

Editorial

A Particularly Tragic Case of Possible Alzheimer's Disease, that of Marshal Pétain

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Abstract. After World War I and more particularly in June 1940, the prestige of French Marshal Philippe Pétain, considered as the winning general the battle of Verdun, was very high. He became President of Council while the French army was unable to stop the German offensives. But five years later he was sentenced to death for high treason. By rereading his bibliography from a medical perspective, it is possible to find multiple suggestive events and to affirm *a posteriori* Pétain suffered from a neurodegenerative disorder, whose first signs appeared in the 1930s, suggestive of Alzheimer's disease, which had an impact on French politics. The modern medical knowledge of this disease casts a new light on the behavior of Pétain during the last war.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, dementia, neurocognitive syndrome, pétain

INTRODUCTION

Neurocognitive syndromes affect mostly elderly people; they can often alter family environment and sometimes have tragic consequences. The case of Philippe Pétain is particularly illustrative. He was made Marshal of France in 1918 after his decisive role in the Battle of Verdun. This prestigious title is purely honorary and a reward to French generals who led a victorious army. In June 1940, he was 84 years old; he enjoyed great prestige. The majority of the French population welcomed him as a savior, was very grateful to end the nightmare of this unimaginable defeat, and appreciated his spirit of sacrifice. Five years later he was sentenced to death for high treason; he was finally kept in jail where he died "completely senile" in 1951.

Before and during the Second World War, the term "senility" was part of the popular language, had a pejorative connotation, and was largely used by physicians to describe the set of cognitive and physical deterioration that occurs with aging. "Senility" was considered as a physiological condition and "dementia" as a natural consequence of aging [1]. But in 1976, following Katzman's works, Alzheimer's disease (AD) which was initially discovered in a 56-year-old woman, and "senile dementia" which presents the same anatomical lesions, were recognized to be one single disease [2]. Since then, Katzman's views had been controversial because of the now recognized heterogeneity. Other neurodegenerative illnesses were subsequently and progressively identified. This explains the ignorance of Pétain's pathological cognitive disorders by his contemporaries. Afterwards historians [3–10], who were not doctors, ignored Katzman's works and kept the term that was used in the medical documentation of the time; they did not make the connection between the numerous suspicious facts and a possible neurodegenerative pathology. Jennekens, in 2014, rereading

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53 from a medical perspective the many books that were
54 available to him, diagnosed a predementia process at
55 the beginning of the war [11]. These last years, new
56 works were published [8, 9, 12, 13]. It is possible
57 to find multiple suggestive anecdotes and to affirm *a*
58 *posteriori* that Philippe Pétain suffered from a neu-
59 rodegenerative disorder, beginning well before 1940,
60 suggestive of AD, which had an impact on French
61 politics.

62 THE NEUROCOGNITIVE DISORDERS OF 63 PHILIPPE PÉTAIN

64 Pétain's decline was indirectly observed at multi-
65 ple junctures in the last decade of his political career.
66 As early as 1931, his collaborators reported that "he
67 forgets and does not assimilate anymore" [4]. In 1934,
68 while he was Minister of War, General Weygand,
69 vice-president of the Superior Council of War, con-
70 sidered "he does not know his files and he is probably
71 too old for his position as minister" [14]. In the same
72 year he made retrograde remarks which did not con-
73 sider the progress of armaments; for example, he
74 thought it was useless to fortify the Ardennes that
75 the Germans will never cross it, while it is precisely
76 through this region they penetrated France [15]. In
77 1937, before the Swiss General Staff in Lausanne
78 [8], and the following year in the preface of the
79 book of General Chauvineau [16], he declared that
80 tanks would be of little use in the event of a new
81 war. In 1938, according to his copy writer, comman-
82 dant Loustanau-Lacau, he often appeared absent and
83 stayed for hours in front of his papers without read-
84 ing them, "his mind is closed for old age" [6]. From
85 1939 until May 1940, he was the French ambassador
86 to Spain, and with his staff, he negotiated the return
87 of Spanish Republicans gold.

88 In May 1940, while the French Army retreated,
89 the government recalled him in the hope that his pres-
90 ence will instill a renewed fighting spirit to the French
91 army. All admired his exceptional physical condition;
92 however, those close to him recognized that "some-
93 times the brain works badly" [15]. He was aware of
94 this, so he refused the position of Minister of Foreign
95 Affairs, "I can only deal with what I know, I can-
96 not learn anymore" [17]. He was "apathetic" to the
97 councils of ministers, the reciprocation of discussions
98 escaped him, and some people called him "pasty" [5].
99 Sometimes he made totally inappropriate remarks;
100 for example, he suggested the use of carrier pigeons
101 to compensate for bad radio connections [18].

