



## Reread "Le fil de l'épée" by General de GAULLE

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Dealing with the action of war, character, prestige, doctrine, the relationship between the politician and the soldier, "Le fil de l'épée" (The Thread of the Sword) by General de Gaulle, who was a member of the French army, is a very interesting book. The thread of the sword" by General de Gaulle, which is based on numerous historical, literary and philosophical examples, could be one of the reference works for the training of officers and civilian decision-makers.**

When I was a platoon leader in the Marine Tank Infantry Regiment, my unit commander gave me the following book for my birthday: «Le fil de l'épée and other writings» [1]. 1) It was a book I was passionate about and confirmed what I had learned from my young experience as a military leader in the neighbourhood or on operations. When asked about it by officers of my generation, most of them replied that they knew "l'2]. The edge of the sword" but almost none of them had read it. Cited as an essential part of military culture on the Coëtquidan Schools website, it is not one of the works that officers are required to read in the general culture directives. Questioning then the civilian executives of my entourage, I realized that few had heard of it.

In a situation of responsibility, why grope around and deprive yourself of the in-depth reflection of one of our elders? Why is this book not read more? Is it outdated? Yet this book, very well written and based on various historical references, seems timeless to me and deserves to be read and reread by all officers and decision-makers who wish to put the exercise of their responsibilities on a solid foundation.

Dealing with war action, character, prestige, doctrine, the relationship between the politician and the soldier, this book, based on numerous historical, literary and philosophical examples, is a very clear study of the leader and what he should be. It could be one of the reference books for the training of officers and civilian decision-makers.

### **A little-read book because its author is politically marked.**

This book may not be read for political and sociological reasons, because "the most illustrious of the French" [2] and his heritage divide French society. This book, moreover, is perceived in a partisan way in a part of the French society of the 21st century.

Except for Arnaud Montebourg who, according to Le Point of 28 November 2010, defines himself as a "Gaullist of the left", General de Gaulle is controversial, if not sulphurous, in certain circles that see in him the man of the permanent coup d'état [3] denounced by François Mitterrand in 1964.

At the same time, General de Gaulle is seen in other circles as the man who betrayed French Algeria, who deceived their parents or a member of their family: They first believed that he adhered to the programme of integration of Algeria into France, according to his deeds. They first of all believed that he was adhering to the programme for the integration of Algeria into France, according to his declarations at the Algiers Forum on 13 May 1958 with the formula "I have understood you" or by shouting to Mostaganem "Long live French Algeria" [4]. Then they suffered the dramatic consequences of the independence policy of the Head of State by losing everything, and for some of them their lives or those of close relatives. Although the number of witnesses to these events naturally diminishes, family traditions transmit this mistrust of the general and perpetuate a frank discrediting of his work.

Conversely, for another fringe of the population, "I had heard of it. The edge of the sword" It is the philosophical basis of the political movement that survived the General and which still structures part of French political life today. According to the "Dictionnaire de Gaulle" [5], it is indeed a "Gaullist manifesto before the letter, exalting the greatness and unity of the nation beyond ideologies". Thus, the recent re-editions clearly have a political vocation, if only because of the identity of the personalities who introduced the text: Alain Peyrefitte in 1996 [6] or Hervé Gaymard in 2010 [7].

The political marking of the book and its author seems to slow down a certain number of executives to promote or approach this book for the training of elites.

These political considerations should be set aside to note that the themes addressed by Charles de Gaulle are consubstantial with the status of officer and more generally of leader.

### **A book that is always up to date and not only for the military**

In 2012, is a book from 1932 still relevant?

Indeed, at a time of the global approach, of the fight against gaps in space and of globalized cyber defence, General de Gaulle's experience based on the First World War may at first glance seem obsolete. If this reasoning is taken further, then it would also be useless to reread Sun Tzu [8] or to study history. Not taking advantage of past experience would be an insult to intelligence. However, if we can learn from the past, the general himself warns us that it would be dangerous to draw laws from it. Moreover, the purpose of the 1927 lectures given by Captain de Gaulle was to make the trainees at the École supérieure de guerre understand that war is contingent and that circumstances never recur. Also, it would be very dangerous, according to Colonel Pétain, quoted by de Gaulle, to stop a priori the form of any war action.

