



## The image of the military in the nation

G2S File No. 25

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Published on 10/04/2020

Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

**"Accepting to die so that innocent people may live is at the heart of a soldier's commitment." It is with these words that the President of the Republic paid tribute to Colonel BELTRAME during the ceremony of 28 March 2018 at Les Invalides. This tribute was followed, in cumulative audiences, by 3.6 million French people on television.**

We are far from the years of Indochina, Algeria, the committees of soldiers... Conscription and its servitudes have disappeared. But, at the same time, the army seemed to have moved away from the Nation, while many of its garrisons disappeared. It had even almost disappeared from the concerns of the French until the Islamist extremists took the war to the Middle East, Africa, and now, to national soil. As a result, the need for security is reappearing and the image of our armies is magnified, as it has not been for a long time.

Is this a cause for celebration? Of course, but at the same time, it seems important to look deeper into the foundations of this phenomenon, to assess its solidity, to become aware of its fragility and to find ways of perpetuating it.

Indeed, if our image in the Nation today is excellent, this "state of grace" is nevertheless fragile and needs to be strengthened and maintained, especially among our youth.

This good image could be explained by three main reasons: our armies respond to the security needs of worried citizens, they give confidence by being professional and non-partisan, and they are valued by the political authorities.

France is worried. On its soil, the threat of a new attack is always to be feared. Beyond that, there is a widespread feeling of insecurity in the world. The protracted conflict in the

Middle East reveals the competing actions of Russia, Turkey and Iran. The Chinese power is challenging the United States of America to the unpredictable president. North Korea continues its plan to become a military nuclear power. The Sahel has been inflamed by the collapse of Libya. All of this contributes to the anguish in our society.

In this climate, the army reassures by its presence and professionalism. Our compatriots are now familiar with the SENTINELLE soldiers in our streets and many are aware, probably in a more confused way, that our presence in Africa appears to be a distant bulwark against the same threat of an extreme and fanatical Islamism, present there but also at home.

The professionalism of the military is also widely appreciated. In a violent context, where the majority of demonstrations end in riots, the action of our gendarmes in maintaining order is rarely criticised. But, even if not everyone has made the connection, the best example of professionalism - and courage - was recently given by the PARIS fire brigade, during the Notre-Dame fire, because these "fire soldiers" are soldiers!

Furthermore, without any partisan spirit, we must acknowledge that we are lucky to have a President of the Republic who has understood the importance of putting the armies first. The moving ceremonies at the Invalides in honour of those who fell in the exercise of their mission, well covered by the media, even if they are, alas, a little too frequent, make the image of the soldier sublime.

Finally, the typically French celebration of 14 July remains an unmissable moment to show our men and their equipment in the best light.

**A guarantee of security, an example of professionalism, consideration of power, everything seems to be very favourable to give our armies an ideal image. However, this image remains fragile**

This state of grace must be examined realistically. However, there are a number of worrying signs in our society today, in search of landmarks, largely influenced by the media, capable of burning tomorrow what it praised yesterday.

It is clear that today, a high school student spends more time in front of a screen than in his school (40% of his waking time according to Michel DESMURGET's study<sup>2</sup>). He can therefore only be influenced, to varying degrees, by the media. The life of the French is largely punctuated by unfiltered information from continuous news channels or social networks. From scoops to catastrophes, it is reflection, hindsight and critical thinking that are the victims. "The cult of instantaneity, unlimited expression and broadcasting favours post-truth and fake news," according to sociologist Michel WIEVIORKA. Society is driven by emotion. The French cried Notre-Dame who was burning, trembling for the Australian koalas; everything is good, from the best to the worst, to "make the buzz".

This state of mind, which certainly allows a nation to commune with tragic events, also

has a definite setback. Without real critical safeguards, opinion can be subject to two tendencies. On the one hand, a kind of truth can be built up from proven facts which, pushed by certain lobbies, becomes an absolute, inescapable truth and will for a while occupy the front of the media stage and above all deeply affect judgement. We have thus seen an opinion, initially indifferent, rightly scandalized by the discovery of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. This salutary reaction nevertheless has an enormous setback: from now on, for the majority, media hype means that the Church is now definitively assimilated to these abuses. All abusers!

