



The military and involvement in public life

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

As I appreciate the difficulties of the exercise and the importance of what is at stake, I wish them every success in this process, which is intended above all to serve our fellow citizens.

As for me, I would like to mention in this article my brief political experience during the 2017 legislative elections, the elements that motivated it and some of the lessons I learned from it.

I had been engaged in the beautiful mission of Governor of the Invalides for nearly two years, when, in the spring of 2016, my wife and I were invited to lunch at the National Assembly by the Deputy of Valencia and his deputy . This luncheon will remain in our memories, because after a few exchanges of courtesy, the member of parliament will tell me that for a few months he had been working on a project consisting in proposing me to be a candidate in Valencia to run for his succession! His deputy, who is also the mayor of a town in the Valencian conurbation, volunteered to stand in for me.

The moment of surprise passed, and after many questions and explanations, I understood their reasoning quite simple, having no candidate who 'imposed': the military is very well seen in the country and some Valentinois still have good memories of the former chief of corps of Spahis that I was ... The left seemed at that time "out of the race", it is to the extremes that we should resist ... A former officer should be able to do this...

Having asked for three months to respond to their proposal, I was provided with plenty of statistics and forecasts showing that the riding was "winnable" and that I would have their full support throughout the campaign. In short, for them, it was "a one-time offer that could not be refused.

Having always felt that there were too few former military personnel in the Assembly, I decided to take the plunge, not without having set that I would remain as long as possible in post with the dear boarders of the Invalides (which I was, of course, ashamed to abandon two years before the end of my term of office, scheduled for 2019).

Wearing the LR-UDI colors, I was present at the nomination of the candidate François FILLON whom I supported, then at his "explosion in flight" in the first round of the presidential elections. This painful defeat in the first round had a harmful effect on the right-wing alliance, which was then hit by a near "extinction of votes", especially during the legislative elections...

At the end of April 2017, I had asked the President of the Republic to end my duties as Governor of the Invalides on the date of the beginning of the official legislative campaign in mid-May. I informed the Minister of Defence at that time, as the texts provide for a second-section general. I received a good reception, mixed with curiosity...

So I really entered the campaign in Valencia at the beginning of May 2017, for a period that was undoubtedly too short but absolutely fascinating. We held a multitude of electoral meetings in the surrounding towns and villages, without, it must be said, attracting crowds... We made numerous tours in the various markets, where contact with potential voters was not always easy... indeed, it is a real change for an officer to come and solicit his fellow citizens - while they are busy with something else - to praise the merits of his candidacy!

Then came the day of the first round, when I finished second behind the candidate from En marche. I was then defeated in the second round on June 18, with a comparable difference. However, I had allowed myself a bit of humor by calling on voters to respond to the general who launched a "second call of June 18"!

Let me now turn to some of the observations or lessons I have learned from this brief experience.

First of all, the best thing is the wealth of human relations that I was able to benefit from during the campaign on the part of the activists or supporters of our cause. Even though there were relatively few young people, in fact people of all ages and backgrounds, I said - and I still think - that I had impressions with them that were very comparable to the ones we have with our soldiers on operations . A lot of dedication, determination, enthusiasm and loyalty: many of them are still today pleasant relations in the Valencia region.

On the other hand, I quickly came to the sad conclusion that "anything goes" in the political struggle... I will take two examples.

The first is the way in which the outgoing Member of Parliament who was supporting me, in turn, "exploded in flight" on the first day of the official campaign, on the morning of Monday 22 May. The local newspaper had indeed chosen his plane and therefore headlined on the front page that the outgoing member had made shocking and inappropriate comments To do so, the newspaper used a clandestine recording made by

an unscrupulous activist during a lunch with this MP in the previous March . The newspaper exploited this theme for a week by asking the different political parties on a daily basis what they thought of such statements...

Interviewed in my turn, I could only declare that "in spite of his regrettable remarks, the outgoing deputy was very courageous", since he was born, under media pressure, to resign from his post as president of the departmental council! It is easy to understand that, deprived of my main support, I felt a little lonely to lead this short campaign ...

The other interesting and quite topical example is the use of the pension issue as a political weapon. Activists have probably spread the word to ask me several times in different markets, what I was going to do with my pension, if by chance I was elected... I guess in their minds I had to give it up?

My main opponent, for her part, waited until we were faced with agricultural representatives and a retired farmer who was talking about his 750 euros pension, to ask me in public if it was comparable to military pensions? I understood that day that we, who had only had enough to live on all our lives, were nowadays clearly classed in the category of the wealthy, and moreover "thanks to their taxes"....So I advise those of our comrades who venture into this particular world of politics to study the answer to this question carefully.

Another lesson, which is also quite obvious, is that it is difficult for a military member, after a career of high mobility, to demonstrate sufficient local roots, especially if you don't have a minimum of media support. An opponent, very right of the chessboard, himself a former soldier, thus provoked me with the complacency of the local newspaper, by calling me a "parachute", which was of course not totally unfounded... and not abnormal for a soldier either... In spite of my stay in Valence as a Spahi, I was able to claim that my family had an important presence in the Rhone valley and in the Drôme, and that my father, then in the FFI maquis of the Drôme, had participated in the liberation of Valence on August 31, 1944.... without media coverage, it was an arduous task.

However, it must be said that, in the dynamics of the presidential election, a "media steamroller" was set in motion in front of us. Continuous news radio and television stations were on the campaign trail... Thus, my opponent won, even though the election meeting rooms were even less crowded than ours!

Faced with this obvious media imbalance, I was counting on the famous professions of faith that the candidates addressed to the voters, via the services of the Prefecture, to make myself known... It must be said that it was really not "the right year", because in the first round, the professions of faith were simply not distributed in good time by the private company to which the Prefecture had subcontracted the mission! Despite our protests, and a second improved version of our profession of faith, the distribution was just as disastrous and random for the second round! I told the evening of the results of the second round what I thought of it to the Prefect, who simply apologized. The appeal lodged for this reason by some of the defeated candidates was unsuccessful.

In conclusion, I would like to say that, even if it was not successful, I do not regret anything of this adventure. Now living in the Drôme, I very much appreciate getting to know the people, who are welcoming and relaxed. Moreover, having met them occasionally since then, I know that the residents of the Invalides did not blame us too much for this abandonment, and I am happy that my successor is taking care of them with all the necessary care.

I have also appreciated the reaction of our military institution; the sympathetic support of many young comrades and the understanding attitude of my friends and former comrades.

I therefore continue to believe that it would be healthy for our country if the military institution were better represented in Parliament, but of course I am aware of the difficulties. For my part, I felt that I had been given a rather exceptional opportunity, but one that was implemented during an "annus horribilis" in many respects for the right.

In political life, too, you need a bit of luck...

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