, indeed, nearly the whole future of France. It was Le Monde which once remarked that few armies in the world possess a generation of officers who have fought so much. The names of the Colonels and Generals in Algeria read like a roll of honour of French arms from the post-1940 resurgence onwards. It might also have been added that few modern armies had suffered such a series of dreadfully humiliating defeats; from Sedan in 1940, to Dien-Bien-Phu in 1954, and later Suez in 1956 – all of which, not entirely without reason, the army ascribed more to the deviousness and incompetence of politicians than to any martial failings on its part. The units arriving in Algeria from Indo-China – notably the legendary paras – were well-versed in revolutionary warfare and represented perhaps the toughest and most efficient fighting force in the world at that date. Victories like the 'Battle of Algiers' convinced them that they could win the war – and, for deep psychological reasons based on those defeats of the past, it was a war they had to win.5 These tough regulars were, above all, men with a mission:
We want to halt the decadence of the West and the march of Communism. That is our duty, the real duty of the army. That is why we must win the war in Algeria. Indo-China taught us to see the truth.6

said Colonel Argoud, an old Indo-China hand who later typified the ringleaders in the 'Generals' Putsch' against de Gaulle in 1961, and later still was one of the Fallen Angels of the OAS. But, once again, as the Argouds and Godards and Salans saw it, the politicians would not let them win the war.

When the Algerian revolt broke out in November 1954, the French forces present could hardly have been worse equipped to combat it. They were a largely mechanised, road-bound force. As a French ethnologist remarked to an armoured colonel at the time: 'If in 1830 the French Expeditionary Force had had tanks, they wouldn't have got beyond the beach at Sidi-Ferruch!' There were no mules or horses available, and only one solitary helicopter in all Algeria. An FLN ambush would surprise a mechanised patrol, burn a vehicle or two, and kill several men; then melt into the trackless hills. Rebel intelligence always seemed to be one leap ahead of the cumbersome, weary French columns. Then the first paras arrived, followed by still more paras, men like the 'lizards' of the legendary Colonel, later General, Bigeard. The paras had the advantage of being able to move at extreme speed, into country that was hitherto almost inaccessible territory held firmly by the FLN. For a time they turned the tables. But there were never enough of them to hold ground from which they had cleared the FLN. So, as in Vietnam, the FLN would retorts at night and reterrorise the local Pied Noir – or more especially Moslem farmers.

One of the next developments on the side of the French military was to introduce the principle of 'collective responsibility', whereby when telegraph poles were felled or a local dignitary murdered, the whole Arab community would be held responsible. This had slightly unpleasant overtones from the Nazi occupation of France and, for whatever small successes it may have produced, it deeply offended primitive senses of justice and – in the opinion of more than one observer – handed the FLN one of its principal 'psychological trump cards'. Next General Beaufre, perhaps the most thinking general of his generation, gained temporary success by dividing his command into three different kinds of zones, which (in a manner similar to that adopted by the US in Vietnam later) provided for varying degrees of interdiction, culminating in the zones interdites where the army was permitted to fire on anything that moved.
This effectively denied the FLN forces access to food and supplies, but it also involved the French authorities in massive resettlement programmes of the peasants living inside the zones interdites. These, altogether numbering over a million, were moved into ‘Regroupment camps’, some of them little better than concentration camps; they were to cause an uproar from French public opinion, and undoubtedly also turned many a previously non-committed Algerian against the French. To this extent the French military defeated their own purpose.

