INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-23 ALGERIA I

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Dear Peter;

There could not be a more appropriate time to come to Algeria. The country has been celebrating its twenty-fifth year of independence - in typically subdued fashion - and the country is in the midst of a serious re-examination of the socialist economic policies that have been de rigueur since the country became an independent nation in 1962. There is also a rumor currently being heard in Algiers that President Benjedid has signed a treaty that would unite Libya and Algeria.

In addition to the right timing, Algeria also happens to be my favorite among the Maghrebi countries. It is a hard place to live: prices of just about anything are skyhigh. Finding an apartment is almost impossible: rapid population growth and rural flight have made housing one of the country's burning issues. But there is a spirit to this country and to its population that is hard to describe. What I would like to share with my readers in the next few reports is to share some of the enthusiasm and respect that I feel for the troubled times the country has gone through, and the large difficulties I see looming ahead.

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My own entry into the country this time was not a particularly exciting one. Within forty-eight hours I was rushed to the hospital for some kind of acute infection that almost left me, to use T.S. Eliot's marvelous line, "etherized upon a table." Almost, for the impending threat of surgery yielded to the relative comfort of Bulgarian and Yugoslavian drugs. I discovered to my intense satisfaction that socialist painkillers are as effective as their capitalist counterparts, and a whole lot cheaper. When I finally left the hospital and asked for the bill my request was only met by uncomprehending stares. The entire treatment had been free.

While inside the hospital I stared for a few days at a peeling ceiling and an occasional insect that found its way across the arroyos of pigment above me. This gave me plenty of time to give some serious consideration - "defeated, sir, but never beaten" - to my next few reports. There is much to regale my readers with: Algeria has experienced a traumatic war of independence from 1954 until 1962; it adopted a develoment program after its independence that according

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to its leaders would lead to economic independence; it has lingering problems with its berber population and a slowly growing fundamentalist movement.

In perhaps no other North African country is the immediate past of such importance in understanding the present. Even now the War of Independence and the colonial period that preceeded it - Algeria was invaded in 1830 - haunt Algerians to a degree that makes any attempt to understand current developments almost impossible without reference to what is still often referred to euphemistically as the "colonial encounter."

Picture 1: Harbor front with French collonade, Algiers.

I would like to provide in my reports a feeling of the country's history and current problems, mixing history with observations on the spot.

* * *

From a little distance offshore Algiers looked to arriving French immigrants like a delightful cluster of whitewashed buildings,

hung around the bowl of the surrounding hills. Then, as the boat turned slowly into the protection of the harbor wall, the passengers felt a surge of pride at the clean lines of the recently constructed grand boulevards, the cobblestoned streets that gently slanted down to the dock area, the turn-of-the-century cast iron lamps that lit up at dusk, the redtiled roofs of the buildings with the old reassuring advertisements for Dubonnet and Cointreaux.

On the right, a little higher up and farther away, past the cluster of the kasbah where few frenchmen were likely to live, Bab El Oued teemed with lower and middle class Europeans. On the other side of Algiers, shaded by eucapyptus trees and enjoying breezes that ran up from the harbor, the richer classes lived on Mustapha Supérieur.

All was in french: the customs officials, the signs, the timetables at the little railroad station, the instructions of the port officials. One felt safely chez soi. Arabic was the language of the kitchen, the language of the supplicating porter at the Gare d'Alger waiting for trunk-encumbered Europeans to arrive. Along palmtree lined avenues that curved boldly into the surrounding hills galleries - full of bric-a-brac that hinted of the Orient but were not of the Orient- catered to a clientele that had only the most utalitarian contact with the local population.

Picture 2: Algiers central post office in neo-Moorish style.

Colonialism and all it entailed were perhaps best expressed in the linguistic marvels of colonial language: there were officers of native affairs, Moorish quarters and a hundred other indications of separateness. Not surprising it was Albert Camus, born in Algeria, who was most sensitive to these more subtle forms of colonialism. The traveling salesman's wife in The Adulterous Woman hears the bus driver shout "a few words in that language she had heard all her life without ever understanding it." And reading Camus's The Stranger, set in Algiers and Marengo, one is almost amazed when toward the climax of the book Monsieur Meursault suddenly encounters (as Camus describes with such a grasp for the cynical nature of the encounter) "the Arab."

Camus's book is about the psychology and the existentialism of an individual, scarred by his own society into a man without feelings. Yet instinctively the reader feels that what triggered the senseless murder of the young Algerian on the beach is the very fact that he is "the Arab." One keeps wondering - and Camus undoubtedly wanted to preserve this underlying tension - whether the shots would have been fired if the young man had been European?

