



## The temptation of strategic caporalism

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**On 9 April 2003 in "liberated" Baghdad, Corporal X of the 4th Marine Regiment <sup>affixed</sup> a starry banner to the statue of Saddam Hussein. An officer rushed up and ordered him to remove the flag. But it was too late. The picture of this symbolic image will go around the world. It will fuel the idea that the United States is engaged in an annexation war in Iraq.**

**The notion of "strategic corporal" developed in the late 1990s by American General Charles Krulak is particularly well embodied in this case. In fact, through a media magnifying glass phenomenon, an individual action of tactical scope can be transformed into a real strategic "buzz" [1].**

**Whether we welcome it, in the name of the transparency of military action, or whether we deplore it, in the name of a fair assessment of the action of the forces, it is now a reality. Its impact on command in operations should not be neglected. It could even constitute a revolution in the art of leading men to fire.**

1) Originally a marketing technique, buzz can also describe a phenomenon of media amplification that, from a local event, makes it a subject of national or international concern.

Indeed, faced with this interaction between tactical action and the "web 2.0" universe, the strategist, whose vocation is to decide in uncertainty and to favour long-term vision over short-term micro-management, is subject to the temptation of "strategic caporalism". If he were to succumb, this could lead to two types of drift, not mutually exclusive.

Firstly, by giving in to the fashionable effect of an illusory application of the precautionary principle to the military world, the strategist would abdicate all or part of one of his main prerogatives, which is the use of armed force. Imbued by a society that is in the process of being judicialised and characterised by a hyper-sensitivity to the losses suffered,

immobility could be favoured over the use of force. It would then be a form of self-censorship that could lead to a castration of military specificity. In the name of peace of mind, the idea of fighting and bearing the cost would be rejected.

But it is also in the erasing of the principle of subsidiarity that strategic caporalism could find a major point of application. Under the pretext of a necessary control, the strategic level could, little by little, deny the subordinate levels their freedom of action. This would result in the enactment of more directive orders and prolific rules of engagement as the cases envisaged become more comprehensive. Tactical levels would then be deprived of their capacity for initiative and design.

For the subordinate at the tactical level, the loss of freedom of action would eventually transform him or her into a performer devoid of creative imagination. This situation of submissive subjugation, as opposed to active obedience, would result in a real sterilization of thought, initiative and the desire to serve.

Moreover, the tactical level, subjected to the combined pressure - without being an accomplice - of its hierarchy and the adversary, would then be placed in a schizophrenic-type situation. Stuck between a superior who would have little or no confidence in him and an adversary whom he would have everything to fear, what solution would be left to the man in the field, apart from giving up his weapon to grasp a Penal Code in one hand and an umbrella in the other?

This situation is still a fiction. Nevertheless, faced with the growing pressure on a strategist subjected to the anguishing prospect of the "butterfly effect", it is necessary to go beyond the stage of analysis to come up with proposals.

The easy solution would be to remain passive and undergo a process that seems both inexorable and unmanageable. However, an offensive stance is possible. By choosing to act in the fields of communication, education and means, we can take advantage of these developments so that tactical action gains both legitimacy and effectiveness.

A change in the field of communication requires a change in our strategy.

Tactical military action is of great media value. In a society overwhelmed by images and fascinated by individual destinies - tragic or heroic - that make it possible to make a break with daily anonymity, our strategic corporal is above all media. Whether we like it or not, he will be put forward. Let us therefore strive to enhance his image. Let us accept journalists more freely among the troops engaged in operations, let us systematically disseminate the images taken by our specialist teams, let us invest in online sites such as "Dailymotion" or "You tube".

But this action on the world of spreading the "buzz" would not be enough. It is also necessary to work on pedagogy. We must initiate our political decision-makers by making them better acquainted with the complex conditions of operations, by showing them that war action is never linear and completely predictable. Mistrust is born out of ignorance, mistrust out of a lack of trust. Moreover, we must continue a process that is already well under way, that of educating our own troops. Education through realistic and advanced training combining stress management and situational awareness at all levels.

Finally, it is perhaps above all in the theatre of our commitments that we must operate. In order to minimize the risks of slippage for the men in the field, they must be given the means to carry out their mission.

Material means, of course, particularly in the field of armaments, by ensuring that each unit has the full range of equipment it needs to be able to force the adversary - armaments with reduced lethality - or to neutralise him.

Legal means also by making an effort, over and above international mandates resulting from political compromises, on the rules of engagement. To avoid the possibility that in certain theatres of operations legally acceptable but militarily dangerous rules may not be reached. As when a soldier is asked to discern "hostile intent" from "hostile action" knowing that only a fraction of a second can separate the two, the time for an opposing bullet to reach its target.

Human means finally, because in conflicts that can evolve in a few hours in a brutal way, the principle of "just sufficiency" of the means engaged can finally prove to be just sufficiency.

Yes, there is a risk today of over-reaction by a strategist who would lose confidence in his tactical corporal. The solution probably lies in the concerted action of the entire chain of command. So that we can continue to write "De minimis non curat praetor".

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