102 General Spears, sent by Winston Churchill,
103 explained to him on June 6, that someone like Jeanne
104 d'Arc would be needed to save France, he got a
105 speech that he made in 1937 and read all of it; Spears
106 thought he was "pitiful" [5]. On June 7, Paul Rey-
107 naud, the President of the Council (equivalent of
108 Prime Minister), before the advance of the German
109 armies considered the possibility of declaring Paris an
110 "open city", and asked the ministers for their opinion;
111 Pétain then said he was surprised by the appointment
112 of Colonel Charles de Gaulle to a ministerial post
113 and explained at length that this ungrateful man had
114 dared to publish a book without his agreement, it was
115 totally inappropriate given the seriousness of the sit-
116 uation [9]. On June 16, while the French army was
117 totally defeated, he accepted the post of President
118 of the Council and his representatives negotiated the
119 armistice.

120 While forming his government, he offered Pierre
121 Laval the ministry of Justice. Laval stated his pref-
122 erence for the post of minister of Foreign Affairs.
123 Pétain accepted although he had already attributed the
124 position to Paul Baudoin. When his entourage, partic-
125 ularly General Weygand, pointed out that this would
126 complicate relationships with the British, Pétain gave
127 again the ministry of Justice to Laval who again
128 declined the proposal [3].

129 On June 17, without any notification to the min-
130 isters, he made during a radio address the quite
131 shocking statement "I give to France the gift of my
132 person", but unfortunately he added "yet I feel my
133 heart is aching, and I tell you, we must stop the fight";
134 while the discussions for the armistice would start
135 only 48 hours later, the effect on the morale of troops
136 was disastrous and many regiments refused to fight
137 [15].

138 The same day, a collaborator informed him of
139 "preparations for a rebellion against the govern-
140 ment" from Georges Mandel who was minister of the
141 Interior up until the day beforehand. Without investi-
142 gation, he himself signed an arrest warrant to counter
143 the latter. This arrest was rapidly known and Albert
144 Lebrun, President of the Republic, made known his
145 disapproval. Mandel was freed and went to Pétain's
146 office immediately. Appalled, he asked for written
147 apology, which Pétain provided without delay. Man-
148 del found it insufficient and demanded a more explicit
149 text and Pétain amended his previous text [15]. The
150 first hours of the Presidency of the Council show how
151 Pétain presented a lack of critical thinking and poor
152 judgement. His personality had changed; formerly
153 very authoritarian, he became hesitant and generally

154 agreed with the last statement made in front of him
155 [18].

156 On June 19, he did not recognize the Spanish Min-
157 ister of Foreign Affairs, although he had seen him at
158 least 10 times during his embassy in Madrid a few
159 weeks earlier [19]. Some members of parliament,
160 for example, Marcel Héraud, Georges Mandel, and
161 Jacques Bardoux, knew his deficiencies and despite
162 them, voted for full powers on July 10 [7, 20], and
163 finally he was appointed Head of the French State,
164 and as such officially led the country's politics.

165 Shortly after, a member of his entourage specified
166 that "he is good 3-4 hours a day, especially in the
167 morning when he is rested, but his collaborators can
168 make him sign anything when he is tired" [21]; in
169 other words, from the beginning of the war, it means
170 he was the victim of abuse of weakness.

171 From 1941, the witnesses reported long hours of
172 absence, generating "a situation that becomes tragic
173 some days" [5]. The ambassadors of the United States
174 [22] and Germany [7] knew of this cognitive deteri-
175 oration and informed their respective governments.

176 From 1942, his speeches were sometimes con-
177 fused, censored, and rewritten before publication in
178 the press [8]. In April 1942, Laval, a pro-German
179 politician, was appointed Head of Government whilst
180 Pétain remained Head of State [4]. Pétain did not
181 oppose the mass arrest of Jews at the Vélodrome
182 d'Hiver (July 1942) [4], the forced incorporation
183 of Alsatians and inhabitants of Lorraine within the
184 Wehrmacht (August 1942) [4], and the establishment
185 of mandatory labor service (STO, service du travail
186 obligatoire) in Germany for young French people
187 (September 1942) [8].

188 He also had episodes of confusion, for example in
189 July 1942, when visiting a hospital in Lyon he asked
190 the mayor of this city "who am I, where am I, what am
191 I doing?" and the mayor answered, "you are Marshal
192 Pétain and you are visiting the Hôpital de la Charité in
193 Lyon" [23]. In October 1942, Laval judged that "this
194 old man does not have his head and is good only to
195 sign papers" [23].

