



## Public debate and military thinking

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le colonel (ER) Claude FRANC

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Histoire & stratégie

**"In the depths of Alexander's victories, we always find Aristotle. "Charles DE GAULLE  
-To the professional army, 1934.**

**The freedom of expression of the military in the public debate, while commonly accepted in Anglo-Saxon countries, is confronted, in France, as much by political prejudices inherited from the past as by internal reticence on the part of the military. However, the regulatory and even legislative measures that for a long time restricted it have gradually fallen away, so that today, although this expression is more or less free in legal terms, it remains very little used and, when it is fortuitously the case, examples abound to show that the hierarchy does not encourage it, when it does not fight it.**

In fact, when we look at the participation of the military in the public debate, it should be linked and extended to a second, more specific area, that of the expression and dissemination of military thought, because, in all objectivity, military thought cannot exist without it.

When this analogy is made, it becomes obvious that the expression of military members in public debate must be freed and, above all, accepted and even encouraged in order to play the role of a basis for the dissemination of a military thought that is rich, coherent and adapted to the issues of the moment and especially those of the future.

**There is unquestionably a structural opposition between public debate and the raison d'être of armies.**

By definition, and this is by no means a criticism in itself, in a democracy, public debate is

always partisan in nature. This is the essence of any adversarial debate. It is this permanent dialectic that has underpinned the very functioning of institutions since the establishment of parliamentary government in England in the fifteenth century, after the "Great Revolution", and which has been gradually copied or imposed in the great nations that make up today's industrialized world.

On the contrary, armies have always been the *ultima ratio regis*, i.e. the state's last resort when other institutions have failed. In France, this situation is illustrated by the fact that, in the national legal arsenal of the provisions of the state of siege since 1791, the highest state of exception has always been the state of siege, since it corresponds to the transfer to the authority of the state of siege. authority to the military authority of the maintenance of law and order and even judicial responsibilities held by the administrative authorities of the State or, to a lesser degree, by the participation of the armies in the permanent functioning of the State in the event of a major national crisis.

Thus, immediately after the wave of attacks in the spring of 1986, the armies were deployed at the borders to reinforce the administrations, whose role was to ensure the security of the State. In the recent past, after the attacks of 2015, the armies have been committed to the national territory with 10,000 troops, in accordance with their operational contract.

At another level, in 1988, in New Caledonia, then an Overseas Territory and, as such, subject to national legal provisions on security and the maintenance of law and order, a state of siege was established on the island of Ouvéa by the Minister for Cooperation, who was present on the spot, thus allowing the intervention of second- and third-category resources, on the orders of General VIDAL, the Territory's Superior Commander, to whom the High Commissioner had handed over his responsibilities in that regard.

In order to be able to act swiftly and effectively in these very specific contexts defined by the rule of law, it is important that the armies remain absolutely neutral and, as such, should not take part in the partisan divisions that arise from public debate.

It is in this respect that General de MONTAUDOUIN's - to say the least unfortunate - initiative to call for a cohort, not to say a quarteron of heads of state, between the two rounds of the 1988 presidential election, to be elected by the people, was a major step forward. The active army had judged very harshly Jacques CHIRAC's candidacy against that of François MITTERRAND. Moreover, this action had brought complete discredit on the command which, as a result, had to suffer the barely concealed contempt of the new minister, Jean-Pierre CHEVENEMENT.

On the other hand, there was never a worse Minister of War under the IV<sup>th</sup> Republic, and even afterwards, than General ANDRÉ who, with a spirit of rare intolerance, introduced partisan political divisions within the army and thus strongly distorted for several consecutive years the normal game of officer advancement, by bringing into account the most questionable selection criteria, i.e. their supposed attachment to republican values. It is interesting to note that it was the military institution itself that generated the character and that it was by no means an exogenous element that engaged in these deviations.