Perhaps no one has ever been able to paint so accurately the dilemmas of the Europeans that lived in North Africa. For them life in Algeria was a new beginning in a place smelling slightly of exotica and strongly of cheap labor and good land at bargain prices.Slowly the area around Algiers and further inland

Picture 3: Amir Abd Al-Qadir square. Abd Al-Qadir was the leader

was turned into a mixture of local and French architecture. The little steep streets from the harbor into the hills were lined with little row houses that all over North Africa look the same: a red-tiled slanting roof, the front door flanked by a single window on each side (on the left always the "best room" reserved for company, on the right the family sitting room). In front, between the metal gate and the walls of the house, a small garden where the owner's wife grew a few flowers that were brought to the table in the early morning. And beside the gates of these small homes they nailed little marble plaques that bore the pretentious names of middle-class idiocy: "Villa Alexandrine... Villa Céleste... Le Beau Séjour."

On the Avenue d'Isly, the fashionable street near the center town, the more prosperous immigrés could check on the Paris stock exchange quotations, the issues printed in goldleaf on a board at the Banque de Paris's entrance.

Even in death there was a form of preferential treatment: the European cemeteries of Sa'ada and Saint-Eugène were spread out on the slopes overlooking the harbor. The tombs are garnished with pictures of small children, soldiers on handcolored porcelain medallions, porcelain flowers in a wide range of gaudy colors, crucifixes, rusted flowerpots, devotary medallions - the bric-a-brac of Christian funerary rites, mankind's folly for eternity.

When I visited Saint-Eugène I found the tombs slowly sinking into the earth; chapel doors hung wide open on rusty hinges. The official guardian was friendly but the upkeep of the cemetery seemed perfunctory. From thousands of crumbling graves cherubic-looking marble angels stare at the sky, carved granite lambs - the well-fed European-style lambs, not the thin local variety - guarded over neglected tombs. On one of them, dedicated to Madeleine Font, the following inscription:

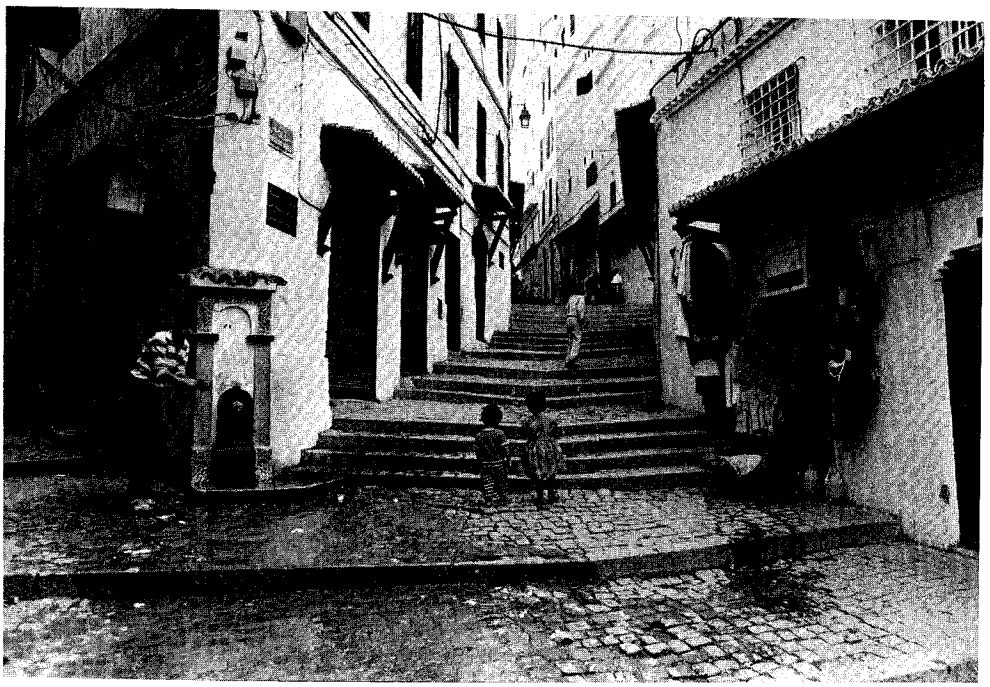
> Ta vie hélas s'est effacée
> sous nos regards voilés de pleurs
> mais tu dors, tendrement bercée
> dans le souvenir de nos coeurs.

