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The French approach to warfighting

The difference between winning or losing a war generally hangs on a razor's edge. Force ratio, strategy, tactics, procedures, weapons, training, the list of contributing factors goes on. But there is one key factor that more than any other will lead one of the warring parties to its victory or its defeat. Military history proves that only nations driven by a strategic culture deeply rooted in an actual fighting spirit can prevail.

France with its rich military history has been a significant actor in developing the strategic culture of the West. Many French thinkers and practitioners of the art of war have made significant contributions to the field. French military thinking is certainly one of the oldest and richest in Europe. Heirs to the Enlightenment, the French were among the first to look to theorizing the art of war with Folard, Puysegur and Maurice de Saxe; strategy and tactics with Joly de Maizeroy and Guibert planning and decision-making methods with Bourcet; the organization of staffs with Berthier; the battle with Ardant du Picq. Illustrious leaders like Vauban, or enlightened theorists like Guibert, had a major influence on Bonaparte, Joffre, Leclerc and de Lattre through their writings. The legacy of the revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic campaigns considerably marked the studies and theoretical development of Jomini, Clausewitz, Fuller and Liddell Hart. Guderian, Patton and Montgomery, for their part, had a

of the eighteenth century. The French influence continues, through generals like Foch, De Gaulle, Beaufre, Poirier and Gallois, to feed the reflections of many tacticians and strategists, including abroad. In parallel with issues related to the defense of France's "backyard" in Europe, the French military also played a major role in the expansion of a vast colonial empire, which survived until the end of the war in Algeria and embodied a real French singularity, still relevant today. French theorists of pacification, such as Gallieni and Lyautey, and of revolutionary wars and counterinsurgency, such as Lacheroy and Galula, inspired many reflections abroad in the western engagements of the early 2000s in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Understanding this huge heritage underlines how reducing the history of war to the reading of Jomini and Clausewitz cannot suffice, and that the development of military thinking in the West must go in-depth to understand the very notion of strategic culture. This knowledge allows a better understanding of France's warfighting culture today. Knowing and understanding one's ally's culture before engagement is probably the most effective way to interact and win with him.

Bonne lecture!

**Général de division Pascal Facon,
directeur du Centre de doctrine et
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Furia Francese: representations, limits and reality

by Colonel Fabrice Clée



Forced to retreat from Naples in the summer of 1495, French King Charles VIII's campaign came to a stop when facing the League of Venice near Fornovo. The gallantry and the fierceness of the French troops, led by the King himself, were highlighted by Italian chroniclers who spoke of *Furia Francese*. This expression survived through the years and glorified the irresistible impulse of French troops in combat when appropriately led. Since the battle of Fornovo, France has been involved in 49 major conflicts. It has fought 185 battles and won 132 of them. With these victories the French Army holds the record in Europe, way beyond all other European nations. French people often wage war. And they generally wage it well, with singularity and consistency, and by relying on the heritage of their history and geography. This was confirmed throughout French military history, from Gergovia to Gao, via Fornovo, Valmy, Austerlitz, Waterloo, La Marne, Bir-Hakeim, Chipyong-ni, Urbajna and Alasay. All these victories and defeats foster a particular spirit of warfighting, deeply rooted in our representations of how war has to be fought.

This paper argues for the specificity of the French fighting spirit, mainly described at the end of the 19th century, but also its limits and abuses, and mostly what this spirit should cover today. 19th century military authors underlined the fearlessness that characterizes French soldiers and motivates them to naturally confront danger at the risk of their own lives. French military

operations in the 21st century are still based on the same virtues that were supposed to be inherent to the French soldier. Bravery, boldness, physical strength, discipline and *Esprit de corps* give to the troops the sufficient mass to oppose and break up the enemy.

