



## What social role for the officer in the 21st century?

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Commandement

**"No one is in a better position than the officer to exercise effective action over his subordinates. In immediate contact with them, he fully shares their work, their fatigue, and yet derives no benefit from it. He is, therefore, a marvellous agent of social action."**

**Captain LYAUTEY (On the Officer's Social Role).**

In 1891, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Captain LYAUTEY shook up his hierarchy and astonished French society by exposing his views on The social role of the officer. He advocated a new and wider conception of the function of officer, associating to his technical and operational role, that of educator of the (male) youth of France, who were then required to serve in the army for three years. "Give them this fruitful conception of the modern role of the officer who has become the educator of the entire nation," he said. For him, this education was to contribute to strengthening the cohesion of the Nation by awakening the spirit of defence of the citizens, by making them understand the issues at stake, but also by developing their personal capacities and aptitudes and thus their confidence in themselves and in their leaders.

This approach to the officer's "profession" gradually took root in officer training, particularly after the Second World War. Chapter 1 of Instruction<sup>No</sup>. 300 on General Military Training of March 1970 recalled that: "Training in the armed forces has two closely related aspects which are equally indispensable but very different in nature:

- One aspect is the training, acquisition and knowledge of the skills necessary to perform the tasks...

- An aspect of education, adaptation to the living environment, active adherence to military rules and preparation for wartime and peacetime actions".

However, the " education of citizens" by the officer was then essentially carried out through compulsory military service involving some 260,000 young Frenchmen per year<sup>10</sup> , but suspended since 1996. Now that this vector of influence has disappeared and the numbers involved have been considerably reduced, one may wonder about the sustainability of this mission?

However, in his book *Servir*, General de VILLIERS states: "We have 25,000 young people arriving every year, overseas military service, voluntary military service, the foam school from the age of 16 and equal opportunities in the Air Force. These social measures maintain the vitality of the link between the Army and the Nation".

In order to better appreciate the desirable social role of the officer in today's security context, it is necessary to start from his or her aims to distinguish useful actions and investments and to set their limits. This social role must be part of the need to strengthen the links between military and civil society.

This is essentially a question of :

- Stimulate the spirit of defence of the citizens.
- Strengthening the support of civil society for the military (understanding of missions and constraints) and their action.
- To improve the motivation and cohesion of men and units for greater efficiency.
- To optimise the recruitment of military personnel, both in quantity and quality.

### **Stimulate the spirit of defence of citizens**

As a consequence of the emergence of nuclear weapons at the end of the Second World War, the likelihood of "total wars" between enemy developed nations became more remote, and with this remoteness, the spirit of defence of citizens became more distant. Mechanically, this has always been proportional to the importance and proximity of the perceived threats. At the end of the Cold War, the absence of perceived threats to citizens led not only to material disarmament, but also to moral disarmament.

Islamic terrorism since the early 2000s, the destabilisation of the countries on the periphery of Europe in the South and East, and the rise in military power of the countries on the periphery of the EU have all contributed to the rise of Islamic terrorism. The destabilisation of the countries on the periphery of Europe in the South and East and the rise in military power of the emerging countries have revived a sense of insecurity and a need for defence, but without a clear awareness of what the country's military defence

effort should be. The plebiscite of citizens (between 70 and 75%) in favour of a European defence concept in Eurobarometer polls reveals the widespread feeling that national defences are no longer sufficient to guarantee against today's threats.

Operation BARKHANE in the Sahel-Saharan strip, whose link with their defence is generally accepted by a majority of French people, illustrates the limits of France's ability to resolve this conflict through its military capabilities, even though the quality of the military is unanimously recognised. The military operations of the last 20 years have rarely produced the expected results, which makes civil society doubt the military solutions to crises. As a result, the spirit of defence is less identified with military action. In this context, the social role of the officer still appears necessary.

The officer's main vector of influence on this spirit of defence is to be found in his intrinsic qualities: exemplarity, dedication, spirit of sacrifice and competence, which the officer must transmit to his subordinates, as well as attachment to republican values.

