

## **Armed Forces Facing the Media Storm**

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### **Introduction**

The designation “stormtroopers” comes not from these troops’ means, sheer numbers, or even nature, but rather from the effect they exert on the enemy, more precisely through the disproportion between the effect and the resources employed. Through a prompt, violent, or massive action by the attacker, the localized saturation, whether temporary or not, of the enemy’s apparatus provokes a decisive rupture. Independently of the subsequent efficient exploitation of the shock, the mere flabbergasting effect is enough to weaken the opponent’s moral forces. History and popular culture provide us many examples of daring coups de main that have achieved tactical, operational, or even strategic effects on the enemy’s manoeuvre. In general, these daring actions concern the center of gravity, the decision-making center or the ability to transmit orders. The aim is to paralyze the enemy’s action. In order not to bore the reader with a succession of examples, let us mention just a particularly emblematic one.

Expelled from Tenochtitlan after the Noche Triste affair (in which they had suffered heavy losses), pursued by forces infinitely superior in number, and running away in a hostile territory, Fernando Cortes’s Spaniards and their native allies had no choice but to fight at Otumba on July 7, 1520. According to the legend, facing total defeat, the conquistadors attempted a desperate action: with a few horsemen, Cortes charged toward the Aztec military staff screaming “Santiago!” They killed the officers and captured their ensigns but, which is more, the unexpected action provoked a shock among the enemy troops. Indeed, the Aztecs had

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never seen a cavalry charge and thus their immense army disbanded. The Spaniard and their allies had obtained an unthinkable victory.

Thanks to the considerable development of the mass media from the nineteenth century onward and the disappearance of censorship even in war times, the shockwave caused by a military action has gone far beyond the battlefield. Clearly, thanks to the multiplier effect of the media, an event of relative seriousness, even at the tactical level, may have an influence on the operational and strategic levels. The media covering conflicts has thus acquired, since World War II, the power to influence, voluntarily or not, the conduct of war by the military (as we will see in the first section that follows). Aware of this phenomenon, armed forces and rogue groups around the world have also demonstrated interest in implementing high-value media actions (as will be discussed in the second section).

### **Reputational Risk: The Achilles Heel of the Armed Forces**

According to both the Allied and German staffs, General George S. Patton was one of the most brilliant general officers serving in the US Army. Energetic, demanding, and remarkably cultured, he had two major flaws that put a serious dent in his career. He was short-tempered and unable to conform to official language conventions. His two most bitter setbacks came not from the enemy, but from the media. Twice, on August 3 and 10, 1943, while visiting a field hospital of the Seventh United States army as he did every day, Patton became angry, admonishing and slapping two patients suffering respectively from malaria and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Believing them to be malingerers, he chased them out of the medical unit and threatened them with martial court if they did not return to the front.<sup>2</sup> War correspondents

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<sup>2</sup> One of these incidents unfolded as follows: “‘Your nerves, hell; you are just a goddamned coward, you yellow son of a bitch.’ Patton then slapped Bennett. ‘Shut up that goddamned crying. I won’t have these brave men here who have been shot at seeing a yellow bastard sitting here crying.’ He then struck the soldier again, knocking his helmet liner off his head and into the next tent. Patton turned to the admitting officer and yelled, ‘Don’t admit this yellow bastard; there’s nothing the matter with him. I won’t have the hospitals cluttered up with these sons of bitches who haven’t got the guts to fight.’ Patton then turned back to Bennett, who was shaking, and said, ‘You’re going back to the front lines and you may get shot and killed, but you’re going to fight. If you don’t, I’ll stand you up against a wall and have a firing squad kill you on purpose.’ Patton then reached for his pistol. ‘In fact, I ought to shoot you myself, you goddamned whimpering coward.’ As he left the tent, the general was still

quickly learned of the affair and sent a letter of denunciation to Eisenhower, in order to force “Blood and Guts” Patton to apologize. The army refused to make the affair public so as not to discredit the military hierarchy and give grist to the enemy’s propaganda. However, a journalist eager for a scoop revealed the incident three months later.<sup>3</sup> Patton, too valuable to be definitively dismissed, was nevertheless deprived of any command for eleven months until public opinion forgot about the affair. After a brilliant campaign at the head of the US Third Army, Patton once again proved to be a poor communicator. During a press conference on September 22, 1945, his remarks on denazification were such that they could be easily distorted. The newspapers focused on a provocative comparison between the Nazis and the Republican and Democratic parties. Therefore, on October 7, he was relieved of his command.<sup>4</sup>