Combat is mainly associated with shock and fire. Fire superiority gained a foothold in modern warfare but it is by no means the only key to success. Stand-off fire does not allow control of the field. Regardless of culture and technological evolutions that have affected combat, essential warfare components remain unchanged: maneuver, adaptation, resilience and cultural awareness. Fighting spirit contributes to the first principle of war, namely freedom of action. It is key to both political and strategic authority. It is strongly related to the ability to coerce the

enemy and to deprive him of his freedom of action. Thucydides stated 25 centuries ago that “*the strength of the city does not rely on its ships, nor on its ramparts, but on the character of its citizens*”.

Warriors who died in Valmy, Chemin des Dames, Bir-Hakeim, and Uzbin weren't victims but citizens who fell for their country's security, its defense and sovereignty. Their sacrifices form their fellow citizens' determination to protect their values and way of life. This fighting spirit cannot and should not be the prerogative of soldiers. This would acknowledge the dissociation of the Nation and its Army. This statement is above anything else a common heritage. It is rooted in representations, a particularly rich history, a geography, a mentality and values specific to our society. Indeed, this posture enables our Nation to affirm its determination to wage war up to hand-to-hand combat and bladed weapons to defend its values and way of life. The bayonet is therefore considered as a symbolic weapon that discourages the enemy from acting, making him question his ability to win and eventually give up. French people's responses to the terrorist attacks of 2015 proved that its combativeness and determination are not, as of today, a mere creation of the mind.

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The fundamental principles of operational decision-making in the French Army

by Colonel Fabrice Clée

Operational decision-making culture in the French Army is rooted in the very rich history of ideas and strategic thinking in the West. Operational decision-making deals with any complex reasoning process that can be characterized by four phases: knowledge acquisition, problem modeling, choice and action control. In recent decades, it has undergone significant changes, mainly due to an acceleration of scientific progress and a commendable desire from military leaders and private and public officials to learn from each other's good practices. The need for interoperability, for taking into account new forms of conflict and adversity, and the integration of new technologies, have led Western armed forces for nearly three decades to unify their operational reasoning methods that are very strongly inspired by American doctrine. Despite huge progress in new technologies, it cannot be forgotten that decision-making in warfare is fundamentally based on human factors and above all the ability of an operational leader to take into account the inherent complexity and uncertainty of war.

The work of most strategists in the past centuries, mainly French, Prussian and British authors, repeatedly underlined several factors that hinder or multiply the ability to develop knowledge, i. e. to understand a situation, as well as to make decisions in combat. These factors mainly relate to uncertainty and the essential importance of intuition for the leader in war to think and conduct actions. From this observation, these thinkers deduced that it is mainly the leader's subjective analytical skills, his ability to take in the situation at a "glance", that determines his decision-making ability. It is the leader's ability to free himself from the temptation of absolute rationality, to rely on his intuition in the face of circumstances and to take risks. While the art of leadership is fundamentally based on the individual personality of a leader and the charismatic expression of his intention, it is also based on a collective dynamic embodied by the staff. This group of experts and advisers, both civilian and military, is an essential tool to assist the military leader in his decision-making process. In European history, the initial formalization of this type of structure took place in Austria and France in the 18th century. Under the authority of Napoleon, one could witness a systematization of the general staff, although still limited to the drafting of the Emperor's orders and the administration of the troops. Over time, the notion of "staff" spread beyond the military sphere and now is



used in many complex organizations (from companies to political parties to administrations) to designate the team of experts who surround the decision-maker. This circulation of the "staff" concept is symptomatic of the mutual influence that has existed for more than a century between military and academic theorists. It was at the turn of the industrial revolution that some capitalist companies sought to move away from the family management model in order to carry out important projects involving a large number of people. Management theorists would then develop organizational models based on military doctrines of operational decision-making processes, their objective being to guarantee entrepreneurs optimal rationality in their choices. However, this rationality remains limited by the uncertainty inherent to the environment, contingencies, competition and the cognitive or emotional limits of the decision-maker.