As noted earlier, the paras came from Indo-China thoroughly steeped in the doctrines of Mao and General Giap, and they put these to good use in the methods of psychological and political warfare they introduced into Algeria. One of their most effective principles was to go for the political brain cells of the FLN, the OFA (Organisation Politico-Administrative), rather than simply hack away at its military arms. To combat FLN agitation and propaganda in the field, and to maintain the présence française in the boondocks, or the Bled as it was known, a system called the SAS, Sections Administratives Spéciales was instituted. Each of these was run by a dedicated and extremely brave young army officer, usually a captain, who would live among the rural Algerians as a combined mayor, judge, and welfare officer. Unfortunately there were never enough of the good ones to go around, and they were prime targets for the FLN terrorists. It must be said here of the French army officers in the field that, for all the allegations of brutality, many had the most honourable and altruistic motives towards the Algerians. For instance the controversial General Massu himself adopted two Muslim orphans; his wife did an immense amount of welfare work among the underprivileged; and Radio-Bigeard, the paras' own station, was not being insincere when it declared that they had not come to Algeria to defend colonialism, and that the paras really had nothing in common with the rich colons who exploited the Muslims.

It must also be noted, however, that to some extent the psychological warfare experts with their Maoist indoctrination seemed to be fighting the wrong enemy. For, although Ho and Giap and the whole Vietminh setup had been thoroughly steeped in Marxist doctrine from the earliest days, communism never had any influence over the FLN. In fact the French Communist Party often ranged itself on the other side. Furthermore, unlike the flesh and blood state on its own soil which the Vietminh inherited, the FLN was always at the disadvantage of having to build up an apparatus, literally, on sand.
We turn back now to the 'Battle of Algiers', beginning in 1956 and running throughout 1957 — a most important milestone in the military war. After finding that they were no match, out in the Bled, for the French Army with its new para formations and techniques, the FLN command tried to make a full-scale bid for supremacy in the city of Algiers. It began with a sharp increase of urban terrorism and a general strike timed to coincide with the tabling of the Algerian problem in the UN. The French gendarmerie proving quite incapable of mastering the situation, Governor-General Lacoste summoned in General Massu and his paras. It was a fateful step; among other things it meant that the army, especially the paras, would be closely involved in political matters, from which henceforward they would never quite divorce themselves. Acting with great speed and ruthlessness, the paras broke the strike, divided up the city in a system of quadrillage (which, their critics in France noted, also bore some resemblance to Sicherheitsdienst techniques in wartime Paris), and combed minutely through the hitherto impenetrable maze of the Casbah. Their brilliant use of informers and the toughest interrogation methods enabled them to build up an `organnigramme' identifying all the leaders and cells in Yacef's FLN network in Algiers. One by one these were killed or captured. By the end of 1957, the FLN had to admit its first big military defeat of the war.

But the Battle of Algiers could probably only have been won with resort to institutionalised torture — freely admitted by Massu on a large scale. The long-term result of this was that, although it may have won the battle, it probably lost the war for France through the violent and persistent reaction it aroused both in the mother country and the world at large.

Therein lies a grave warning for any country which might be tempted to employ torture as an instrument of policy; it is always a dangerously double-edged, self-destructive weapon. One distinguished French soldier has remarked that whatever torture's purpose, it is unacceptable, inadmissible; it soils the honour of the army and the country.

Just one inevitable consequence of the French Army's resort to torture, and equally — on the other side — of the appalling atrocities carried out by the FLN, was the steady erosion of any third force, any body of moderates, on either side who might one day have formed the anchor of a compromise peace settlement. Two other indirect consequences of the 'Battle of Algiers' need to be mentioned.
One is the politicisation of the paras leaders. Following Indo-China, one of the most prominent French military thinkers, General Chassin, after studying the revolutionary lessons of that war, urged the army—which, ever since the 1930s, had been essentially apolitical—to involve itself to an increasing degree of politics. After the 'Battle of Algiers', the paras became more than ever an elitist corps, and needed very little extra persuasion to take Chassin's advice. This led, in a direct line, to the May 1958 coup which brought in de Gaulle; to the fraternising episodes at the time of 'Barricades Week' in January 1960; and finally to the ultimate disaster of the 'Generals' Putsch' of April 1961, in which the pare regiments formed the hard core of dissidence—and after which this proud force was extensively broken up.

