



The human factor in command

General Military Review No. 54

le lieutenant-colonel Georges Housset

Published on 11/03/2020

Histoire & stratégie

Uchrony is a fictitious reconstruction of history, telling the story as it might have happened. It is the tone set for this insert that dares an imaginary conversation between Lyautey and a young officer of our century. The Marshal's principles on the human factor are so relevant that they are fully in line with what is expected of today's land forces framework.

Lyautey: "The campaigns of Alexander and Napoleon cradled your childhood. You will have to get used to it, war takes on a new face. I say it over and over again "to the officers of tomorrow...if they have placed their ideal in a career of war and adventure, it is not here that we should pursue...²⁵". In the past, battle could lead directly to success. Today, its place has been reduced to a first step. "The military expedition in its classic and traditional form is essential at the beginning of a conquest, when one must first reach a precise objective, ruin the material and moral power of the adversary at once...".²⁶". You will then need all the resources of tactics and all the material means at your disposal. "Go straight ahead", I wrote to Colonel Mangin, commanding an expedition against the army of el Hiba in Sidi-bou-Othmann, at the gates of Marrakech.²⁷September 2, 1912.

The young officer: "But then the battle...? »

Lyautey, interrupting him: "the battle must be brief in time. "A country is not conquered and pacified when a military operation has decimated its inhabitants and bowed all heads²⁸". Whenever possible you should show your strength so that you don't have to use it. Thus, "Warned of the power of our weapons, the groups that were forming in the Talda region gave up the action and soon dispersed.²⁹". You see, it's been a long time since the capacity for destruction was the major argument. In reality, the force of arms only contributes to the strategic objective of winning peace. You frown; I'll explain. You will, in most cases, have to fight an enemy that is described as asymmetrical, that is, an

adversary who therefore has no choice but to bypass conventional power. He will appear out of nowhere, will give you a few shots, and will then vanish as quickly as he appeared. You'll exhaust yourself to find out and you won't get the decisive battle. You will feel frustrated, imperfectly satisfied. You will reason like a soldier: you will identify his field of intervention, you will preserve your freedom of action and room for manoeuvre. But that won't put an end to his fleeting incursions. You will then realize that military action, which is indispensable, is not enough.

The young officer doesn't seem convinced.

Lyautey, continuing his demonstration: "The pirate... is a plant that only grows in certain areas, the safest method of eradicating it is to make the ground resistant..."³⁰ ».

The young officer: "How do you do it, Mr. Field Marshal? »

Lyautey, taking the example of a field full of weeds: "Do you think getting rid of them is pure and simple uprooting? »

The young officer: "The grass will repel the marshal."

Lyautey: "That's right, my young friend. But, "... after having ploughed through it, isolate the conquered soil, enclose it, then sow the good seed that will make it resistant to weeds."³¹ you'll be weed-free for good. "The fence" is armed force, sowing the "grain" is social reconstruction; the development of the area by establishing markets, proliferating crops and breaking up roads. It is this spirit that must guide you in your operations. Then, you will agree, some words no longer retain their exclusively military meaning: "the road is no longer just the line of operations or invasion, but the commercial penetration route of tomorrow..."³²". As you will have understood, your role as a soldier will gradually become secondary; as the main actor you will only act in support: "it is from the combined action of politics and force that the pacification of the country and the organisation to be given to it later must result..."³³" ».

The young officer: "It seems clear, Mr. Marshal, but how can I succeed in my mission? »

Lyautey: " you'll have to understand. What is expected of you? This question must haunt your mind. It is the end that must subordinate the means to the ends. Your action must be "part of an overall maneuver". The disaster of the Khenifra expedition of November 12, 1914³⁴ crystallizes what you must forbid yourself. In a report that I addressed to the Minister of War, I described this enterprise as an "unfortunate adventure" and its leader as "haunted by the fixed idea of a daring coup, having taken this initiative suddenly", alone and contrary to the orders received from his general. And what consequences! Unprecedented human and material losses, but above all a deplorable image of the French army and the ruin of a pacification work of several years of effort caused "by the indiscipline of a subordinate". As I have already said: "we must be very much afraid of the people who come to the colonies to reissue Austerlitz".³⁵" ».

The young officer: "Yes, sir, the marshal, but if he had succeeded, it would have been a masterstroke.

Lyautey, a little annoyed: "Understanding the human environment will be your second priority. Waging war in the midst of peoples is nothing new; France's colonial military past

has broken its armies to this exercise. But you have to penetrate yourself that today, even more than yesterday, you will have to do so. Now, populations have become both actors and essential stakes; they represent the centre of gravity of most operations. Opponents or allies, sometimes successively both, the peoples affected by a conflict remain for you an objective that you must influence and whose reactions will contribute to the final result. Your challenge is a human one.

The young officer: "Mr. Field Marshal, how do you prepare for it? »

Lyautey: "while I was on board the building that took me to Cairo, "through all the free hours, I worked on Egypt, Arab art, Pharaonic archaeology³⁶". You, too, will have to prepare yourself in advance by a book study, which is indispensable but not sufficient, in order to offer a ground already cleared for direct teaching. On the spot, you will have to perfect your knowledge of local customs and habits. You will have to seek direct contact with the people rather than isolation in over-protected bases. In short, you will need to understand more. In order to "grasp" this environment, you will have to focus on Intelligence, which is, more than ever, an important condition for your success. Of course, you will have sophisticated equipment at your disposal, but it is not a drone that will tell you that the day before, terrorists passed through the village".