And on a little tin plaque, bent and half-covered with an accumulation of needles from the pines overhead:

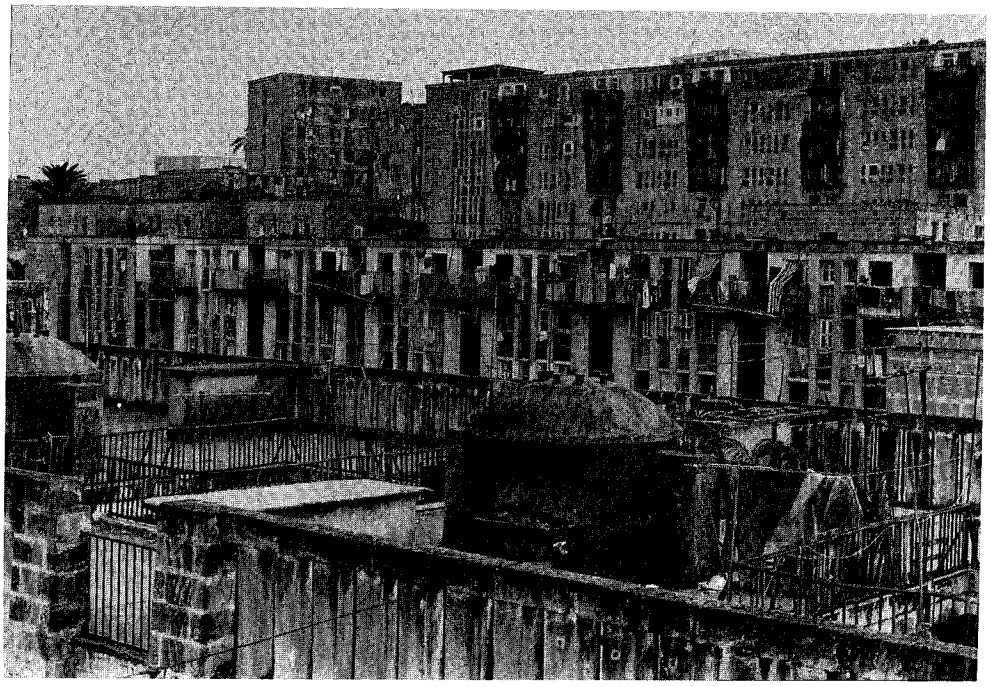
> A Lourdes nous avons prié pour toi.

* * *

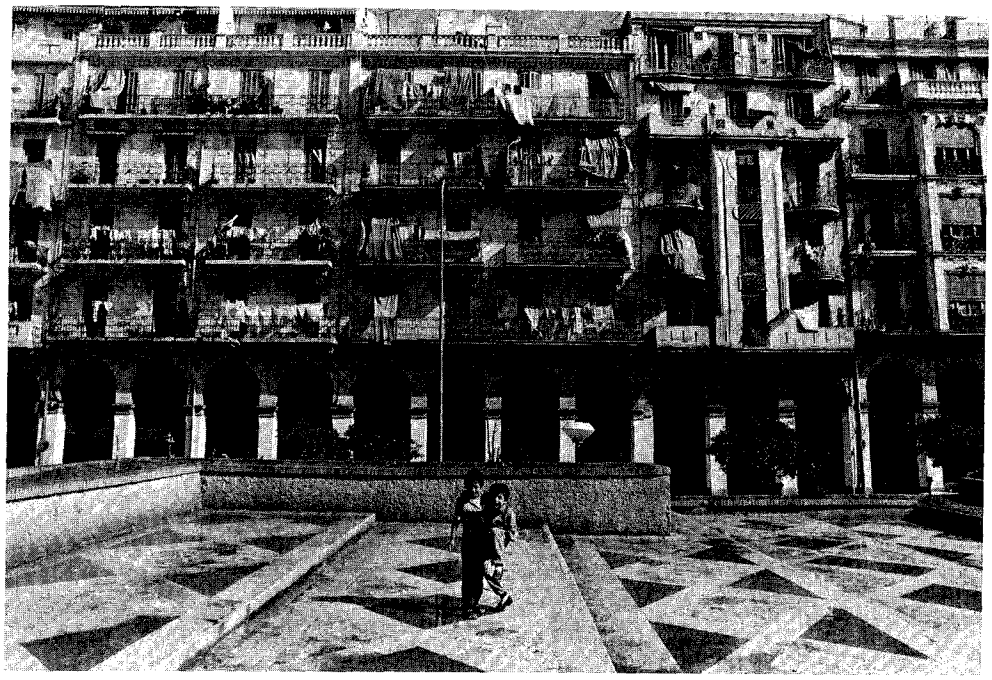
Then came the War of Independence. For eight years (1954-1962) a modern equipped French army fought against what had started out as a ragtime band of self-styled guerillas. Slowly the Algerians forced themselves - with setbacks and delays - into a more or less coherent army. Called the ALN (the Armée de Libération Nationale) and in cooperation with a number of political exiles and internal coalitions, it fought the French colonizer until the bitter end.