The “Patton” affair, incomprehensible from a German or Soviet point of view at the time, brilliantly illustrates the concept of reputational risk. Despite being in a situation of total war and considerable losses, one of the main belligerents deprives itself of a recognized military asset in order not to offend the public opinion because of an incident that is, in fact, minor considering the overall situation. In the second half of the twentieth century, the reputational risk has expanded to the entire armed services; for example, in France, any service member is identified as an ambassador of the Force and must consider their behavior accordingly lest any error lead to overall reputational loss.

In a famous 1999 article, USMC General Krulak dealt with the importance of the “strategic corporal” in modern conflicts involving asymmetric combat, pacification, and humanitarian aid, in a world of excessive media coverage. The point was that, at the most basic level, a single soldier could seriously jeopardize the entire military campaign if a bad decision

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yelling back to the receiving officer to ‘send the yellow son of a bitch back to the front line.’” As related in Michael Keane, *George S. Patton: Blood, Guts and Prayer* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2014), 185.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchel P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 233.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Blumenson and Kevin Hymel, *Patton: Legendary Commander* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), 87.

with disastrous consequences was to be released in the media.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the revelation of the abuses perpetrated at the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib in 2003 by American soldiers is undoubtedly a textbook case because of the deleterious effects on the reputation of a campaign whose legitimacy rested on the moral justification of concern for human rights. Years after the events, and although those responsible have been severely punished, evidence of the affair remains visible on the Net, with lingering reputational consequences for US forces.

Equally terrible for the reputation of armies, questionable macabre staging with corpses or people in a state of submission in the context of the wars of the twenty-first century have quickly gone viral because of their easy sharing on platforms such as YouTube. Additionally, the promotion of former criminal political regimes by some individuals have forced military and political institutions in the West to apologize and denounce such acts. For example, the so-called 2006 skull and crossbones scandal shook a Bundeswehr haunted by history and yet highly sensitive to ethical issues.<sup>6</sup> Any explicit reference to the Third Reich could lead to severe sanctions whatever the armed force, as seen in recent German,<sup>7</sup> Australian,<sup>8</sup> and French cases.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is no need for military personnel to promote horrors to tarnish the reputation of the institution they serve. Numerous seemingly “benign” cases from France

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<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, 14–17.

<sup>6</sup> “On 25 October 2006, the *Bild*, Germany’s most widely read daily newspaper, published five photographs that caused a stir in the country. They showed German soldiers deployed in Afghanistan posing next to human bones, with a skull as a trophy. One of the soldiers had been photographed in a sexually explicit pose with a skull. In Berlin, the pictures caused a sensation. The Bundeswehr and the public prosecutor have launched investigations against twenty-three suspects and six soldiers were suspended. Against this backdrop, the *Berliner Morgenpost* reported on November 4th that during a routine patrol in Kabul in 2002, several soldiers allegedly carried out a mock execution on a young Afghan. One soldier posed with the immobilised victim, a loaded gun held on the terrified boy’s head. Meanwhile, four other soldiers took pictures with their digital cameras. They then gave him a dollar before releasing him.” In Thomas Rid, “The Photos of the Strategic Corporal: How the New Media Are Changing War,” *IFRI*, November 2006.

<sup>7</sup> “New Photos Link Elite German Soldiers to Nazi Emblem,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 2, 2006, <https://www.dw.com/en/new-photos-link-elite-german-soldiers-to-nazi-emblem/a-2223277>.

<sup>8</sup> Dan Oakes, “Australian Soldiers Flew Nazi Swastika Flag from Vehicle in Afghanistan; PM Says Diggers’ Actions ‘Absolutely Wrong’”, *ABC*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-14/photo-shows-nazi-flag-flown-over-australian-army-vehicle/9859618>.