The young officer: "If I understand correctly, Mr. Marshal, my men will have to show a continuous reversibility? How can this be achieved? »

Lyautey: "To achieve these results, be more of a man-wielding man than a man-leader.³⁷. You must be obeyed, loved and educated. This obedience must come to appear natural, necessary and indispensable. You must therefore impose yourself. It is not your bravery, which is the result of a happy mixture of knowledge, sweat and a little luck, that gives you the right to command; it is your moral superiority. In the hour of danger, it is not a speech, it is the man who persuades by "... his decision, his communicative activity, the promptness of his gaze, his composure in peril....³⁸". Gestures are preferable to words".

The young officer: "What gestures, Mr. Marshal? »

Lyautey: "share the fatigue, the sorrows and the dangers of your men. Your conduct must be firm, your character upright. Be demanding. First of all with yourself, you will see, your subordinates will end up taking you as a model. Then you can be demanding of your troop. There, now, people are looking at you, learn to look at others. To be loyally obeyed, it is not enough that you have imposed yourself; you still need to be loved. It is affection that drives the one who risks his life to save his leader under fire. If you want to be loved, love first. To love your men, you must first know them: their origins, their families. Be human³⁹. You and your men must work together to build a common work. As such, you must create a mutual dependence which must be the touchstone of brotherhood. Do not hesitate to trust. The latter cannot be decreed, it is given and conquered. Do not fear the decentralization of initiative, the distribution of responsibilities in action. Today, with open-mindedness, they are prerequisites for military action. But beware of demagoguery. You are on a pedestal, get off it often. But if one of your colleagues wants to climb up, step on his fingers. Finally, you will find in your subordinates a wasteland. Cultivate it. Your military training will appeal to their memory and intelligence, don't forget to address their hearts. Develop their feelings of probity, righteousness, patriotism and humanity. Teach your subordinates about the flag you cherish, and evoke the traditions forged by the elders, which are the glory of your regiment. In this way, you will forge the moral strength of your unit, an indispensable ingredient that will enable you to face adversity.

Pensées mili-terre

Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement

Saint-cyrien of the Grande Armée promotion (1981-1983), Doctor of History, Lieutenant-Colonel Housset served ten years in the Train Corps, before taking up the post of office manager, successively in the Minister's office (SDBC), the Directorate of Heritage Memory and Archives (DMPA) and the Defence Historical Service (SHD). In 2006, he was assigned as Deputy to the General Delegate for Army Heritage (DELPAT), then returned to the SHD to head the Defence Symbolism Division. Since 2015, he has been serving at the Command Doctrine and Education Centre (CDEC), as head of the research and history function, within the Studies and Prospective Pole (PEP), deputy to the pole's commander.

25 Lyautey: Du rôle social de l'officier, Revue des deux Mondes, tome 104, Paris, 1891, page 457.

26 Lyautey (colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, page 5.

27 However, it seems useful to specify that military action, according to Lyautey, must respect a certain ethic. He does not endorse the "barbaric" methods that may have been practiced during the conquest of Algeria, particularly in 1844 (the Sbêhas) by General Cavaignac and in 1845 (Dahra smoke) by Lieutenant-Colonel Pélissier, on the advice of General Bugeaud. The methods used were frightening in France.

28 Lyautey(colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, page 18.

29 Ernest Vaffier: The Moroccan Battle, the work of General Lyautey, Paris, Nancy, Berger- Levrault, 1916, page 41.

30 Lyautey(colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, page 11.

31 Lyautey (colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, op.cit. page 12 and op.cit. page 15.

32 Lyautey (colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, op.cit. page 12 and op.cit. page 15.

33 Lyautey (colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, op.cit. page 16.

34 "... The material failure in itself is unprecedented. I do not believe that there is an example in our colonial history of the destruction of such an important force, of the disappearance of all its officers ... of the loss of such equipment and such trophies. Major General Lyautey, France's Resident Commissioner General in Morocco, to the Minister of War, 16 December 1914.

35 Lyautey (colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, page 33.

36 Lyautey: Letters from Tonkin and Madagascar (1894-1899), Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1921, page 11.

37 The subject is also a major preoccupation of the company. Whether it be Robert Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton (les deux dimensions du management, Éditions d'organisation, Paris, 1972), Douglas Mac Gregor (la dimension humaine de l'entreprise, Édition Gauthier-Villars, 1969), Rensis Likert (psychologie dynamique, les relations humaines, Éditions PUF, 2000), Kurt Lewin (les frontières dans les dynamiques de groupe, Édition PUF, 1947), all studies on management style show that the more the human factor is taken into account, the more an organization's productivity is optimal.

38 Lyautey(colonel): Du rôle colonial de l'armée, Paris, Armand Colin & cie, 1900, page 3.

39 While he was a captain in Saint-Germain, he made a point of looking after his men outside of duty hours. In particular, he founded a circle and a home for them.

Title : le lieutenant-colonel Georges Housset

Author (s) : le lieutenant-colonel Georges Housset

Release date 12/03/2019