But the link between the army and society also rests on effective and sustained communication. National tributes to soldiers killed in external operations, more or less mediatized, contribute to this, but cannot be enough. It is essential that the officers who are the best experts in military action be involved in communication and testimony in order to raise public awareness and understanding of current threats, the issues at stake, the role of citizens and the needs of the armed forces to deal with them. Progress has been made in recent years with the regular hearings of chiefs of staff before parliamentary committees, the intervention of general staff officers and the participation of military officers. The progress made in recent years with the regular hearings of chiefs of staff before parliamentary committees, the involvement of general officers in the second section of the media and the creation of specialised information media such as the ASAF11 or the THEATRUM BELL website<sup>112</sup>, but these are still <sup>inadequate</sup>.

The involvement of the military corps and therefore of officers remains essential for a stronger involvement of citizens in their defence in the current context.

### **Reinforce the support of civil society for its army**

The positive image of the armed forces and the military in French society has increased by 20% since 2006 and has reached unprecedented levels: 83% of French citizens expressed confidence in their army in 2017 and 82% wanted an increase in the defence budget (cf. DCoD annual barometer<sup>13</sup>). This encouraging progress is the result of the French army's effectiveness in external theatres, but also of the deployment of the SENTINELLE system for the protection of populations against terrorism in major cities. Despite the ingratitude of this mission for the military, it must be said that it creates an emotional bond and gives a unique visibility of the usefulness of the military to the population. This observation illustrates the importance of direct contact between the military and the society they defend for the support they expect from it. This support remains essential for the morale of combatants.

However, it can also be noted that this increase in the positive image of the armed forces began at the end of conscription, which profoundly changed the public's view of the military. The generally negative feeling of national service having disappeared and even fuelled some nostalgia, young conscripts and their families no longer see the armies as a life insurance-type guarantee whose only constraint is its financing.

There is more support and confidence in the defence tool (deterrence and professional army), but less involvement. Unfortunately, in this area, it is to be feared that greater social involvement of officers will have little impact on this attitude of civil society.

Furthermore, the contribution of the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the involvement of military officers in the State's social policy through the social measures of the Adapted Military Service, Overseas Military Service, Equal Opportunities Plan, EPIDE14 , the army's outreach centre.... also strengthen the bond of solidarity with civil society. It is likely that the setting up of a universal national service with even limited participation by the military will increase it further, but with one limitation: not to turn military personnel into sports instructors, trainers and social workers, at the risk of blurring the image of the armed forces.

## **Improving human confidence and unit cohesion**

The area in which the officer retains a decisive social role is unquestionably that of the confidence to be gained from the men and the morale of the units. Independently of the quality of the leaders, with the multiplication of external and internal operations (SENTINELLE) and the significant increase in the number of spouses with a professional activity, the social status of the military has taken on new importance. Their physical as well as moral availability in the theatres of deployment requires the hierarchy and especially the contact officers to pay particular attention to the social status of families. The material living conditions of the "rear" but also the relations of trust within the units have become decisive factors in their effectiveness. "The needs of recruitment, retention and professional development oblige the armed forces to strengthen their internal social action, in terms of remuneration, living conditions, training, retraining and taking care of the family context," notes an IHEDN working group.

## **Optimizing recruitment**

Finally, many factors play a role in the recruitment of NCOs and soldiers: context of threats, nature of operations, level of risk, social situation, etc.; but word of mouth from both active and demobilised soldiers on the consideration of social aspects and human relations in the units is also a major criterion in the decision to enlist.

The personal and professional development achieved in the armed forces, in addition to the reference values of the military society, are the best guarantees of the civic education of a responsible citizen. Even if the number of personnel affected by "military education" has considerably decreased, its impact on the spirit of defence, but also on the support of civil society for the army, recruitment and the effectiveness of units cannot be ignored.

The social role is not included in the White Paper. It is not one of the primary missions of the army, but this has never been the case. In the past, the social role has been a positive consequence of the army's place in society. Today, with a professional army, it should probably be included among its missions.

The officer's social role is still relevant today!

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10| Today, one age group, girls and boys combined, is estimated at just over 790,000 young people.

[11] Association in support of the French army: <https://www.asafrance.fr>

[12] Profile of the G2S On the website THEATRIUM BELLI : <https://theatrum-belli.com/category/defensems-association/>

13| Delegation for Defence Information and Communication.

14| Establishment for Employment Insertion.

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