<sup>9</sup> “Trois militaires photographiés faisant le salut nazi,” *Le Figaro*, April 2, 2008, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualites/2008/04/02/01001-20080402ARTFIG00283-trois-militaires-photographies-faisant-le-salut-nazi.php>.

illustrate that service members' personal opinions could harm the French armed forces. Indeed, both the Gilets Jaunes movement and demonstrators against gay marriage may have gained support among the Armed Forces, which, if injudiciously expressed, could do the military serious harm. Although they may individually enjoy complete freedom of conscience and are allowed to take part in demonstrations as long as they do so dressed in civilian clothes, any excess, whether attributable to them or not, necessarily end up in the media, with consequences for their careers.

On a completely different note, the effects of media coverage on military reputation can be seen in the scandal linked to the faulty payroll software "Louvois," whose many perverse effects caused nonpayment of some service members' salaries and overpayments to others. In reaction, committees of servicemen wives gathered to publicly expose some dramatic personal situations and denounce the considerable cost of the fiasco.<sup>10</sup> Facing a wave of indignation and "bad buzz," the French army had to abandon Louvois in favor of another software.

### **When the Attacker Looks for Media Shock**

While the arguments above demonstrate that conventional armed forces can be severely affected by media shock, they can also take advantage of the process. In this case, the effect is either to boost morale on one's own side or to undermine that of the opponent through media-friendly actions. In rare cases, the action may have both effects.

On the night of August 24, 1940, a German aircraft mistakenly dropped a bomb over London; by express order, any attack on the city was forbidden at that time. The same day, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered a retaliatory air raid over Berlin.<sup>11</sup> Less than half of the eighty-one aircraft engaged managed to reach the German capital. Despite the negligible result of this attack, which inflicted only minor damage and left one casualty at the Berlin Zoo

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Monin, "Louvois, le logiciel qui a mis l'armée à Terre," *France Inter*, January 27, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Christer Bergström, *The Battle of Britain: An Epic Conflict Revisited* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2015), 151–53.

—its only elephant—this action was a psychological success for several reasons, all amplified by media coverage of the event. First, Churchill proved to the British they could strike back. Secondly, the raid was perceived as an offense to the Reich, which enraged the Führer and spurred him to change his plans. Instead of concentrating its efforts on neutralizing the RAF (which was on the verge of collapse), the Luftwaffe received the order to carry out retaliatory raids on British cities and on the capital in particular; this was the Blitz. Those terror raids on civilians both enabled the RAF to recover and dissipated any lingering illusions about Mr. Hitler. It was now quite clear that, despite what Chamberlain had said about him, he was *not* a gentleman. Finally, the chief of the Luftwaffe, Field Marshal Göring, was discredited and the vulnerability of the Reich could no longer be denied.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, on August 9, 1939, speaking before an assembly of officers, Göring had mocked the idea that an air raid could reach Germany: “Not a single bomb will reach the Ruhr. If an enemy bomber were to reach the Ruhr, my name is no longer Hermann Göring: you could call me Meier!” Subsequently, the German air defense sirens were given the nickname “Meier’s trumpets.”<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, in some cases media treatment of military actions can be counterproductive. The bombings of Dresden in February 1945—whose military interest is still the subject of bitter debates among experts—were taken up by Goebbels’s propaganda as proof of the barbarity of the Allies who allegedly sought to victimize the German population. Far from undermining German resistance, the Allies were eventually so intoxicated by the enemy that they finally doubted the usefulness of ravaging such a cultural treasure.<sup>14</sup> An estimated 25,000 to 300,000 casualties disappeared among the burning ruins of the German Florence. Whatever the truth, the bombings have remained a stain on the Allies’ conscience, comparable

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<sup>12</sup> The first bombing of Berlin, however, was carried out by the French crew of the Farman N.C. 223.4 *Jules-Vernes* (Major Daillière) on June 7, 1940. The affair was covered up and presented as an exercise by the Luftwaffe.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Margaritis, *Countdown to D-Day: The German Perspective. The German High Command in Occupied France* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2019), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Meyer, *History of Dresden* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019).