As a result, exchanges between the civil and military worlds have intensified with varying degrees of success over the past century, sometimes generating confusion. Thus, decision-making structures, methods and processes, sometimes well adapted to the business world, now seem to have taken precedence over the real determinants of decision-making in war. Therefore, at the eve of the implementation of new technologies in our processes (big data, artificial intelligence, virtual reality) it is now critical for the military to keep in mind these fundamental principles of operational decision-making.

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The evolution of principles of war in French military doctrine, from Antiquity to today

by Colonel Fabrice Clée



In the field of the art and science of war, theorists since Antiquity have been interested, in the search of fundamental rules allowing the strategist and the tactician to gain the ascendancy over an adversary. Inspired by each other over centuries, they have contributed to the emergence of a common corpus, which each nation declines today according to its own military culture. Principles of war are multifaceted and can be understood as strategic principles and action principles. This article focuses on France and how prominent military theorists detailed the principles of war throughout history. The key idea is that principles of war as defined by Marshal Ferdinand Foch and currently endorsed by French Armed forces are the result of multiple influences.

It is only after Napoléon's military campaigns that the basis for defining unconditional principles of war are set with Jomini and Clausewitz. Foch synthesized Clausewitz and Jomini's ideas of principles of war and suggested a series of principles aimed to inform military decision-makers. These first principles are the pillars of the French military culture today, although it took roughly a century for their importance to be recognized.

Two British theorists in the 1920s and the 1950s drew on the work of Foch to develop the doctrine used to wage war. J.F. Fuller in 1920s reasserted the predominance of the principle of economy of forces and erected this particular principle as the pillar of this theory. Fuller's theory on principles of war would then be greatly appreciated by American strategic and military thinkers. In the early 1950s, Liddell Hart theorized an indirect approach consisting of six positive principles and two negative such as not to engage all the resources in front of the enemy or not to repeat an attack on the same line of battle. After 1943, freedom of action became another pillar of the principles of war. Relatively new principles start to gain momentum such as agility, fluidity and surprise. In France in the 1960s, interest in principles shifted from definition and random identification to a total absence of principles of war. Only with the publication of *General Instruction on land forces* in 1994 was the meaning of the principles of war doctrinally reasserted. Drawing on Foch's identification of principles, the general instruction defined three principles that prevailed in the 1970's: **freedom of action, economy of forces and concentration of efforts**. From each of these three principles resulted complementary principles. For example, in order to assure oneself freedom of action one has to have legitimacy in action. Legitimacy in action relies on the principle of necessity. These new principles imply moderation and a principle of reversibility in action.

More recently, General Guy Hubin proposed an interesting approach of the principles of war. He suggested that the basis for analyzing principles of war relies on Foch's three main principles followed by three guidelines: knowledge, will and power. Therefore, freedom of action would be the principle to establish and maintain power. The principle of economy of resources would allow knowledge by estimating the risks and advantages of an action. Finally, the principle of concentration of efforts would embody the will for success.

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Taking onboard interculturality and rendering it operational

by Colonel Martial Reinbold

Interculturality is hardly a new subject. However, a clear conceptualization of the term is yet to emerge and be applied on a conscious and voluntary basis. The successive stages in military history – war amidst populations, indigenization of troops and the identification of the population as the center of gravity – reveal the need for this intercultural factor to be taken into account in the areas of both tactics and military strategy. Unbeknownst to them, Gallieni and Lyautey were all forerunners of the practice of interculturality. Today, is there a need for conceptualizing interculturality? Is it really a factor of operational superiority? It only takes a quick overview to see that it is indeed a factor that cannot be ignored.