Picture 4: An alley in the Algiers kasbah.



Picture 5: Middle-class housing near the Martyr's Monument.



Picture 6: Former middle-class French housing near Center of Algiers.

It was a war that even by the brutal standards of this century defies description. The number of deaths will never be known. The Algerian side claims at least one million. It is hard to get at exact numbers. There are, however, other ways of judging the gruesome toll: one friend who wrote his dissertation on a small village in the Aurès mountains dedicated his thesis to "the seven percent of the village population that lost their lives in the war." His own father and brother were executed before his eyes on a little hilltop a few kilometers away. His younger brother was tortured into insanity by the french. He himself was lucky, spending some years in prison and in exile.

The impact of the war on the collective psyche of the Algerians can perhaps never be reversed. One third of the native population was displaced; almost 8,000 villages and hamlets were destroyed. An electric fence along the Tunisian and Moroccan border was aimed at preventing infiltration of ALN fighters into Algeria.

When Franz Fanon - a young doctor/psychiatrist who participated in the war on the Algerian side - wrote in clinical details about torture in Algeria during the war he was in part concerned with the psychological impact of torture on its individual victims. The annex to his Wretched of the Earth makes for bone-chilling reading. On that earlier trip through the Aurès mountains a man once took me to a little quarry; I had been told that he had been tortured barbarously in 1956. As we stood at the lip of the pit I could dimly

see the remnants of shackles. The man stepped back quickly, wept, and walked away. The old nightmare had come back. And just as the war left its mark on the individual psyche, so it did on the consciousness of the nation.

The legacy of the war remains, even though Algerians are a proud people, given little to sentamentalizing the years of their resistance.They are a people of a delightful sense of humor. Almost everything and everyone is fair game; but one never, ever jokes about anything connected with the war. One evening as I sat waiting for a friend in the lounge of the Safir hotel - one of Algeria's few luxury hotels - I overheard a conversation. The man talking was impeccably dressed. From the conversation I could tell that he was a diplomat on temporary homeleave. He was talking to some of his North Korean colleagues whom I had earlier seen roaming around the lounge with tiny enameled pictures of Kim Il Sung sewn to their lapels. The conversation was very quiet, and the man's voice barely rose when he said: "You must never forget what this country went through, gentleman. It will take many more years before we have come to terms with the war."

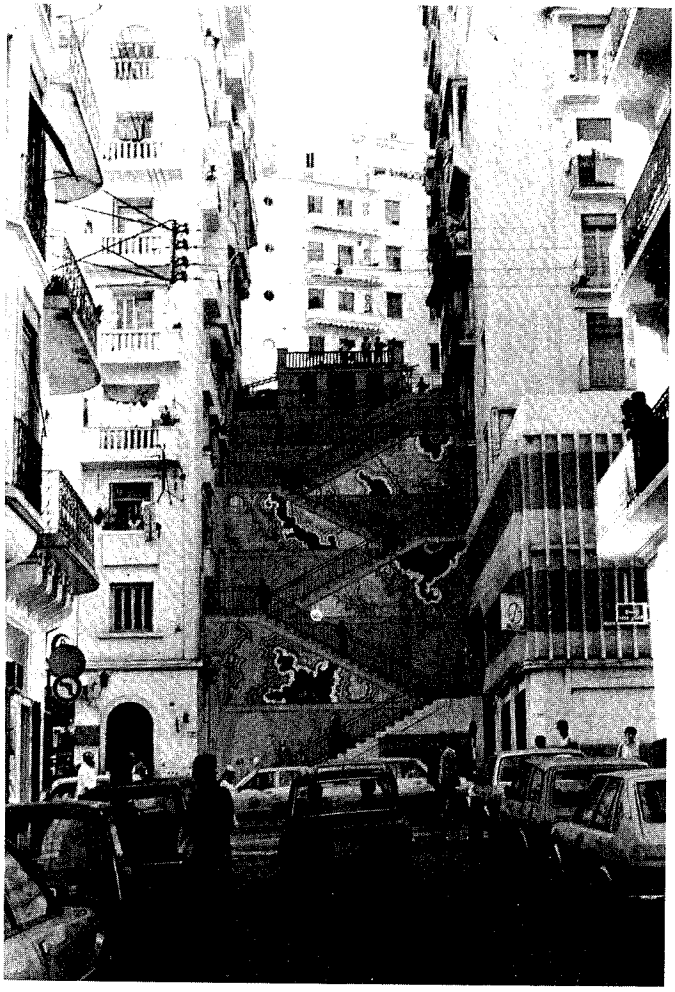
A few days later I was talking to a fisherman trying his luck near the wharves. When the conversation almost inevitably turned to the war he stared at the ground, his head hidden by the hood of an old Southwesterner, and said: "We must keep rebuilding this country; there is much yet to do."