The French Cartesian character leads us to want to put any situation, any action and in particular war in equation. The General warns us of this, moreover, in the part of his work *De la doctrine*: "It seems that the French military spirit is reluctant to recognize the empirical character that war action must have. It is constantly striving to construct a doctrine which enables it, a priori, to guide action and to conceive its form, without taking into account the circumstances which should be the basis for it".

In order to elaborate his decision, the military leader is faced with a complex set of more or less established, more or less complete and more or less current data. General Vincent Desportes demonstrates in "Deciding in uncertainty" all the topicality of this issue [9].

For Charles de Gaulle, the elaboration of the decision is thus based on both the intelligence and the instinct of the leader, which are then indispensable and indissociable, an idea illustrated today by David Petraeus[10]: 10: "It is indeed notable that any experience of war that is not complemented by intellectual reflection is but a long series of absurd horrors. Likewise, any military theory that is constructed in the absence of lived experience is vain".

In a more general way, as much as the contingency and uncertainty of our world are important, the first chapter of the "edge of the sword" titled «Of War Action» which expands on the above notions could be more simply called "Action".

Once a decision has been elaborated by instinct and intelligence, it must be transformed into action, to move the masses, to change habits. To do this, the leader must then show authority. At the end of "War Action" the General discusses the problems of training, recruiting and advancing leaders: "Moreover, powerful personalities organized for struggle ... do not always have those easy advantages, that surface seduction which is attractive in the ordinary course of life. The characters accused are usually bitter, uncomfortable, even fierce. If the masses quietly agree with their superiority and do them an obscure justice, they are seldom loved and then favoured. The choice that administers careers is more likely to be based on what pleases rather than what deserves. What a striking reflection on the training and selection of our elites!

Unfortunately, this is certainly the most topical part of this book. In a recent essay[11], Ollivier Saby saddens us by revealing how the elite of the administration at the *École nationale d'administration* is trained and selected. His testimony teaches us that it is important not to show character by expressing different ideas, but to please the notifier and not to make waves in order to benefit from a ranking that allows access to the most prestigious bodies of the State.

Since they entered without any pecuniary interest or social ambition, this same shortcoming was not found among officers. To a lesser extent, however, one may wonder about the influence of the Saint-Cyr exit rankings on the grading and advancement of army officers, sometimes long after they leave school.

In order to have the authority necessary for action, the leader must be a man of character, which is the subject of the second part of the work: "Character".. Reading this part resonates at different levels today:

- What young leader today has never had difficulty in imposing an intelligent solution to a problem that broke with the habits of experienced subordinates? What young leader has not felt how much strength of character is necessary to have the audacity to undertake and then the will to stick to it?
- On a larger scale, in France, we are witnessing a generalized crisis of authority,

detailed in 2011 in the French documentation book *Crisis of authority and socialisation of young people*. In the field of national education, the crisis of teachers' authority is illustrated by Bruno Robbes, a lecturer in educational sciences in Cergy.

- We are also witnessing a rise in individualism and a decline in personal reflection among our fellow citizens, replaced by the reasoning imposed by the media bombarding us with information and imposing a readiness to think. Under these conditions, the person who manages to get out of this mire, to form his own ideas and to stick to them, is none other than the man with a sufficiently developed character.
- Moreover, the rise of religious, political and social relativism is also reflected in individuals: when a government frequently and irrationally changes the rules it imposes, why should a subordinate at a low level not allow himself to question a rule issued by his superior? Here too, a man of character has a duty to impose himself.

This excerpt from this eighty year old chapter seems surprisingly fresh: "Faced with the event, it is to oneself that the man of character turns. His movement is to impose his mark on action, to take it into account, to deal with it. And far from hiding under the hierarchy, hiding in the texts, covering himself with reports, he stands up, camps out and faces up to it. Not that he wants to ignore orders or neglect advice, but he has the passion to want, the jealousy to decide".

