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BATTLE OF ALGIERS

Battle of the minds.

text **Anthony Kaufman**

Nearly 40 years ago, a film presaged a revolution. Today, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* is tapping into the pulse yet again.

When *The Battle of Algiers* was first shown in the early 1960s in Paris, the theater where it was showing was bombed. In one provincial town, angry viewers burst into the projection booth and destroyed the film print. Eventually, the movie was banned in France because of its depiction of cruel French military forces using torture to foil their adversaries. And later when it was released in the U.S., it became required viewing for the Black Panthers with its lessons in cell organization and guerilla warfare.

Set in Algeria in the 1950s, the film follows the rise and fall of Ali la Pointe, a leader of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). Their agenda: to combat the French occupation of Algeria. Shot in a nervy, handheld docu-style and nominated for a Best Foreign Language Oscar, *The Battle of Algiers* is a gripping account of urban warfare, from Algerians placing bombs surreptitiously in sidewalk cafes to French paratroopers invading the labyrinthine byways of the Casbah ready to shoot their Muslim enemies with impunity.

As the U.S. government continues its own battle with insurgents in Iraq and readies for a backlash of '68-style revolutionary dissent with peace marches on the anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom, *The Battle of Algiers* is reappearing in U.S. theaters as a potent reminder of the violence of our times. As a former U.S. National Security Advisor recently said, "If you want to understand what's happening right now in Iraq, I recommend *The Battle of Algiers*."

While re-released last month by Rialto Pictures, *The Battle of Algiers* made a splashy special preview screening at, of all places, the Pentagon. As reported in the *New York Times*, a flier advertising the screening—eventually attended by about 40 officers and experts—declared: "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."

For the record, the French eventually won the battle of Algiers, but they lost the war for the hearts and minds of the Algerian people, finally withdrawing from a newly independent Algeria ruled by the FLN in 1962.

But *The Battle of Algiers* still provides a blueprint for excessive military repression; it's not difficult to see why the current administration has an interest in the film. It's been reported George W. Bush has a habit of marking X's on the pictures of arrested or killed Al Qaeda members—a practice used in *The Battle of Algiers*. In a famous scene from the film, a French Colonel declares at a press conference that to combat terrorism, "you must accept all the consequences." The sentiment is eerily similar to an American intelligence official's statement to the *New Yorker* last December, regarding the struggle for Baghdad: "We're going to have to play their game. Guerilla verses guerilla. Terrorism verses terrorism."

However, the film should continue to be a tool for the left, as well. According to film critic J. Hoberman and author of *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties*, "*The Battle of Algiers* couldn't have opened at a better time, coming out on the heels of the riots in Newark and Detroit. It was the equivalent of a new left cult film," he continues, "not just for the black militants but for white revolutionaries and wannabe revolutionaries; it was part of the political literature of the period."

Certainly, now, in an election year, the political left needs a strong anti-



war war movie. After such reactionary gun-toting pro-military vehicles as *Black Hawk Down* (made with direct Pentagon collaboration), *Master and Commander: the Far Side of the World* ("with its emphasis on leadership under fire," says Hoberman), *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (with its hours of bloody edge-of-your seat heroic carnage), and Confederate Civil War epics *The Last Samurai* and *Cold Mountain*, the time is ripe for *The Battle of Algiers* to stoke the hearts of the left once again and offer an alternative—and indicting view—of the evils of war.

It will be a tough battle for the minds of the American citizenry. Hollywood has brought out the big guns since 9/11, pushing forward a flurry of distracting sword-and-toga war films from Crusade epic *Kingdom of Heaven* to *Alexander the Great* and *Troy* (the latter two coming to theaters this year) in order to capitalize on the nation's recent taste for the blood of Others.

When I ask Hoberman whether a film like *The Battle of Algiers*—with its spirited endorsement of freedom fighters—could be made today, he imagines a Hollywood version that transposes the battle to Baghdad. "The French general would be an American hero, and then the 'good' Arabs could realize that the bad terrorists are horrible people, so they unite with the paratroopers and make a democracy." He pauses, then adds, "No, I can't see it. American movies are not known for empathizing outside of America."

