The Cognitive Decline of Marshal Philippe Pétain

Frans G.I. Jennekens

Department of Neurology, University Medical Centre, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Key Words

Dementia · Predementia · Second world war

Abstract

In 1940, at the age of 84, Marshal Pétain was appointed the head of state and government of France. His health was excellent but he tired easily. He felt unable to learn and his memory was weak. During a crisis situation in 1942, he did not lead, plan and decide and he was replaced as head of government. From 1943 on, he was increasingly apathetic. In 1945/1946 he had difficulty finding words after a short conversation. A parliamentary committee concluded in 1947 that he was senile. His mental condition worsened in the years thereafter. In retrospect, it is clear that the final responsibility for the policies of the French government in the Second World War had rested on a man who was going through a predementia process of cognitive decline.

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Apart from some degree of deafness, in 1940, Pétain enjoyed at the age of 84 an excellent health [1, 2]. His erect stature and surprisingly fresh complexion made his appearance youthful and strong (fig. 1). There are no indications that he consulted any medical specialists in the years of World War II. Pétain impressed in 1940 by clarity of mind [1–3]. He adhered however to old solutions and was slow in recognizing new developments. He welcomed the armistice [1], and expected the war to be over

soon, as in 1918 [1, 3]. He never changed his opinion that the underground resistance was against the spirit of the armistice and comparable to the mutiny of the French army in 1917 [4].

Pétain considered himself in 1940 unable to work more than three or four hours a day [4]. Observations by the American and Canadian ambassadors confirmed that he tired easily [5]. Pétain has been known ‘to sign documents at night when he was tired without paying attention to their content’ [6].

In May 1940, Pétain told senator Bardoux about his failing memory: ‘I can only deal with topics that I know about, I cannot learn anymore’ [7]. Those who knew him well perceived his memory weakness. In a discussion on the 19th of June 1940, Pétain declared not to know the Spanish minister of Foreign Affairs whom he had met approximately a dozen times during his stay in Madrid in 1939–1940 and together with whom he had signed a commercial treaty. ‘Who is this Colonel Beigbeder?’, he asked [8, 9]. Flandin, deputy prime minister in January 1941, recalled that Pétain had short episodes of memory loss [6]. In conversations, Pétain preferred the view of the last speaker, presumably because he was insufficiently able to keep in mind the views formulated just a moment ago (‘recency effect’) [1, 5].

On the 8th of November 1942, the American army invaded French colonial territory in northern Africa where the French army recognized the French government in Vichy as its lawful authority. Should the American army be welcomed as an ally, risking thereby a conflict with

Fig. 1. Philippe Pétain (with hat) descending a winding stair in July 1941. Source: Jean Fernet, *Au côté du maréchal Pétain. Souvenirs 1940–1944*. Paris, Librairie Plon, 1953.

Germany, or should it be treated as a foreign army, risking war with the United States? [4]. Pétain appeared unable to decide and agreed both with fighting the Americans and cooperating with the Americans [5, 6]. His collaborators noticed that he seemed to have ‘no will of his own’ [4]. The Germans reacted by occupying the whole of France, thus nullifying the armistice agreements. It was suggested to Pétain that he should resign or leave France, or dismiss the government and delegate the secretary-generals to rule the country. Nobody understood why he remained entirely passive [10]. Pierre Laval, the deputy prime minister then, urged him to resign as head of government. Pétain was exhausted and unable to resist [4, 5]. Laval became head of government, while Pétain remained head of state.

In 1943, Pétain presented himself very well to visitors [3], but the acting German ambassador Abetz, knew that

he had moments of ‘mental exhaustion’ [11]. Serrigny, an old military friend, wrote in January 1943 that Pétain was ‘disconcertingly serene’: ‘it is of no use now to stimulate this poor old man’ [2]. He knew little about what went on, failed to appreciate some major events and was misled by politicians and flatterers around him [2].

In 1944, Pétain still delivered public speeches, often in a disorderly fashion [4]. Occasionally, he was surprisingly lucid but Serrigny felt that Pétain did not dispose of ‘his full mental capacity’ [2]. He was sometimes apathetic [6, 12], and ‘deeply melancholic’, for the overt phenomena of which he showed no shame [12].

According to the Swiss ambassador, Pétain remembered in April 1945 little of the main developments in 1944 and ‘confounded individuals’, and ‘events’ [5]. In July 1945, while in High Court for his trial, he dozed off or did not appear to realize what went on. His counsellors advanced fragility and senility as excuses for his policies [1].

On 16 November 1945, he was brought to a prison on Yeu Island [4]. The prison officer, Joseph Simon visited him almost daily but Pétain sometimes did not recognize him. Pétain asked ‘why do I have to remain in jail without having done harm to anyone’. He repeated 10 to 20 times the same observation or communication in the course of a day or several days [9]. After talking for approximately 15 min, he became tired. He had then difficulty finding words and was unable to recall what he had said a few moments before [9].

In June 1947, a parliamentary committee, chaired by a physician, visited him in his prison to question him about events during and before the Second World War. The 91-year-old man was willing to cooperate but the Second World War seemed almost erased from his memory [4]. The committee concluded that he was senile [3]. His mental condition worsened steadily in the years thereafter [4].

Conclusion

In retrospect, it is clear that the final responsibility for the policy of the Vichy government has rested on a man involved in a process of slow progressive cognitive decline, on his way to dementia.

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