As globalization is now part of everyday life, there is a growing need for intercultural practice in the corporate world as well as in the public sector. The market for interculturality is hence booming. Numerous universities in France, such as Dauphine or La Sorbonne, now offer high-level training in intercultural management. Every business has come to recognize how important it is to consider intercultural factors: understanding the “other” is indeed crucial to work more effectively in a multicultural environment, and to collaborate better with a diverse range of partners. The United States immediately grasped the importance of interculturality. In the U.S Department of Defense, interculturality is taught via various innovative channels, using new technologies. The U.S DoD even runs tests to select candidates with high intercultural skills and turn down others. Interculturality training is therefore not just a passing trend but a real need expressed in several forms. In France, EMSOME (“*État-major spécialisé pour l’outre-mer et l’étranger*”), which trains all Army personnel deployed outside metropolitan France or abroad, can truly be seen as a “school of interculturality”. It is the direct descendant of organizations that had been preparing French troops for overseas services since 1901 and has maintained its status as a historical training school. EMSOME remains at the heart of every mission: training, organic command and, more recently, the Army hub for operational military partnership (CPMO).

The training provided by EMSOME relies on three pillars. Firstly, “knowledge” of the trainee’s new location’s human and geographic environment. Secondly, “knowhow” and “know-how-to-be”: attitudes, behaviors to either adopt or avoid. The goal is to enhance the trainee’s aptitude for adapting to a drastically different environment.

As stressed by the Army Chief of Staff in his introduction to a conference on interculturality on 28 November 2018, “*the two main pitfalls to avoid*” in practicing interculturality are “*ethnocentrism and cultural relativism*”. Ethnocentrism propels us towards trying to decipher and explain “the other” via our own framework of values, while cultural relativism rules out any judgement of others, opening the door to accepting anything. Ultimately, interculturality implies finding the middle ground between these two extremes. Today, the challenge for EMSOME is to render operational how interculturality is taken onboard. Interculturality is no longer just a way for our soldiers to adapt to a new environment: it must boost our operational efficiency. It can do so firstly by providing better interactions with our European and African allies in operations, and secondly, by enhancing our capacity to understand our enemies, and the populations in the midst of whom we operate.

It is mandatory for the operationalization of interculturality to undergo a concept phase. EMSOME is currently at this stage, trying to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues at play. Over the past year, various works were carried out to achieve this goal, based on analysis provided by universities, writers and researchers.

As we’ve seen, interculturality is a crucial topic, which will continue to matter in the future. EMSOME is committed to this issue, and its historical expertise has already benefited the forces deployed abroad. Day after day, it reinforces its expertise, seeking to fulfill completely its role as a “school of interculturality”.

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Surprise in French warfighting culture

by Major Philippe Georges



Surprise has always been a phenomenon integral to war. Throughout history, the importance of surprise has been apparent in numerous studies on strategic thinking. Surprise can occur in diverse domains, including geographic space, time, technology and doctrine. Not mutually exclusive, these fields in which surprise has been achieved can be combined in order to increase its effects. Liddell Hart sets out three levels of surprise determined by the effect obtained. The first level is tactical surprise, providing an initial advantage from which one can recover. The second is decisive surprise, destroying the plan and all the dispositions taken and from which one can survive and be able to give a new kind of combat. Finally, the third level would be moral surprise, leading to tetany, which annihilates every capacity for recovery. The tactical effects and advantages of surprise on the battlefield are diverse. For instance, it delivers a necessary blow to the latency established between the action taken by the victim, surprise, and his reaction. The ultimate goal is to paralyze the enemy. Moreover, surprise remains one of the sole means for tipping the balance of a situation involving several opponents of equal force. It can even create the conditions for victory in a situation which had started off as unfavourable for the party initiating the surprise.