The other consequence of the lack of criticism and hindsight, and which can be abruptly condemned and rejected without appeal by people who had been admired or even praised before justice was pronounced. The cinema, education and sports circles are nowadays undergoing a more or less deserved hallali ...

Why such a development with no direct connection to the subject? What is the relationship with our armies? For the time being, fortunately, we are spared, but a few clues should alert us. The national tribute to the victims of the helicopter crash in Mali has nevertheless raised the problem of our presence there. "Far from home, in Africa ... The cartoons in a satirical newspaper should not be the first indication that the legitimacy of our action in the Sahel is being called into question at a time when public opinion in these countries is beginning to shift in favour of a sentiment hostile to France.

### **Nothing is ever definitive in public opinion, especially in today's world. Is it possible to prevent possible abuses?**

Our good image needs to be constantly monitored, maintained, reinforced and, anticipating the future, it must involve our youth.

First of all, we need to strengthen this image. This first requires good communicators, well introduced in the media, without forgetting the social networks that are now unavoidable. In this connection, perhaps we are not making it sufficiently known that the military excels in areas that are not specific to them. If you search the Internet, it is very difficult to discover that Martin FOURCADE, five-time Olympic champion, is also a second lieutenant. We will always need a TABARLY ... There is also no shame in pointing out that the man who made the right decision, at the foot of the North Tower of Notre-Dame which was threatening to collapse, by committing his men to the blaze, was a general at the heart of the battle.

Another way to give a good image of the military is to get involved in the life of the country. For example, the citizens' reserve was a good initiative that deserves to be widely exploited. Recipients should be invited, without boasting, to make their military status known and, why not, to come to work occasionally in uniform. The image of the soldier as a man of integrity, faithful to an ideal, gifted for organization, a man of action and decision must be cultivated. The appointment of General GEORGELIN to coordinate the restoration of Notre-Dame de PARIS is entirely in line with this. A second career or a commitment in public life is a good relay of opinion that must be cultivated. The only limits are the display of militant political positions which, whatever one does, commit the

institution.

Mayor of a small town, alderman of a larger city, are valued positions that are a testimony to the spirit of service. The duty of reserve that protects the institution should not discourage those who, like Pierre de VILLIERS, know how to write books that are widely appreciated far beyond the restricted circle of our institutions. We really have an effort to make in this area. This way of being present in society is an important asset to be cultivated and developed.

Last but not least, we should be concerned about our youth, because nothing lasting can be built without involving them. This priority target is probably not the easiest. As we saw earlier, it is "hyper-connected" and cannot be reached without social networks. At the same time, we must be aware that this work cannot be done without involving young people themselves. At the risk of not understanding their language and codes. How can this be done? It is already necessary to involve all the young people that we know how to reach through certain institutions: the Institute of Higher Studies of National Defence (IHEDN), its branch IHEDN-Youth, the Armed Forces-Youth Commission in particular.

Above all, however, we will now have at our disposal a formidable means of raising the awareness of all young people, the Universal National Service (UN). This service, which is intended to cover an entire age group, must include in its programme information and awareness-raising sequences on the action of our armies, in particular through testimonials. There is a whole programme to be set up with the young people themselves.

Thus, while much already exists, we must not neglect any tool, occupy our full place in the Nation and project ourselves resolutely into the future.

Let us be aware that the world in which we live is unstable, changing and connected at the same time. The image of armies in the Nation, which is excellent today, requires vigilance, competence and anticipation, particularly by investing in youth. We must be watchful, attentive to any change, in direct contact with decision-makers, capable of controlling opinion, in a widely open world where we must now broaden our thinking beyond the strict framework of our country.

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[2] TV Lobotomy - The Scientific Truth about the Effects of Television. Ed. Max MILO, PARIS 2011.

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**Release date**            26/03/2020

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