Secondly, there is the level of intelligence and special operations—at which, incidentally, the French often excelled during the war, whether it involved the assassination of German arms dealers running weapons to the FLN, or under-cover work inside the country. Experiences with double agents, or bleus, gained during the Battle of Algiers led to some of the greatest French successes of the whole war. Realising how riven the FLN command was with mutual distrust and rivalries; the French secret services played on this by the skillful introduction of double agents, traitors and forged material into their ranks. This resulted in a bloody series of Stalin-like purges within the FLN army of the interior, to a point where it was almost paralysed. It also gave rise to the one serious bid for a 'separate peace' by the most important of the six FLN commands or Wilayas' fighting inside the country. If consummated, the Si Salah episode—or 'Operation Tilsit', as it was called—might have had far-reaching results for an Algerian settlement, to the benefit of France, but it was vetoed by de Gaulle under circumstances that still retain a certain mystery.

Another factor which certainly proved one of the most successful military innovations by the French of the whole war, was the establishment of the Morice Line along both the Tunisian and Moroccan frontiers (notably the former); a kind of Maginot Line, but which, this time, did what it was supposed to do. One is reminded of how materially aided the British were in Malaya, and also Kenya, in having no 'open frontier' with which to cope. The opposite was the deadly Laos trail down along the frontiers of South Vietnam which played such a decisive role in that war against the Americans. The Morice line was an electrified, mined belt of barbed wire, backed up with radar and mobile fire-power, which lost the FLN thousands of men who had tried to get through to reinforce and supply their hard-pressed forces inside Algeria. It did effectively cut those off from the exterior.
Meanwhile, in 1959, the brilliant General Challe launched a series of the most effective counter-insurgency offensives against the isolated forces in the interior. Building up a powerful mobile reserve, he would sweep one area, leave it held by local forces to prevent the customary return of the FLN, then move on with devastating speed and power to sweep the next area. The Challe technique had never been used before and, combined with the sealing-off effects of the Morice Line, he undoubtedly came closer to winning the military war than had any other commander; this by the beginning of 1960. (It should, however, perhaps also be mentioned that, in terms of men on the ground, whereas France had lost the war in Indo-China with a ratio of 6:4, at the height of the Challe Offensive they enjoyed a superiority of the order of 16:1.)

The very success of Challe's offensive also, unhappily, helped persuade him to his tragic decision to lead the revolt against de Gaulle in 1961, realising that negotiations with the FLN were in the wind. But what Challe, straightforward soldier that he was, could not see was that although the fighting war was virtually won on the ground, it had also been lost on the diplomatic and political fronts of the outside world; in France itself, where — as during the later stages of the US-Vietnam war — protest had risen to unacceptable levels; at the UN, where France had lost most of her friends; and in the US where Senator J.F. Kennedy had led the drive to support the cause of Algerian independence. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Morice Line, Boumedienne had taken the calculated decision more or less to write off the war inside Algeria, and instead build up his troops within the safe sanctuary of Tunisia and Morocco, progressively armed by new Chinese and now Russian weapons, waiting for the decisive day. (This increasing East Bloc involvement was also a factor pressing de Gaulle towards a settlement.)

Thus, it could be said that although militarily the French seemed to have solved the problem of the 'open frontier', that had not been done politically and diplomatically; they might have succeeded in preventing the war spilling into Algeria, but what they had failed to do was to prevent it spilling outwards – into France, the Third World, the UN and the US.
Regrettably, the pessimistic conclusion that in this wicked world terrorism and extremism pays; the moderates lose. Just keep on being obdurate; don't deviate from your maximum terms, and good, moderate, democrat politicians who have to face an election every four or five years will give you what you want, sooner or later! This is perhaps a dishearteningly cynical view; it is to be hoped that some of the young soldiers of today will come to disprove it. Perhaps one of the lessons of the Algerian War particularly is the need for the military of the West to be taught to think politically in all situations, and to be in touch politically; but not to get involved politically. It is a difficult and dangerous tightrope to have to walk.