Without revealing all the depth of the general's thinking on the character of the leader, let us follow the edge of the sword and look at this aspect of human leadership, "Prestige", constituting the third part.

In the 21st century, this term may be considered backward. Indeed, during the last French presidential elections, one of the main arguments of a candidate was to promise a normal presidency. Some opponents reproached him for his softness. Beyond the political formula, is it really possible to be normal in order to establish one's authority, to decide and act in a context of crisis? General de Gaulle seems to show us, based on the history of great men, the opposite.

Defining himself by: "the moral authority of a person, the seduction he exerts on the imagination of men", it is well understood that prestige is an indispensable instrument for a leader to make his subordinates adhere to his project.

To do this, the leader must keep a part of mystery, and therefore distance. So who hasn't felt the loneliness of the leader? Who hasn't felt doubt that he couldn't share, for fear of making his subordinates doubt him? Quoting Émile Faguet, the general reminds us that "the feeling of loneliness is the misery of superior men".

Having already mentioned the "De la doctrine" part at the beginning of this article, the last part of the sword's edge In times of the downsizing of armies, "Politics and the Soldier" is also still very much in vogue: "As long as the homeland is not under direct threat, the public is reluctant to be burdened with military charges. ...] How could the ruler, who cannot do without the suffrage of the crowds, ignore such sentiments? Moreover, it is up to him to draw up the budgets where the maintenance of the armies digs frightening holes"; or on the relations between politicians and the military: "The fact is that today's way of doing things does not make it easy for politicians and soldiers to practice joint action, or even to get to know each other well. ...] They do not, moreover, find the occasion, except in a few commissions or conferences where warriors, qualified as

"experts", stick to their technique...".

In conclusion, ignoring the political divisions, "The edge of the sword» could be a reference book for the training of officers and decision-makers. It deserves to be read and meditated upon throughout a career.

Particularly educational, well-written and full of historical, literary and philosophical examples, this short, eighty-page book is particularly enjoyable to read. As Alain Peyrefitte says in his presentation "la pensée qui aiguise" ("the thought that sharpens") "The Thread of the Sword» is a thought in action, a thought in the field, marked by decision but also by attention to circumstances".[12].

Above all, this book is exceptional because the story has allowed the author to implement his thought at the highest level. As François Mauriac wrote: "Thirteen years before the unforeseeable catastrophe, unimaginable at that time, this young chef of thirty-seven years, in advance, knows what he will do and what he will be".

[1] «The Thread of the Sword and other writings» , Charles de Gaulle, Plon 1999.

2] According to the formula of the President of the Republic René Coty.

3] "Lecoup d'état permanent", Essai politique de François Mitterrand, Plon 1964.

4] With a pause between "Algerian" and "French", according to his son-in-law Alain de Boissieu in "I4 I". "To serve the General", page 101, Plon 1982.

5] "Dictionnaire de Gaulle", edited by Claire Andrieu, Philippe Braud and Guillaume Piketty, Robert Laffont, 2006.

6] "Lefil de l'épée" by Charles de Gaulle, Plon / Imprimerie Nationale, 1996 edition.

7] Librairie Académique, Perrin, 2010.

8] Chinese general of the 6th century B.C., author of the oldest work on military strategy: "The Art of War". [8] The Chinese General of the 6th century B.C., author of the oldest work on military strategy: "The Art of War».

9] "Deciding in Uncertainty" Economica - 2nd edition - 2007. Preface by General Bruno Cuche

10] David Petraeus, born on 7 November 1952 in the small town of Cornwall-on-Hudson in Orange County, New York, former US Army General and ISAF Commander in Afghanistan, was appointed Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on 6 September 2011.

[11] « Promotion Ubu roi. 27 months on the benches of the ENA », Essay: Flammarion-Documents 2012.

12] Introduction to "The edge of the sword" by Charles de Gaulle, Plon / National Printing Office 1996 Edition.

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