



The vulnerability of the modern soldier

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 30/06/2020

Tactique générale

The relationship of the contemporary western military to vulnerability is changing. Although it seems intrinsically dangerous, vulnerability is still useful to the soldier, because the soldier will always need to be strong to fight, but weak to understand.

"When I'm weak, that's when I'm strong." ^[1]

1] Saint Paul, Second Epistle to the Corinthians.

Achilles is one of the most emblematic figures of the fighter. Hero made almost invincible, he retains a degree of vulnerability that will ultimately lead to his loss.^[1] Achilles thus embodies the contradictions that the soldier has always had to overcome in his relationship to force and violence. Endowed with the means of coercion, with the exorbitant power to legally give death, he is never invulnerable.

Whether physical, mental or moral, in all cases vulnerability is a reflection of the finitude and fragility of human existence. For the soldier, vulnerability is synonymous with weakness and must be dominated. Moreover, the question of the soldier's vulnerability is no longer posed in the same terms today as in the past because progress in the protection of the combatant and in war medicine has made it possible to considerably limit physical vulnerability. . On the other hand, the modern western soldier carries within him an unprecedented fragility, linked to the relationship that society has with death. In the 21st century, the courage of the soldier remains a reality. But society's collective anguish in the face of death weighs on the combatant's commitment, inhibits military action and can eventually put soldiers in danger.

For the soldier to be strong, he must be protected, but also convinced. However, it seems that his real vulnerability today is the weakness of meaning, i.e. the difficulty of giving a

clear answer to the question "...Who are we dying for?»^[3]. The soldier must overcome this difficulty in order not to become a mercenary. How, then, can the cohesion of the military institution be maintained? Is it still necessary to try to eradicate all forms of vulnerability in order to make the soldier invincible? On the contrary, the purpose of this study is to show that all vulnerability is not in itself bad for the soldier. It is even a guarantee of humanity for the soldier. Indeed, being aware of one's fragility can be a safeguard against the temptation to be invincible, which can make soldiers forget that their role is to protect the most vulnerable of their fellow soldiers from murderous madness. Ultimately, vulnerability is healthy for the soldier, because the soldier will always need to be strong to fight but weak to understand.

Thus, the notion of vulnerability is generally denigrated among the military, but it seems risky to claim to be totally free of it, especially since it may ultimately be consistent with the ideal of the soldier.

The notion of vulnerability is generally viewed with circumspection within military society. Indeed, it is above all synonymous with weakness. It is true that, from the combatant's point of view, physical vulnerability leads to defeat and death. Any soldier who is too physically weak will be unable to withstand the constraints and pressure exerted on individuals during combat. Moreover, an inadequately protected soldier will be the preferred target of the adversary. Protecting the soldier from the enemy's blows and thus reducing his physical vulnerability is a concern as old as war itself.

But the protection of the soldier generates other, invisible vulnerabilities, starting with moral vulnerability. Indeed, the psychological security provided by the protection of armour can insidiously develop a defensive, even obsessional, mentality that can alter tactical thinking by favouring protection over intelligence and manoeuvre. The example of the American army in Iraq, moving in armoured convoys without contact with the population is, on this point, eloquent. This attitude may be a sign of a deeper vulnerability: anxiety in the face of death. From this point of view, it can be seen that the perception of death by soldiers in an army depends on the way in which their society views the issue. In this respect, soldiers in Western armies, particularly French armies, are more fragile than others.

The vulnerability of the combatant may finally be psychic, and therefore also invisible to the naked eye. The psychological impact of a traumatic event is unique to each individual. This can create a potentially destructive inequality between members of the same community of combatants, because the durability of the military model depends on the cohesion of the group. It can also fuel suspicion of an injury, the reality of which is difficult for the non-specialist to appreciate.

Denying the very existence of a vulnerability is a tempting way to compensate for its disadvantages. Distrust of psychological wounds is thus an ancient and tenacious phenomenon. In France, the existence of mental injury was only officially recognized in 1992, even though the consequences of these injuries had been known for a long time.^[4] While the physical wound usually commands respect, the psychological wound is sometimes still negatively connoted. Society is indeed reluctant to make room for veterans traumatized by the experience of facing death, forcing them to see what they

wanted to forget. Modern Western armies are often professional armies for whom the issue of recruitment is crucial. There may be a strong temptation to lower the selection criteria to ensure manpower. While injury, whether physical or mental, can affect anyone, regardless of their intrinsic qualities, it is nevertheless essential to select candidates for recruitment rigorously, otherwise the entire community may be endangered.

Technical progress is another means of eradicating all forms of vulnerability. Technology gives the military a sense of omniscience and omnipotence. It enables him to reach his adversary from a distance, without the risk of being hit back, and without collateral damage. It thus removes the moral confrontation with the enemy and the ethical considerations associated with the use of force. The massive use of armed drones by the United States to strike targets around the world today symbolizes the quintessence of this model, although its strategic effect is questionable. The purpose of the technology is thus apparently to enable the military to overcome any limits, and thus any vulnerability. The exoskeleton¹⁵ is the most successful project in this respect: the robot embodies an ideal war in which all contingencies related to human vulnerability would be eradicated. Information technology, on the other hand, makes the soldier more vulnerable by disrupting the limits of space and time. Social media, for example, allow the soldier on operation to be symbolically present in his home. The risk is then great that the group will become entrenched, or even a form of schizophrenia, regardless of the comfort provided and the legitimacy of the need.