This is part of the reasons why some of the most powerful countries in the world – such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Russia and several countries of NATO – have even elevated “surprise” to the status of a principle of war. But the specificity of France precisely lies in the fact that “surprise” has never been classed as a principle, among the three principles of war recognized by France and originally identified by Marshal Foch. These principles to be applied by land forces at a tactical level are

economy of means, unity of effort and freedom of action. In a more general perspective, French warfighting culture, from the First Empire to the present day, can be characterized as such: cartesian in nature, it gives great importance to axial manoeuvre, soldier bravery and the position of the leader. Of the three recognized principles of war, freedom of action is the most important and is considered fundamental. War remains a fight via and for freedom of action. Freedom of action is what secures the initiative of the military or political leader. It should enable the leader to take action how and where it suits him, with the necessary means, to fulfil the set objectives. Freedom of action also remains fundamental for limiting risks and maximizing opportunities. As for unity of effort, it involves the combination of actions and the optimization of effects to “increase the effectiveness on the chosen objective.” As an offshoot, we can grasp the combined arms cooperation necessary to aggregate the various capabilities and skills for the objectives set by Command. This particular principle is therefore distinct from the unequivocal definition of concentration of means.

The economy of means principle will soon have an increased number of applications with the advent of the Army’s SCORPION program. In the fields of distribution and modularity, the system will offer never-before-seen opportunities. As such, in French culture, surprise is nonetheless tied to these three principles of war. From a doctrinal perspective, surprise is a procedure which maximizes their effects, but the inherent nature of surprise prevents it from being classed as a principle. If surprise can secure and maintain freedom of action, it becomes essential for applying the principle of unity of effort. As part of the framework of kinetic force balance, surprise becomes the best way to tip the balance in our favour and offer opportunities for exploitation. Otherwise, it maximizes effects on an enemy who has been completely unaware or even weakened. In the case of the economy of means, surprise applies to the freedom granted to the leader to organize his forces, to choose his capabilities and to put them to use in a way that adheres to doctrine (more or less). In French warfighting culture, the definition of the principles of war selected by Marshal Foch enables us to grasp the extent to which surprise is clearly induced. Surprise enables an increase in effects and offers leaders opportunities and the chance to guard against enemy surprise.

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The new forms of war and the future of Air-Land operations

by Colonel Gilles Haberey

War today encompasses many forms and understanding the enemy is henceforth questioned by his protracted use of hybrid strategies. Given the dire consequences a potential ill-suited military apparatus could lead to, both our enemy's hybrid warfare and our own constraints compel us to humbly extend our thinking accordingly. Undoubtedly, the times of tactical and operational certainties have long passed. Moreover, although the multifaceted evolutions of warfare are well known, determining their scope is far from easy.

First, the changing nature of the operating environment, invariably intricate, is to be considered. New forms of conflict are blurring the edges between public and private actors involved in violence, and between conventional armed forces, armed groups, militias, and organized crime. Violence itself develops into a polymorphic phenomenon, from its institutionalized form, involving armed forces, to terrorism, surgical strikes, hostage crises or the use of special forces. In addition, violence today lies beyond the scope of international law. Lastly, cities will turn to be the heart of tomorrow's operational environment.

Second, the technological domination that Western armed forces have long enjoyed is no longer to be taken for granted. Our enemies are now embracing cheap civilian technologies (such as drones, 3D printing, chemical and biological agents, IEDs) and resort to psychological warfare entailing fake news and cyber threats. Consequently, our supremacy, as far as information systems, cyberspace and the third dimension are concerned, is gone. By investing in the above-mentioned areas, our enemy could eventually recover the very symmetric capabilities it lost on the ground.

Yet, notwithstanding these developments, none can pretend that the way to wage war is to change drastically. Principles of war are far from being disputed, and the use of force remains subject to the mastery of long-term operational capacities. Furthermore, there are no grounds to consider that current or anticipated enemies could earn a sustainable strategic win or destroy our forces, should we suffer from a tactical defeat.



Nonetheless, the French military apparatus is committed to adapting its operational preparation and envisions developing a large spectrum of means and forces able to deploy on the ground. In that respect, our capability development should be comprehensive, and no capacity should be discarded. Likewise, strategic foresight, feedback, doctrine, equipment and training continue to form a critical continuum.