Even children's comic books are not yet free of the horrors of the war. One I picked up, The Man From The Mountain described the heroism of one montagnard during the war. Suddenly, in the middle of the booklet, a page shows a man hanging down from a metal pole, his ears wired to the infamous telephone generator that was a standard instrument of torture during the war.

It is clear that the older generation that lived through that war wants to distill into the current generation the legacy and lessons of that war. The legitimacy of the leadership, of much that went on during the 1960s and 1970s - the austerity at home, the strong support for the rights of Third World countries - was based on what Algeria had achieved during the war. The effort to make the younger generation remember, however, is getting increasingly difficult. More than half of all Algerians now were not yet born when the war ended. To them the war is what their elders tell them it was; and frankly, some of them are tired of the stories.

Undoubtedly there will always remain a strong sense of dedication to what Algeria did during the war. The symbols of that resistance will continue to represent hard fought-for values. But there is a slight shift of sensitivity here. Whereas the "war generation" could be asked to make sacrifices in the aftermath of the conflict - and did so for almost twenty years - the younger generation often no longer shares that perspective.

This realization must undoubtedly have played a role in the decision of the current Benjedid government to make more luxury goods and consumer articles available after a twenty year period of relative austerity under Presidents Ben Bella and Boumedienne.



Picture 7: Sidestreet with staircase near Abd Al-Qadir square.

Nothing could be more symbolic of this bifurcation between the old and the new generation than the Martyr's monument and the newly built shopping mall at Riyadh El-Feth. Standing across from each other, the 94 meter tall concrete Martyr's monument is a tribute to the mujahedeen that fought for Algeria's independence. The shopping mall, a multiple level concrete affair built with money originally budgeted for a natural gas liquefaction plant, attracts Algier's young. On any Sunday it is filled with teenagers sporting Walkmans and scateboards, articles undreamt of in Algeria even a few years ago.

The decision to build the mall rankled many of those who keep defending the economic policies of the Boumedienne government (1965-1979) - and they form a force strong enough to be reckoned with inside the country. There is also the almost unavoidable resentment and bitterness by some of these people against what they consider a golden youth that cares little for continuing a policy of austerity.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this. But life goes on, and when the government decided - for better or for worse - to cast its lot with a different economic approach in the 1980s, it did so with a cautious determination that may prove to be as strong and longlasting as the earlier socialist experiment under Mr. Boumedienne. If there is one predictable aspect to Algeria, it is their thoroughness at whatever they experiment with.

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I would like to write in some more depth in my next report on some of Algeria's economic planning after 1962. In some ways it was a highly original if controversial experiment. My personal evaluation is that the country has done rather well, and that its success was in large part due to the political leadership provided by the country's second president, Houari Boumedienne.

Like most Algerian leaders, Mr. Boumedienne disliked publicity. As a result of the war Algerian politics has always been marked by a deep sense of collegiality. Much like his one-time nemesis, President De Gaulle of France, Boumedienne had the same sense of understanding the futility and momentary impact of individuals upon history. For De Gaulle - who had all official portraits removed from the Elysée the night before he left the French political scene - it was the deeply personal conviction that the end was here, and that with it disappeared the need for the pictures and the hero-worship. The grandeur was in France, not in the individual who guided it. Similarly Boumedienne and the remainder of the political leadership felt that not any individual - no matter how courageous he had been in the War of Independence - but Algeria mattered. In De Gaulle's case the self-effacement had been a personal decision; in Boumedienne it was the act of a nation in its continuing search for its vision of a just and more egalitarian society.

When Boumedienne gave his first public speech on Algerian television the camera focused in on a microphone standing by itself on a table. The new president's voice could be heard but he remained off-screen. Thus started a presidency of almost fifteen years that would profoundly mark the newly independent country.

All the best,

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