

Universal national service and military service

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

There is great concern about **the future of our country and its ability to "live together", with all citizens sharing what are commonly referred to as "republican values". We will not return here to the diagnosis, which is widely referred to in this dossier. On the other hand, with regard to the treatment of the evil that affects the component of our nation that is its greatest wealth, in this case its youth, it seems urgent to put an end to the fantasy of the concept of universal national service as currently advocated by certain politicians who would like to make it a (pale) replica of the former military service, obviously entrusted for the most part to the military institution.**

In fact, in a society that is losing its historical landmarks, paradoxically, the image of an army that is the last guardian in many respects of the virtues that made the Republic. And it is therefore quite natural that, in order to face the problem, the firebrands of military service, which was "definitively" suspended in 1996 with the adoption of the model of a professional army, reappear. This military service, once so criticized for its many shortcomings, is put forward by a number of senior citizens who, with the passage of time, have become the parents of multiple virtues, whereas many of them, when they had to participate in it, never stopped trying to escape it by means of reprieve and dispensations, judging it to be of very little usefulness, and a source of wasted and wasted time, or else circumventing it by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by open positions in embassies or in cooperation, or the "safe houses" inherent in such a massive scheme. This concert of new converts has obviously caught the attention of a new political class whose youth has, among other characteristics, the defect of not having been concerned by this imperative of military service and therefore the power to idealise it at little cost. It is in these conditions quite easy to make it one, or even the reference point for solving the problem of unity posed to the nation.

However, once it is accepted that a professional army is indispensable to meet the strategic challenges of our time, the impressive list of obstacles to be overcome, whether budgetary, human or material, to return to a form of military service, leads us to rule out

the feasibility of such a system and to try to imagine a system "inspired by" this service but which the realities of the constraints tend to reduce to its simplest expression: Hence the idea of a universal national service, which, in a few weeks and in a Prévert-style list of actions to be carried out, supposed to make up for previous shortcomings, including those of the National Education system, would give young people back the indispensable referential training that they currently lack.

As other articles in this dossier show, this project is clearly utopian as regards the adequacy between its supposed objectives, the real possibilities of concretizing the actions to be carried out and the results to be hoped for.

It should also be noted, however, that, unlike military service, in which young people put themselves at the service of the nation, universal national service would be tantamount to putting the nation at the service of young people. This is not prohibitive, but it does mark the fact that we are dealing with a completely different paradigm. And, in this case and in view of the objectives pursued, the term service, used for its evocative power, seems well to be proscribed: it is in fact a period of citizen training, devoid of any military connotation, which is now put forward by its promoters. And it is to a sort of short secular Scouting course that young people would be invited to learn a few rudiments of living together.

It can also be noted that the reference to military service more or less directly raises the fundamental question of the social role of the military institution. However, the purpose of military service was never primarily the mixing of classes of young French people: it was an effect induced by the strategic choice of a conscription army, calling on all strata of the population to provide sufficient numbers of soldiers for a massive confrontation such as the one between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Today, to want to heavily involve the armed forces' resources and their relatively small human resources in the Scouting substitute referred to above would be to give clear priority to a secondary social role to the detriment of their operational capabilities and primary purpose.

Should nothing be done? Of course not, because everyone understands that the situation is serious and that we are moving at an accelerated pace. We are heading for disaster if nothing is done to put the Republic and its values, the rule of law and its obligations, which impose a fair balance between rights and duties, back in their rightful place: which could be summed up by reinventing the rule of law and duty...

In this process, which is crucial for the future of our nation and which must clearly be a long-term one, by examining all the causes which, from the childhood of the citizen, lead to the sad current situation, the armies certainly have a role to play, more in keeping with their possibilities and which must not lead to any weakening of their capabilities or call into question the model of a professional army.

Thus, two avenues could be favoured for the participation of the armies in the effort to be made by the nation for the benefit of its youth. The first concerns our country's elites, the second is a proactive and concrete implementation of the 2016 interministerial protocol defining the relationship between National Education and Defence.

Indeed, a truly military training for the nation's elites seems all the more necessary since the abandonment of conscription has generated among them a total ignorance of the military institution, which is nevertheless at the heart of the regalian and state responsibilities. Unlike their less privileged fellow citizens, these elites owe the Republic a

few months of their lives to the Republic, given the role they will have to play in their careers and the satisfaction of all kinds that they will derive from their dominant position. Thus, all students of the "grandes écoles", all students at the end of their master's degree should do the following a real "military preparation", consistent and with periods of insertion in the units and formations of the armies and the gendarmerie.

The pool thus created would have a better knowledge of the armies, could be used to supplement the National Guard's supervision system, and could truly strengthen the armed forces-nation link, other than through speeches and cocktails, with a view to "general mobilisation". (a concept that has been forgotten a little too much and which our history shows us that it would be quite illusory to consider as definitively eradicated), would provide the basis for the supervision of the units that would have to be recreated for what was formerly called the general coverage of the territory. Beyond that, the link thus created would be such as to place the role of the armies and the strategic-military problems in the minds of those who are called upon to lead and drive society, which would avoid many misunderstandings in the analyses heard here and there. There would therefore be an effort to welcome, integrate and train these elites to be led by the armies, but this does not seem unrealistic, as it would be aimed at limited numbers of personnel and would have to favour immersion in units after a short period of preparation. And, in reference to the former military service, it would be a matter of resurrecting the notion, revised and corrected, of aspirant, whose great interest and real virtues are recognized by all connoisseurs.

A second axis of effort could be a voluntarist and concrete implementation of the 2016 interministerial protocol defining the relationship between National Education and Defence. In this framework, it would be appropriate for the armies, through the cooperation of their managers, to "come to the rescue" of teachers for the conduct by them of "civic and citizenship instruction". While "educating educators" through information-training sequences on Defence and its ethical references, they could contribute to a systemic action adapted to each age level of students, with priority given to adolescents. The ultimate aim would therefore be, with the support of National Education teachers, to introduce young people to basic defence issues and the "values" cultivated in the armed forces (discipline, adherence, motivation, solidarity and esprit de corps, to mention only the main ones) through modern educational processes.

It is therefore a supporting role in the framework of a real inter-ministerial mobilisation that the armies could play. While their participation in national education missions should make it possible to carry out an overall action for all young French people, their involvement in the general training of the armed forces should not be limited to the training of young people. It would aim to provide our country with the capacity to irrigate society through the action of its leaders in the defence field, in the citizen and republican dimensions of the latter.

Thus the armies are not intended to "repair" a social body in difficulty. However, as a reference and institution with multiple, albeit limited, resources, they can contribute to the national effort needed to put our country's youth on the right track. However, we should not ask them for everything and anything. And the politicians who today consider asking them more or less recklessly must bear in mind that it is not with an army that could almost fit into the "Stade de France" alone and represents 0.4% of the population that we can miraculously solve a social and educational problem that affects a national community of 65 million inhabitants.

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