196 After the Anglo-Americans landing in North-West
197 Africa in November 1942, the Germans invaded the
198 South of France, and he was unable to leave France
199 and to go to Algeria despite the express requests of
200 some of his collaborators. He was even confused
201 and disoriented; Jean Jardel, his secretary general,
202 stated "the marshal is no longer here" [5]. His doctor,
203 Bernard Ménétré, was finally obliged to prescribe
204 him some rest for several days, and asked that he no
205 longer be disturbed during the night [7]. From this

206 day on, he did not attend Ministry Councils and the
207 meeting dates were no longer communicated to him,
208 which did not trouble him [5]. A few weeks later, in
209 January 1943, he seemed very serene and made inco-
210 herent remarks about military operations in North
211 Africa [24]. One day he had lunch and talked for a
212 long time with a visitor; in the afternoon he met him
213 again and asked that he be introduced to him once
214 more as if he had never seen him [15].

215 In 1944, his wife reported nocturnal ambulations
216 [13]. The Germans forced him to leave Vichy on the
217 August 20, 1944 and deported him to Sigmaringen,
218 from where he fled to Switzerland on April 23, 1945.
219 He voluntarily surrendered to the French authorities
220 in defense of his honor on April 26 and was imme-
221 diately incarcerated [8]. During the preparation and
222 the duration of his trial, in 1945, his wife agreed
223 to be interned with him to help with his toileting
224 and food [8]. His lawyers reported a lack of mem-
225 ory and confusion of events [6]; at their request,
226 he refused to speak at his trial, officially because
227 he held the High Court of Justice for illegal, and
228 informally because "his mind becomes numb" [6],
229 even though he appeared 20 years younger than he
230 was [6].

231 After his internment on the island of Yeu, his cog-
232 nitive functions declined rapidly: in 1945, he did not
233 recognize his lawyers and his prison officer despite
234 seeing him 10 times a day [25]. On 16 February
235 1947 he wrote to his spouse, the writing was reg-
236 ular, the letters were perfectly formed, there was no
237 micrography [26]. The same year, before a parliamen-
238 tary committee, he hardly remembered the war and
239 the commission concluded that he was "senile" [27].
240 Despite this report, the French Republic kept this
241 demented, dependent old man in detention, who had
242 been nicknamed "the oldest prisoner in the world"
243 [12]. The following months he presented compul-
244 sive activities, wanted to kiss the nuns, made obscene
245 remarks, became incontinent; his hunter's step disap-
246 peared to give way to a hesitant step, and finally on
247 July 23, 1951, he died of "senile decrepitude" [27];
248 no autopsy was performed [25].

249 DISCUSSION

250 During physiological aging, performances in
251 vocabulary use are stable whereas those for long
252 term memory, processing speed, and working mem-
253 ory decline slowly, but normal aging is not associated
254 with global decline [28]. Nevertheless, cognitive

performance declines differently depending on the individual; some individuals will present with preserved capacities while others will present with a marked decline. These differences may be explained by the notion of cognitive reserve, this being secondary to cultural levels, social environment, socio-professional activities and leisure activities which develop cerebral plasticity and alternative neural networks which then delay the manifestation of decline related to age and disorders [29]. The decline related to age is much slower and less clinically significant than the pre-dementia decline of AD. Some patients may show a mild deficit of one or more cognitive domains (mild cognitive impairment) [30]; it can cast doubt but often only the evolution makes it possible to confirm it is a pathological decline. The facts reported above from 1934 to 1940, taken individually could be considered as non-pathological and eventually secondary to cognitive decline related to age, but their repetition is equally more questionable as it falls within a cognitive deterioration which is slowly aggravated over the years.

AD, after an imposing series of 1,110 autopsies conducted on subjects of 70 years of age or more, presenting a Mini-Mental Score) inferior to 20, is responsible for 82.9% of dementia syndromes (42.9%, "pure" AD, 39.9% AD associated with other pathologies) [31]. The prevalence of dementia syndromes augments considerably with age; a European collaborative study gives the following rates: 11% for men between the ages of 80 and 84, 12.8% for the ages of 85 to 89, and 22.1% for those over 90 years of age, and that for AD is 6.3, 8.8, and 17.7%, respectively. For women, the prevalence of dementia syndromes is higher, respectively 12.6, 20.2, and 30.8, and for AD 8.4, 14.2, and 23.6 [32].

In the case of Pétain, symptoms evolved progressively and inevitably. In June 1940, he met hitches with learning, judgment and mental flexibility, attention and memory dysfunction, apathy, and prosopagnosia; his personality was altered, and he became highly impressionable.

In 1942, the disorders were getting worse, with additional spells of confusion and disorientation. Theoretically neurocognitive disorders must be confirmed through a neuropsychological evaluation, which at this period of time was not possible. Furthermore, historians did not seek to know whether he was dependent for his activities of daily living. *A posteriori* it is therefore difficult to conclude on the severity of this evolutionary neurocognitive syndrome, the first evidences of which appeared in the

1930s. At most we can say that Pétain is in a phase of mental decline before and during the war.