**However, even if it is defended by "politics", the exclusion of the military from public debate is a fault.**

It is national historical causes that have long caused "politics" to feel distrust for the military and, as a result, to exclude it from public debate. In 1871, the right to vote was even taken away from active military personnel, who did not regain it until 1945. But, quite paradoxically, these non-voting military personnel remained eligible to vote, which allowed General BOULANGER to embark on the political career that we know. Even at that time of the fledgling Republic, a time when the army was the tool of "Revenge", the "Holy Ark", as it was sometimes called, "the Holy Ark", as it was sometimes called, the fact remains that, in the political subconscious, it still represented the tool with which the Prince-President had strangled the 11th Republic in the coup d'état of December 2, 1851. This coup d'état, the success of which had only been made possible by massive military participation in PARIS and in the provinces, was the founding act of the anti-militarism of the French left, even if this distant cause had, of course, been largely diluted over time and no longer represents much today.

A recent example illustrates the absolute opposition of the political to seeing the military speak out. In the middle of the Gulf War, when the air offensive had just begun, on January 18, 1991, President MITTERRAND sent Admiral LANXADE, his Chief of Staff, to the Gulf War.s Chief of Staff, Admiral LANXADE, to explain, in the context of a programme with a large audience, the nature and modalities of the French commitment in Kuwait, within the coalition commanded by General SCHWARZKOPF. Unable to stand seeing and hearing an admiral dressed in Anne SINCLAIR's uniform during the programme "Sept sur Sept", the very next morning, the Minister of Defence, Jean-Pierre CHEVÈNEMENT presented his resignation to the President of the Republic. The latter hastened to accept his resignation, since, in the end, this was the second degree aim of the manoeuvre. But the affair did not end there. The next day, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Philippe SEGUIN, who had no reputation for being a fiery anti-militarist, strangled himself with indignation in a vitriolic column published by Le Figaro, in which he expressed all his solidarity. to Jean-Pierre CHEVÈNEMENT and his formal and non-negotiable opposition to any intrusion by the military outside his purely and specifically technical and operational sphere of competence.

This attitude, which is, after all, quite recent, amounts in fact to relegating the military to the level of a simple executor and to excluding it from the field of the nation's major decision-makers. This approach is dramatic because, while an operational decision does indeed fall within the sole domain of expertise in the field - and this is less and less the case today - any strategic reflection on the military's role in the field of operations must be carried out by the military, and this is less and less the case today. This approach is dramatic because, while an operational decision is indeed the sole responsibility of the operational expertise in the field - and this is less and less true today - any strategic or prospective reflection on the subject can only be envisaged in a global way, i.e. by taking into account all the parameters, including those outside the strictly operational field.

It must be acknowledged that this political stance is certainly still strongly dictated by the memory of the events in Algeria and, in particular, the events of April 1961 in Algiers, which went down in history as the "putsch of the generals". But, in doing so, on all subjects relating to military thought - the term will be explained in the third part - the presence of the military is indispensable.

## **Contextualisation of the public debate**

In fact, it appears that just as the dissemination of military thinking is closely linked to the degree of participation of the military in public debate, so too is the degree of participation of the military in the public debate. In fact, it appears that, just as the dissemination of military thought is closely linked to the degree of participation of the military in public debate, so too is the dissemination of this same thought closely linked to the consideration of military or, more generally, defence issues by the public sphere. Without going back to the salons des Lumières, where their walls resonated with debates between partisans of the thin order or the deep order, which allowed the gestation and then the formulation of ideals, the military thought is intimately linked to the degree of participation of the military in the public debate. Without going back to the salons des Lumières, where their walls resounded with debates between partisans of the thin order or the deep order, which allowed the gestation and then the formulation of the ideals of BOURCET, FOLARD or GUIBERT, to name but a few, the richest period in terms of the production of military thought was undoubtedly the decade preceding the Great War. It is not neutral that it was also the period during which the public authorities showed interest in military matters. The debates on the law of three years (of military service) were by no means confined to the technical aspect of increasing the number of troops that could be mobilized, but gave rise to real social debates in which the military took its rightful place. If the law was passed, despite the visceral opposition of JAURÈS, First Secretary of the IFC,<sup>1</sup> this opposition was constructive, since he published a book intended to present a counter-project, the new army, namely, a militia-based army.