to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To this day, an abundant literature on the subject does not hesitate to denounce an Anglo-American war crime.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to conventional forces, armed groups engaged in terrorism are fundamentally involved in using the effect of media shock. Indeed, the search for the highest possible psychological effect is an indelible aspect of terrorist tactics. Unable to fight an armored mechanized force on its own ground, the terrorist seeks, through the multiplication of spectacular actions, to act on public opinion, which he knows to be fickle, with a view to forcing the politicians to negotiate or to change their strategy. This approach paid off for the supporters of Irish independence and, to a certain extent, in Algeria, where the sending of troops in response to the increase in attacks created the conditions that would undermine the popularity of a conflict the French had won on the field. The 9/11 New York attacks opened a new era in the media coverage of shock and awe events. Despite the national (and international) declaration of unity against the mullahs' regime, which was literally crushed under bombs a few months later, it is possible to wonder about the success—or not—of the campaign against terror waged since then. The symbol of the falling Twin Towers remains indelibly etched in the cultural memory, alongside the images of Westerners leaving Kabul twenty years later, only to be immediately replaced by the Taliban.

Later, it was the turn of the Islamic State to carry out communicative assaults. Because of its universalist project, the message of the Islamic State managed to seduce many Muslims from all over the world, in all socio-professional categories. At its peak, the organization was able to assemble a propaganda department composed of marketing professionals, journalists, photographers, and even Hollywood-trained film technicians. With considerable financial means at its disposal, this “Studio of Terror”<sup>16</sup> was able to produce staged executions, combat

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Chevallier, “Le faux débat sur les bombardements alliés contre l’Allemagne nazie,” *Le Point*, May 8, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Alexis Marant, dir., *Terror Studios*, 2016 (film).

tutorials, and doctrinal material for its members. Indeed, although the content may appear unbearable, especially when children take on the role of executioners in HD footage, the way things are filmed, the way the scenarios are put together, and how the suspense is maintained are familiar to us because they correspond to the standards of a globalized popular culture easily available thanks to the internet and YouTube in particular.

In addition to these highly skilled cells capable of producing a major psychological effect, there are also “retailers” of horror who exploit the same kind of materials with varying degrees of success. Regarding their action against security forces, we might mention the infamous criminal cases of Mohammed Merah, Larossi Abballa, or Mickaël Harpon.<sup>17</sup> Beyond symbols, those terrorist actions have also had an impact on the French armed forces. Since the 1990s, several waves of terrorist attacks have led to variations in the level of the *Vigipirate* plan, permanently detailing a significant number of soldiers to patrol in a metropolitan “theater of operations,” despite a vital need for troops for permanent overseas tours. In order to protect themselves from a risk that could occur anywhere and at any time, members of the military have become anonymous in their own country. The ban on wearing military uniforms off duty and the anonymization of names and faces in media coverage have contributed to the disappearance of the everyday soldier . . . with the notable exception of Operation Sentinelle. Seven thousand to ten thousand military personnel have carried out armed patrols for years along specific sites to reinforce the homeland security forces. The soldier one could meet daily buying his bread before returning home belongs to the past; he has been replaced by a warrior carrying a gun like Israeli soldiers in Palestine during the Intifada.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>17</sup> Antoine-Louis de Prémonville, “The ‘Strategic Corporal’: Facing Cyber Threat in French Armies and Homeland Security Forces,” *Journal of Intelligence and Cybersecurity*, vol. 4, October 2021, [https://www.academicapress.com/journal/V4-1/JICS\\_Vol4\\_Is1\\_Premonville\\_Final.pdf](https://www.academicapress.com/journal/V4-1/JICS_Vol4_Is1_Premonville_Final.pdf).

Many biographers of General Patton's wrote that he was his own worst enemy. In this case, it seems that this assertion can also be applied to the Western armed forces when it comes to the media storm. Indeed, the search for inflicting psychological damage on the enemy on a large scale via the resonance chamber offered by the media seems to be the wave of the future. The expected neutralization of conventional armies risking mutual destruction on the one hand and the increasing arms race on the other tend to minimize the role of classic warfare. Hence, individuals who are not especially aware of the danger of the media threat could involuntarily inflict considerable damage to their own side. Damage that the Internet cannot forget.