Another form of schizophrenia intervenes in the relationship that soldiers have with their bodies. The soldier needs a healthy body and trains to be resilient and enduring. A robust body provides a sense of strength and can become the object of a quasi-cult for the perfection of which all sacrifices are justified. The fear of failure, which is also found in top sportsmen and women, can lead the soldier to irrational behaviour such as taking proteins or amphetamines. The perception of the body image is then the same as in Western societies, and oscillates between idealization and inhibition.

Seeking to combat vulnerability by denying it is therefore risky. But vulnerability can only be accepted by the soldier if he is convinced of the rightness of his action. The legitimate search for¹⁶ the reduction of moral vulnerability must encourage the command to develop resilience¹⁷ from members of the military community. While internal pedagogy explaining the purpose of the mission is indispensable, it is also imperative to promote the notion of the ideal at the individual level. This ideal must be sufficiently intimate to encourage the combatant to overcome his emotions and endure the sacrifices and deprivations of war. Individual adherence to the mission remains a key parameter for maximizing the strength of the group. Otherwise, there is a risk that the soldier will lose his or her sense of responsibility, as he or she is more concerned with fulfilling the task and performance indicators than with understanding the purpose of his or her action. This loss of meaning can lead to dehumanisation, as Hannah Arendt has demonstrated¹⁸.

But for a soldier, accepting his vulnerability is only conceivable to the extent that the military community is capable of building trust between individuals. The key step in overcoming one's own vulnerability is to break out of isolation by speaking out. This allows a salutary distance to be taken from the sometimes upsetting emotions¹⁹ that the combatant may feel. This is a permanent challenge, especially in OPEX. In this context, the idea of limiting promiscuity may confuse respect for intimacy with indifference to

solitude. Verbalization allows a passage from the stage of supposed invulnerability to true wisdom. This process illustrates in concrete terms that through their commitment to the service of the nation, soldiers no longer fully belong to themselves, in that they accept a letting go of their own lives. But this is less a renunciation than a liberating act. Indeed, the acceptance of one's own fragility leads the soldier to humility. This naturally leads him to prefer prudence to excess. Thus, the fruit of vulnerability is less pusillanimity than a genuine economy of means.

Finally, the military's search for meaning would remain sterile if the politician did not assume his responsibility in this area. As the repository of the will of the nation, the politician must say what is legitimate and designate the adversary if need be. Cohesion between the army and the nation is primarily the responsibility of the political body. Without a political dimension, military action loses its *raison d'être* and its effectiveness. The vulnerability of the combatant may therefore result from the negligence of politics and lack of recognition. "When the military spirit abandons a people, the military career immediately ceases to be honoured, and men of war fall to the last rank of public servants. They are held in low esteem and no longer understood," Tocqueville said. . If the political body no longer understands the meaning of military action, there is nothing to prevent the replacement of the army by mercenaries. The transition from a national logic to an economic logic appears to have many advantages: low costs, flexibility, no ethical justification to be given to the service provider. But subcontracting one's security is tantamount to mortgaging one's sovereignty. Here lies the ultimate vulnerability of the soldier: the feeling of being useless. In this case, "the hero who died for his country looks like an idiot who would have been swindled," warns Hude, and symbolizes the disintegration of the nation. May this warning not be a grim omen.

War is par excellence the realm of risk, and trauma is inevitable. Yet the duty of the military is to reduce its vulnerability. To do this, they train and battle by building up their moral strength. He can count on the help of the engineer and, recently, the psychiatrist. He must also be able to rely on the philosopher. Knowing that he is vulnerable should not frighten the soldier, but on the contrary encourage him to strengthen his convictions. Moreover, awareness of one's fragility gives the soldier a lucidity and humility that helps him to preserve life as much as possible. It is perhaps even a part of his honour.

1) From a very young age, his mother plunged Achilles into the waters of the River Styx, holding him by the heel. Only this part of his body was not submerged and was the weak point through which death seized him. The near-invulnerability embodied by Achilles fascinates men and drives them to take risks in order to experience him. If he symbolizes the valour of the warrior, Achilles also represents a certain type of humanity that privileges the individual and relegates the values of the group to the background.

2) Survival rate of wounded American soldiers: 33% in World War II, 50% in Vietnam, 90% today. Catherine Gouëset, "Afghanistan: une guerre qui rend fou", L'Express 13/03/12 .

3) "Who are we dying for?" Emmanuel de Richoufftz, Addim, 1998.

[4] Vietnam War: 58,000 Americans killed in combat. According to Jean-Paul Marri, there were 102,000 suicides of veterans. "Sans blessures apparentes, enquête chez les damnés de la guerre", Infrarouge, France 2, 2010.

Falklands War: 258 British killed in action, 262 suicides of veterans. Alun Rees, "Suicide of Falklands veterans", Dailymail 13/01/2002 and Catherine Gouëset, op.cit.

5) In France, the Hercules project, developed by the company RB3D and piloted by the DGA, foresees by 2015 a structure allowing the infantryman to effortlessly carry loads of 100 kg for a unit cost of 20,000 €.

6] From the Latin resilio, "jumping backwards", from which to bounce back, to resist shock and deformation. Initially, the word belongs to the scientific register (to evaluate the resistance of materials). Resilience is the capacity of an individual or a society to recover normal functioning after a trauma. This notion, developed by Boris Cyrulnik, was integrated into British military doctrine in 2003 and into the White Paper on Defence and National Security in 2008 in France.

[7] Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem, report on the banality of evil" Gallimard, 1966.

8] OPEX: external operations.

[9] «Democracy in America», Book II, Chapter 22, 1840.

[10] «Sustainable democracy, thinking war to make Europe», Monceau Editions, 2010.

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Release date	01/06/2018