Within the army, the same debates led in 1911 to the resignation of General MICHEL, vice-president of the Conseil supérieur de la Guerre (High Council of War), who was the general manager of the army. He was a designated generalist and a supporter of a mixed army, in which active brigades would be attached to reserve brigades within the same divisions. And, finally, what was at stake in the legislative elections of May 1914 was this same three-year law, the majority resulting from the elections being, moreover, very antithree-year.

In the 1950s, such a debate could have been launched with the European Defence Community (EDC) project. This debate, which split all the traditional families of thought (with the exception of the communist monolith) in two, was swept under the carpet by the politicians themselves, the project having been buried by Pierre MENDES-FRANCE in August 1954 by an artifice of parliamentary procedure. Put into perspective with the following decades, this evasion proved to be fraught with consequences: this first attempt at the political construction of Europe having failed, the negotiators of the Treaty of ROME fell back on the economic field alone. We know what happened.

If it is possible to draw a parallel between the wealth of military thinking of an era and the fact that it corresponded to an empathy of the public debate for the " If it is possible to draw a parallel between the richness of the military thinking of an era and the fact that it would correspond to an empathy of public debate for the "military thing" or, more generally, defence issues, then the current period must be conducive to the effervescence of a renewal of military thinking. Indeed, since the wave of attacks that hit the country, there has been little mention of reformulating national service in any civic or other form, of overhauling the reserve system, and even, for the first time since the end of

the wars of decolonization, there has been no reversal of the sinister curve of personnel deflations. While the professionalisation of the armed forces between 1996 and 2000 by putting national service on hold was carried out with almost general indifference on the part of the nation, which is highly regrettable, today we can only note a reversal of the trend.

But we still have to agree on the very term "military thinking". As is often the case with notions of this nature, the term can be understood according to two opposing approaches: either in a restrictive sense, where it would only be a matter of dealing with "military science", the preserve of experts who, like caricatures of scientists, would only work and express themselves in obscure confidential laboratories, or in a much more inclusive and integrated sense, where it would be a matter of dealing with "military science", the preserve of experts who, like caricatures of scientists, would only work and express themselves in obscure confidential laboratories. This is a much more inclusive and integrated sense of the term, one that includes all the disciplines closely or remotely related to defence issues, thus enriching the public debate through its density. A parallel exists with the religious debate, which can either be reduced to the clerical domain or be extended to its eschatological dimension. So, let us not be afraid to encroach on all intellectual fields, even if they are not directly related to military matters. This is the whole meaning of the quotation from General DE GAULLE quoted above. In the expression "military thought", it is not the adjective "military" that is first, but, in accordance with the syntax, the noun "thought".

It would surely be absolutely counterproductive to want to restrict thinking to the specific military field or, to use a very fashionable expression, to the "core military business". Nothing would be more dangerous. We should not be afraid to open it up to all the intellectual disciplines of the humanities and engineering. The example cited above of the failure of the EDC, the initial draft of which was certainly very open to improvement, illustrates that military or defence issues, in short the thoughtThe example cited above of the failure of the EDC, whose initial project was certainly very perfectible, illustrates that military or defence issues, in short military thinking, must imperatively leave their tactical confinement to be situated from the outset at the strategic, or even philosophical, level, that is to say, one should not be afraid of words, at the political level. But this term of politics should not be understood in its partisan sense but in the original meaning of the Greek "police", by which the government and the defence of the city were one.

PERICLES, didn't the father of democracy derive the legitimacy of his power from the fact that he had been elected strategist of the city ("strategos")?

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1) French Section of the Workers' International

**Title :** le colonel (ER) Claude FRANC  
**Author (s) :** le colonel (ER) Claude FRANC  
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