The French Army is intrinsically bound by an ongoing process of continuous reform. It has participated in a range of missions, such as peacekeeping, evacuations, stabilization missions, and counter-insurgency (Afghanistan, Sahel). Currently, it is engaged on the national soil, is helping to destroy ISIS in Iraq, and participates in NATO's presence in the Baltics. The French Army now has to solve the following puzzle: how to defeat multiple and different non-state enemies acting outside the frame of ethics, while maintaining the consistency of a well-structured and hierarchized military apparatus? Solving this may involve a deep reflection at the tactical and operational levels of war (known in French as "*art opératif*") and an enhancement of agility. Finally, if we should fully seize the opportunities driven by technology, we must prevent ourselves from succumbing to the pitfall of dependency.

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Black Hawk Down and the French principles of war

by Hugo-Alexandre Queijo



Black Hawk Down is one of the most iconic war movies. Produced and directed by Ridley Scott in 2001, it is the adaptation of the book, *Black Hawk Down: a story of Modern Warfare*, written by Mark Bowden. The spectator is plunged within the Battle of Mogadishu, which took place on October 3rd and 4th 1993, between American forces and the Somali militiamen of general Mohammed Farah Aidid. The interest of the movie, independently of the accuracy of the presented facts, is to offer a demonstration of sometimes underestimated realities of contemporary conflicts. Friction, defined by Clausewitz as the part of uncertainty which surrounds the conduct of operation, or what “distinguishes the real war from the one that we can read in books”, is a central element. Among the forces that contribute to friction are political pressure, conflicts within joint forces, lack of means, unexpected resistance, mistakes in planning and execution, erroneous interpretation or performance of an order. One of the

best examples illustrating friction is the fall of private Todd Blackburn at the very beginning of the operation. The movie also offers a demonstration of the mechanics of the principles of strategy. They can be understood as criteria for assessing the validity of a decision, from the tactical to the strategic level.

There are “general rules to avoid the enemy’s law and to ensure superiority over chosen points by a quick and determined action.” Marshal Ferdinand Foch initially retained four: freedom of action, economy of forces, free disposal of assets and safety. His work strongly inspired the doctrine of the French Army, which retained the first two, as well as the concentration of efforts. The recent document *Future Land Action* added two others, the so-called “complementary” ones. Coming from the work of Admiral Guy Labou erie in the 1970s, they respectively are the principles of uncertainty and “staggering”. Given the circumstances of the battle, it is not useless to bring some others as well, such as direction, objective, mass or initiative.

The economy of forces mandates finding the correct balance between ends and means. During the battle of Mogadishu, while the American forces may have been able to estimate the forces of their opponent, they apparently underestimated their resolve and their ability to manoeuvre. Similarly, general Garrison may have made the mistake of not having sufficient reserves. Concentration requires as many forces as possible to be combined at the point chosen, to create a mass of manoeuvre or shock that allows, as Corbett says, “to be the strongest in the right place at the right time”. Napol on makes it a major imperative. It is a question of managing the necessary balance between the cohesion of the entire system and its extension in order to fulfil other tasks. This is probably part of the problem that has arisen in the American command. The principle of uncertainty

aims to provoke surprise for the opponent. It is necessary to take all necessary measures to allow the execution of an operation without risking being surprised by an unexpected movement of the enemy. However, from the first few minutes of the operation, in the movie, the spectator attends the signalling of the American entry force, in both land and air, by a network of unarmed lookouts. Staggering is defined by Labou erie as the need to “break the rhythm of the other”, to “break at the right time and on sensitive hinges any attempt to take or retake initiative.” Jomini makes it the privileged way to impose his influence on the opponent. The initiative is obtained by creative imagination in design, speed and flexibility in execution. The loss of initiative is one of the iconic moments of the movie, with general Garrison acknowledging “We just lost the initiative” after the first helicopter crash.

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