

January 2022

## Lessons from History: The Astonishing Rise to Leadership and Power of Napoleon Bonaparte

Emilio F. Iodice  
efiodice@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Iodice, Emilio F. (2022) "Lessons from History: The Astonishing Rise to Leadership and Power of Napoleon Bonaparte," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22543/0733.151.1389>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol15/iss1/13>

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

# Lessons from History: *The Astonishing Rise to Leadership and Power of Napoleon Bonaparte*

— Emilio Iodice, Rome, Italy



*I could listen to intelligence of the death of my wife, of my son or all my family without a change of feature. Not the slightest sign of emotion or alteration of countenance would be visible. Everything would appear indifferent and calm. But when alone in my room, then I suffer. Then, the feelings of the man burst forth.* — **Napoleon Bonaparte**

*Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.*

— **Theodore Roosevelt**, Speech before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899

*High sentiments always win in the end; the leaders who offer blood, toil, tears and sweat always get more out of their followers than those who offer safety and a good time. When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic.* — **George Orwell**, British writer

*The greatest leader in the world could never win a campaign unless he understood the men he had to lead.* — **General Omar Nelson Bradley**, American military leader

*I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?  
Next to the assumption of power is the responsibility of relinquishing it.*  
— **Benjamin Disraeli**, former British Prime Minister

*Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.  
An army marches on its stomach.  
History is a set of lies agreed upon.  
A leader is a dealer in hope.  
Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.  
Victory belongs to the most persevering.  
Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever.  
Impossible is a word to be found only in the dictionary of fools.  
What is history but a fable agreed upon?  
Imagination rules the world.*  
— **Napoleon Bonaparte**

*Napoleon's empire, with all its faults and all its glories, fell and flushed away like the snow at Easter, till nothing remained.* — **Winston Churchill**

## **Introduction**

For several years, I taught an undergraduate course in leadership. It focused on leaders from ancient to modern times. At the end of each session, I surveyed the students. One question was, “Of all the personalities studied, who would you like to have been?” The vast majority answered, “Napoleon.” Bonaparte represented a stunning ascent to power, resilience, courage, glory, greatness, and supreme command and control.

### **I was not surprised.**

More books, articles, movies, and documentaries have been authored about Napoleon than any other leader, except Jesus Christ.

“Though Bonaparte exercised power only for a decade and a half, his impact on the future lasted until nearly the end of the twentieth century, almost two hundred years after his death. Indeed, his influence may not yet be spent. People love reading about him and his spectacular rise, just as in Roman and medieval times they read about Alexander. And they ponder the question: Might I, in comparable circumstances, have done as well?”

We explore his remarkable leadership qualities as we delve into his life and times and stunning rise to power.

## **Napoleon Bonaparte**

### **Leadership Secrets:**

- Never ask of others what you are not prepared to do yourself
- Be courageous

- Plan everything
- Establish clear objectives
- Be diplomatic
- Secure allies and be loyal
- Search for facts and truth
- Intelligence is vital; Set high standards
- Be fair, firm, and flexible
- Maintain personal discipline
- Concentrate on primary objectives
- Stay in touch with your team
- Keep your promises
- Give credit for success
- Take responsibility for failure
- Prepare for victory and anticipate failure
- Be passionate, energetic, and enthusiastic
- Maintain integrity.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica, on August 15, 1769, and died in exile on the island of St. Helena on May 5, 1821. Napoleon considered himself, first and foremost, a military leader in the tradition of the Caesars. He was well trained in military affairs and developed brilliant skills as a strategist and leader of men into battle. His combat successes made him famous. Napoleon rose to prominence during the French Revolution and became one of the youngest generals in French history. He took control of the government, following the Revolution, and crowned himself Emperor. As an administrator, he reformed the French form of government and extended these to the empire. He was praised for his genius as a tactician and his leadership as a brilliant governor of an empire as far flung as that of ancient Rome. His story is one of excessive ambition that drove him to go beyond the limits of rationality and eventually to fall from power, following years of wars and conflicts throughout Europe.

## **Leadership Traits**

### ***Personally Lead Your Troops into Battle***

As a leader of men into battle, Napoleon often assumed direct command and conducted them forward, at the head of his army. He was wounded several times and had a series of incidents where his horse was shot from under him. He immediately mounted another and continued to fight. He never asked for sacrifices from others that he was not willing to make himself. He set the example.

He was young. He was the youngest general in France. Now he was in charge of the armies of Italy. Older, seasoned veterans despised him. They doubted his abilities. They questioned his experience. His was the task to pursue and destroy the enemy.

