

# 1960-1966, Algeria: The Generals' Plot Against de Gaulle

By William Blum, former U.S. State Department employee who resigned in 1967 in opposition to the Vietnam war.

On 22 April, 1961, four French generals in Algeria seized power in an attempt to maintain the country's union with France. The *putsch* [*coup d'état*] which held out for only four days, was a direct confrontation with French President Charles de Gaulle, who had dramatically proclaimed a policy leading "not to an Algeria governed from France, but to an Algerian Algeria."

The next day, the leftist Italian newspaper, *Il Paese*, stated that "It is not by chance that some people in Paris are accusing the American secret service headed by Allen Dulles of having participated in the plot of the four 'ultra' generals." Dulles expressed the opinion that "This particular myth was a Communist plant, pure and simple."

The *Washington Star* said some of the rumors were launched by "minor officials at the Elysee Palace" who gave reporters "to understand that the generals' plot was backed by strongly anti-communist elements in the U.S. government and military services."

Whatever its origins, the story spread rapidly around the world, and the French Foreign Office refused to refute it. *Le Monde* asserted in a front-page editorial on 28 April that "the behavior of the U.S. during the recent crisis was not particularly skillful. It seems established that American agents more or less encouraged [Maurice] Challe [the leader of the *putsch*]."

Reports from all sources agreed that if the CIA had been involved in the *putsch*, it was for two reasons:

- (1) the concern that if Algeria was granted independence, "communists" would come to power, being those in the ranks of the National Liberation Front which had been fighting the French Army in Algeria for several years;
- (2) the hope that it would precipitate the downfall of de

## Oil in Algeria

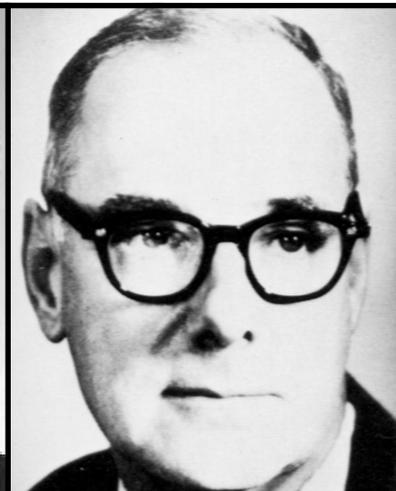
In 1956, Geologists reported that Algeria had potentially large deposits of oil that could ensure energy self-sufficiency for France, at least for the near future. Clearly, the French were prepared to expend a major effort to hold Algeria. French politicians analyzed the political situation in Morocco and Tunisia and determined that resistance to burgeoning independence movements in those colonies would only detract from the effort needed in Algeria. The politicians concluded decided to grant independence to Morocco and Tunisia and concentrate all resources in Algeria.

**Source:** Excerpt, R.W.Rathbun's "Operation Musketeer: A Military Success Ends in Political Failure," seminar, Marine Corps Command & Staff College, April 2, 1984. <[www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/RRW.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/RRW.htm)>



**Maurice Challe**

*After President Charles de Gaulle decided to allow Algerian independence, Challe and three other French Generals led a coup d'état in Algeria to try to maintain it as a French colony. The CIA is said to have encouraged the "ultra Generals" failed coup.*



**Richard Bissell**

*A protégé of CIA Director, Allen Dulles, Bissell was Deputy Director for Plans (i.e., covert operations) (1959-1962). On Dec. 7, 1960, he met Algerian Gov. General Jacques Soustelle who convinced him that de Gaulle's blundering would turn Algeria into "a Soviet base."*

Gaulle, an end desired because he was a major stumbling block to U.S. aspirations concerning NATO. He refused to incorporate French troops into an integrated military command and he opposed exclusive U.S. control over NATO's nuclear weapons.

*Washington Post* columnist Marquis Childs said that the French were so shocked by the generals' coup that they had to find a scapegoat. He also quoted "one of the highest officials of the French government" as saying: "when you have so many hundreds of agents in every part of the world, it is not to be wondered at that some of them should have got in touch with the generals in Algiers" (5 May).

James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* that the CIA: "was involved in an embarrassing liaison with the anti-Gaullist officers who staged last week's insurrection in Algiers ... [the Bay of Pigs and Algerian events have] increased the feeling in the White House that the CIA has gone beyond the bounds of an objective intelligence-gathering agency and has become the advocate of men and policies that have embarrassed the Administration" (29 April).

In May 1961, *L'Express*, the widely-read French weekly, published what was perhaps the first detailed account of the affair. Their Algerian correspondent, Claude Krief, reported: "Both in Paris and Washington the facts are now known, though they will never be publicly admitted. In private, the highest French personalities make no secret of it. What they say is this: 'The CIA played a direct part in the Algiers coup, and certainly weighed heavily on the decision taken by ex-general Challe to start his *putsch*.'"

Not long before, Challe had held the position of NATO Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces, Central Europe, as a result of which he had been in daily contact with U.S. military officers. Krief wrote that certain U.S. officials in NATO and the Pentagon had encouraged Challe, and that he had several meetings with CIA officers who told him that "to get rid of de Gaulle would render the Free World a great service." Krief noted that: "All the people who know [Challe] well, are deeply convinced that he had been encouraged by the CIA" (*Time*, 12 May).

At a Washington luncheon in 1960, Jacques Soustelle, the former Governor-General of Algeria who had made public his disagreement with de Gaulle's Algeria policy, met with CIA officials, including Richard Bissell, head of covert operations. According to Krief, Soustelle convinced CIA officials that Algeria would become, through de Gaulle's blundering, "a Soviet base." This lunch became something of a cause célèbre in the speculation concerning the CIA's possible role.

Krief also said that a clandestine meeting in Madrid on 12 April, 1961, included "various foreign agents, including members of the CIA and the Algiers conspirators, who disclosed their plans to the CIA men." The Americans were reported to have angrily complained that de Gaulle's policy was "paralyzing NATO and rendering the defense of Europe impossible," and assured the generals that if they and their followers succeeded, Washington would recognize the new Algerian government within 48 hours.

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## Trying to Kill de Gaulle

Between 1958 and the mid-1960s, there were some 30 serious assassination attempts upon the life of Charles de Gaulle, in addition to any number of planned attempts which didn't advance much beyond the planning stage. In at least one of the attempts, the CIA may have been a co-conspirator against the French president. By the mid-1960s, differences between de Gaulle and Washington had almost reached the breaking point. In February 1966, de Gaulle gave NATO and the U.S. a deadline to either place their military bases in France under French control or dismantle them.



**Charles de Gaulle**

In 1975, the *Chicago Tribune* featured a front-page story which read in part: "Congressional leaders have been told of CIA involvement in a plot by French dissidents to assassinate... De Gaulle... Sometime in the mid-1960s – probably in 1965 or 1966 – dissidents in the De Gaulle government are said to have made contact with the CIA to seek help in a plot to murder the French leader....

According to the CIA briefing officer, discussions were held on how best to eliminate De Gaulle, who by then had become a thorn in the side of the Johnson administration because of his ouster of American military bases from French soil and his demands that U.S. forces be withdrawn from the Indochina War" (15 June, 1975).

The dissidents involved in the alleged plot were embittered French army officers and former Algerian settlers who still bore deep resentment toward de Gaulle for having "sold out French honor" by his retreat from the North African colony.

**Source:** Excerpts from "France/Algeria 1960s: L'état, c'est la CIA," *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since WWII*, 1995.

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