From his trial in 1945, he presented the same signs as beforehand; he was more often disoriented, confused, and dependent for toileting and feeding. The criteria for dementia (DSM 4) and major neurocognitive syndrome (DSM 5) were present.

The only medical documents actually available are those from the doctors on the island of Yeu [13]. Bernard Ménétrel, his doctor, who was a personal friend, had probably hidden the disorders to maintain appearances and preserve his dignity. Unfortunately, he died accidentally in 1947 and his archives are considered lost [7]. It is thus impossible to give a diagnosis with some certitude as we do not hold his biological evaluations at our disposal, nor any complementary examinations, in particular the analysis of cerebrospinal fluid, cerebral imagery, neuropsychological evaluations, or anatomopathological examinations. At most, we know that he was not diabetic or hypertensive and that the arm swing and his stride stayed normal until 1949, that he did not have deficiency syndrome, tremors, difficulties with accommodation, or megalomaniac delusions [6, 9]. There were not any clinical arguments in favor of vascular injury or neurosyphilis.

Many witnesses signaled that, in 1940, he had moments of great intellectual alertness, alternating with episodes of apathy, and thus had a certain intellectual variability; it is possible that this was due to the administration of tonics (perhaps ephedrine or benzedrine) by his doctor [5, 7, 33]. Boller et al. reported that Pétain had a stiff gait in Vichy times [34], but later his prison guard Joseph Simon, gave a contradictory statement and reported that in 1945 he still walked very fast [35]. So as later he did not present with hallucinations or with Parkinson's disease, the diagnosis of Lewy body dementia seems very unlikely. The slowness of the smooth evolution of this disease which starts in an aged subject through memory troubles is thus strongly suggestive of AD beginning in the 1930s. In this disease, changes in executive functions can be precocious [36], which explains the importance of his impaired judgment as early as 1937. Due to a lack of anatomopathological examinations, the hypothesis of AD, pure or eventually associated with other lesions, notably vascular, seems quite probably but cannot be confirmed given the state of current data.

In May 1940, Pétain was genuinely committed to fulfil a mission, but the task was too complex. The French army was defeated, 1.5 million men were

359 prisoners in Germany, the German army occupied
 360 2/3 of the country, and France had to bear the costs
 361 of the occupying forces while maintaining the unity
 362 of the French Empire (i.e., metropolitan France and
 363 its colonies). He failed to alleviate the hardships of
 364 occupation and to obtain the return of the impris-
 365 oned soldiers. It is probably for these reasons that he
 366 suggested collaboration with Hitler (Montoire, Octo-
 367 ber 24, 1940) [8]. But at that time, he still did not
 368 realize the true nature of Hitler's National Social-
 369 ism. He thought "Nazi Germany is simply a bellicose
 370 nation" [9]. In the meantime, he asked General Wey-
 371 gand to reorganize and rearm inconspicuously the
 372 French troops stationed in North Africa [13]. Later
 373 those troops will play an important role in the lib-
 374 eration of Corsica (September-October 1943), in the
 375 campaign of Italy (November 1943-July 1944) and
 376 in the liberation of the South of France in 1944. In
 377 November 1941, he did not oppose Weygand's return
 378 required by the Germans.

379 In 1940-1941, Pétain was very popular. Unaware of
 380 his cognitive deficiencies, the French people trusted
 381 him, and some engaged in collaboration [3]. Sadly,
 382 the deterioration of his cognitive functions no longer
 383 allowed him to play complex political games and he
 384 fell quickly under the influence of ministers and col-
 385 laborators who wished the victory of Nazi Germany.
 386 When, in November 1942, the Germans invaded the
 387 South of France, the French fleet, stationed in the
 388 port of Toulon, did not sail to Algeria for lack of
 389 competent order and was scuttled for not being cap-
 390 tured by the Germans [10]. From that date, he enjoyed
 391 being Head of the French State, but he no longer
 392 attended the Council of Ministers, just signed offi-
 393 cial documents, and delivered speeches written by his
 394 collaborators.

395 We must underline the responsibility of his
 396 entourage who kept tight secret about his pathol-
 397 ogy. His doctor should have advised him to withdraw.
 398 Maybe he did, but we have no record of it. Laval, Head
 399 of the Government, and the ministers should have
 400 done the same, but obviously they took advantage of
 401 his state of weakness and conducted a pro-German
 402 policy.

403 This presidential pathology should remind con-
 404 temporary politicians that they can become ill just like
 405 anyone else, that their entourage can have interests in
 406 prolonging their term and to manipulate them. They
 407 should also meditate on the statement that Pétain
 408 declared in 1931, "it is better to leave things before
 409 they leave you" [8]. Unfortunately, without having
 410 applied this wise guideline, the name Pétain, after

having enjoyed immense popularity, remains and will
 remain attached to numerous shameful acts.

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