To rid northern Italy of the Austrians was a gargantuan feat. Napoleon assembled his army, before the great battle. He stood in front of his troops and spoke of glory and heroism. He was shorter than most of them. Even so, he showed fearless determination. He was audacious and ready to die at all times. He demanded from them that which he was prepared to give for

France. His life was a symbol. He used it to lead others to victory. He spoke clearly and passionately about the challenge ahead. He said, “follow me” to glory. He led the way.



*Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835) Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole, Courtesy, Musée du Louvre, Paris*

The French army chased the Austrians to a bridge over the river Adda, on the road to the city of Milan. It was the gate that would lead them to death or victory. The Austrians defended it with their lives. They showered it with bullets and bombs. The youngest general in France had to make a crucial choice. If he crossed that causeway, he and his army could be destroyed or they could reach the other side and defeat the enemy.

### **Carefully Calculate the Odds for Success**

After calculating his chances, he needed information to make his final decision. He sent a team of cavalry to cross the river at its narrowest point. They went to the other side. They could engage the enemy from behind, while he stormed the passage. It would force the Austrians to fight a rear guard action and reduce their frontal defenses. As he always did, Napoleon based his actions on facts that were checked, re-checked, and checked again. He knew just how many soldiers he could lose in the struggle to gain supremacy of the vital link to reach and defeat the enemy. He did his cost benefit analysis and made one of the most important decisions in history.



*Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825): Napoleone al Gran San Bernardo, Courtesy, Musée national du château de Malmaison – R.M.N.*

He screamed to his troops, “follow me.” Bullets and bombs rained on him and his men. A thousand fell. He and his officers marched over their bodies. They led the survivors over the bridge and attacked the enemy head on. After four days of battle, they entered the gates of Milan. The Austrians were finished. Napoleon Bonaparte was a hero. Three years later, he would rule all of France. The year 1800 would welcome a new century and a new ruler of men.

### **Take Risks**

His amazing climb to power was based on preparation, planning, good fortune, and brilliant and bold opportunism. He was not afraid to take chances. He realized that the heart of leadership was taking carefully calculated risks. Napoleon’s qualities as a leader and a person were formed at an early age. His concept of the

world, of power and ambition, grew from his beginnings.

He was born on the island of Corsica in 1769, the year the French seized and colonized it. His first memories were hatred of the “occupiers,” dislike of the church and its trappings and the competition with his brothers and sisters. He drove to lead and dominate his seven siblings. His mother complained of his unruliness and lack of discipline. By the time he was nine, he seemed unmanageable. His father placed him and his brother Joseph in a French military school. His first years were bitter. He had to learn French, which was a foreign language to the young Corsican. He had to succumb to regimentation. On Corsica, he was free to live an island mentality where the open air, the sea, and warm Mediterranean sun allowed him to grow in an unfettered environment.

### **Control Your Emotions**

In military school, Napoleon was a loner. He had no companions and kept to himself. He loved mathematics, history, and geography. He hated dancing and singing. He was not an easy student, but a quick study. He learned rapidly and was bored with repetition. He respected authority, but always showed he was in control of himself and his surroundings. He rarely lost his temper. He had a powerful memory for details and sharpened it constantly.

In France, he saw the trappings of wealth and the grandeur of the French military. He mastered French, but held on to his Italian accent. He studied Latin and German, history, and geography, and France’s military victories more than their defeats. The school’s best students were selected for training as engineers and artillery experts. The average and mediocre ones went into the infantry and cavalry. Napoleon’s qualities were immediately apparent. He was sent to be an artillery officer.

He adored history. He enjoyed stories of famous military leaders. Julius Caesar fascinated him. He was taught that Caesar was a tyrant and that Brutus and the conspirators were patriots for freedom. Napoleon challenged this view. He saw Caesar as a great leader and Brutus as a traitor to Rome and his mentor.

He was surrounded by students from the rich aristocracy who had titles and cultural upbringing. He was a foreigner from a French island. There were students from other countries at the school, but he was the only Corsican. On his island, he was part of the upper class. In France, he was at the bottom.

### **Show No Fear**

He was smaller than most of the students and his accent, diminutive appearance, and simple ways made him the target of jokes and bullies. Napoleon learned that, in order to lead, he had to be fearless. He stood up to them. He would not accept their insults. He fought with his fists. Even if he lost to a larger foe, he made his point that he would not tolerate injustice.

He played to his strengths in school. Fencing was useless, he believed, in modern warfare. He was brilliant in mathematics and was an avid reader about strategy, naval and land tactics. He was promoted to study at the Royal Military School in Paris. It was an elegant school, set in a city of enormous contrasts. Great wealth and great poverty were side by side.

## **Be Disciplined**

Napoleon was man of the provinces. He had simple tastes and his friends were not the sons of the fine noble families of France that attended the school. He lived a Spartan life. His friends were the shopkeepers, artisans, and the poor workers who lived off the streets of the capital. His best friends were his books. He spent very little money and studied and read voraciously. He enjoyed the routine of life in the academy and its organized ways. He graduated high in his class as an officer. It was at the same time his father died, leaving the family in financial difficulties. Napoleon assumed the role of head of his clan and brushed aside his older brother. From that moment on, he took charge of their lives and had them blended into his life and his needs to amass power and maintain control.

## **Develop Presence**

Napoleon shaped his skills from his experience in the military and in war. First and foremost, he was a warrior. From his army training, he learned the elements of command and control, outlining clear objectives and projecting a vision and an outcome. He was himself in uniform. As an officer, his demeanor or appearance did not get in the way of his authority. He was comfortable giving orders and receiving respect for his role and position. Napoleon used his authority to develop the image of a confident and strong leader.

Men constantly remarked about his presence. Napoleon stood tall and erect, had nobility in his bearing, and looked people in the eyes. He studied features, words and expressions for the tone of voice and to separate truth from lies. He made it a point for all to know that he ate like his soldiers and lived a frugal life. Nothing changed, until he embraced imperial power. Slowly, the disease of arrogance seeped into his bones. It would be one of the elements of his ruin.

## **Use Public Relations as a Tool**

As he assumed more responsibility, he worked to promote himself in all that he did. Anything written regarding Napoleon, like orders or proclamations, had to relate to expanding his public persona. Speeches, which may have been a series of orders involving an upcoming campaign, for instance, would later be rewritten and published with sentences and phrases praising France, speaking about high ideals, etc. Each was designed to convey a message, enhance popular opinion, and create an image of an emerging force in the life of the nation.

## **Strive to Solve Problems**

His climb to power was a result of success and solving problems and gambling against the odds. He was the one who emerged from the shadows, blood and smoke of the rebellion against the French royal families to take hold of the nation and lead it forward. The government in France, following the French Revolution of 1789, had little diplomatic dexterity. It handled foreign relations badly. It incensed the monarchies of neighboring countries to form alliances against them. These kings and queens wanted to avoid the republican principles of the Revolution spilling into their countries. They wanted to avoid the emergence of a groundswell of popular support that could lead to their overthrow.

Several alliances were formed to fight France. In each situation, it was General Napoleon who

came forward to defeat the enemy. The people would entrust the ideals they fought for, their futures and fortunes and those of their children to him. He would bring them glory, suffering, and misery. They would never forget the man who appeared from the darkness to lead them to greatness and defeat. He would be hated, loved, and idealized for what he left behind and for his legend of leadership.

### **Plan Carefully**

Napoleon planned every campaign in detail. He was a consummate strategist and military leader. War taught him much and forged him into an administrator and conqueror. He was a soldier who lived by duty, honor, and audacity. He used these to win battles on and off the field. Each challenge was a new venture, a throw of the dice. Even so, he never gambled without analyzing the likelihood of success. Napoleon learned to rely on accurate data, careful planning, and preparation. This reduced his margin of error. It primed him and his legions for what lay ahead. It increased his chances of victory against far greater forces.

He conducted over fifty military operations and learned from each. What he found each time, he used for the next challenge. One aspect of his planning was determining all the ways he could be defeated. In addition to studying victory, he mastered the understanding of possible failure.

### **Articulate Objectives**

His objectives were always clear. He made sure his team understood them. He usually focused on two major goals and supporting ones. For example, in his battle against the Austrians in 1805, he needed to first maintain the element of surprise and attack them when they least expected it; and, secondly, to reduce their strength, by sending part of his forces to attack the Austrian reinforcements before they could join the major force. He used his reserves to achieve the secondary goal while focusing on the first objective as his priority.



*François Bouchot (1800–1842) Napoleon Bonaparte in the coup d'état, Courtesy, Brumaire in Saint-Cloud.*

### **Involve Major Stakeholders**

Napoleon knew quickly how to form alliances or keep local principalities neutral. He did this in the campaign of 1805, specifically in the Battle of Ulm. He negotiated treaties with the Bavarians and Prussians as he planned his campaign and lines of attack.

### **Conduct Research and Intelligence**

He was obsessed with details and checking information from various sources. He sent highly qualified reconnaissance teams to scope out the terrain with the minutest data and topography. He had spies study the movement of enemy troops to understand plans and, most importantly, supply lines and the advancement of reserves. He had all this in his hand, when he began his fight against the coalition at Ulm, a small Bavarian town. The people and



history would never forget what happened when thousands of musket carrying men in blue and white arrived, led by a man on a white horse.

### **Set up Standards and Protocols**

Ulm would prove to be a classic Napoleonic operation. It concentrated on precision and preparedness. Napoleon was concerned that his troops coordinated their movements. As a result, he set up strict standards for marching, and activities that included the form, as well as the time involved in reaching a certain point. This way, he could be sure that his forces would arrive to engage the enemy at exactly the chosen time for this action.

### **Prepare for Success**

French troops, under Napoleon, were well trained and properly equipped for the task at hand. They had modern weapons and abundant ammunition and food, and they learned to



*The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries, by Jacques-Louis David, 1812, Courtesy, National Gallery of Art*

find what they needed as they moved through local towns and villages. He redesigned his artillery to make it lighter and more efficient, so that his army could move faster than the enemy.

### **Maintain Adaptability**

Napoleon knew that good fortune was an opportunity for victory. He was always ready to change plans, if his foes made a tactical error that could allow him an advantage. Such was the case at Ulm. The Austrians found themselves surrounded by the French army. Their hope was Russian reinforcements. The Russians miscalculated the time involved in reaching their allies. They were eleven days late. Once Napoleon realized the unique position he was in, he moved ahead and attacked. Despite blunders on the part of his generals, he still achieved victory. He destroyed half of the Austrian army with minimal losses on his part.

### **Obtain the Right Facts**

Napoleon was able to act quickly and decisively because of his extensive network of spies. He collected information and checked it constantly until he was as certain as possible about his facts. Once he had knitted together his data, he took action.

### **Decentralize Command and Control**

Napoleon laid out his plans. They were clear and precise and highly classified. He made sure his commanders knew the overall objective to be attained. He checked to make sure they understood their part. He organized a headquarters to handle communication and to give orders to monitor that procedures were being followed. Then, he empowered his officers to

carry out the details. Each integral part of his army was self-contained. Generals had responsibility for all the needs of the troops and were free to attain their goals using creativity and common sense.

### **Concentrate Forces**

Napoleon knew that overwhelming force against an enemy could reduce his chances of failure and allow him to achieve his key aim. He constantly prioritized his goals. He devoted minimum resources to secondary targets and kept to his strategy, in spite of complaints from his officers and advice to alter direction. He would only do so if there were irrefutable facts that could change his mind.

### **Stick to Attaining the Primary Objective**

After winning at Ulm, Napoleon knew that, unless he completely destroyed the Austrian and Russian forces, his enemy would retaliate and defeat him. He decided that he would attack them where they had gathered. It was a town not far from Vienna. It was called Austerlitz. This was his goal.

### **Be Visible**

Napoleon was with his troops before, during and after the battle. He would often “drop by” to show his presence, exhibit interest, project confidence in them and encourage and console. He gave an inspiring speech before the Austerlitz campaign. He articulated the mission and its importance, demonstrated his personal involvement (...“I will command your battalions in person”) and projected a vision of the future with its benefits (...“Then the peace that I shall make will be worthy of our people, of you and of me”).

### **Fulfill Promises**

He told his army that he would reward them for their sacrifices. After Austerlitz, he distributed fifteen million Francs to his soldiers. He gave pensions to widows and, in effect, adopted their orphans and allowed them to carry the name of Napoleon. He honored those who fell and took care of the wounded and their families.

The Austrians joined the Russians. Their combined force was nearly one hundred thousand troops, twenty five thousand more than the French forces. They were also fresher. The Russians had not engaged the enemy and were in a stronger position. Against greater odds, he decided to attack.

### **Be Prepared for the Unexpected**

Napoleon relied on intelligence data to understand the plans of his opponents. He looked for their strengths and weaknesses. He found that they had a critical limitation: communication. His foes had to communicate using two languages: German and Russian. This would require time to translate and get vital data across lines. It had an important impact on the enemy’s strategy and ability to command their forces to operate as a unified team. It caused delays. It gave Napoleon the advantage of speed. Now, he could execute his plan.

Suddenly, the unexpected happened. The weather changed. Fog settled in on the area. The

surroundings were blanketed in mist. Napoleon saw an opportunity. He adjusted his orders. He directed his main body to move along low ground under the fog. Their objective was to secure a plateau above the enemy forces. His secondary objective was to confuse his foes and have them believe that they were being attacked by superior forces. He sent his reserves to assail the Austro Russian army from the front. The enemy moved to strike.

At the same moment, the bulk of the French forces were assuming their position of strength. They secured the plateau. By dawn, the fog gave way to the sun. Thousands of Napoleon's soldiers rose like ghosts out of nowhere. The Austro Russian forces were confused. They were frightened. In a few hours, thousands fell. The majority fled. They crossed a frozen lake, and many never reached the other side.

## Use Diplomacy

Napoleon knew the value of compromise to minimize conflict and still attain his objectives. He formed alliances. He sought ways both sides could win. A partial victory was better than a defeat.

He realized early that he could not subdue or come to an agreement with the British. They viewed him as a dangerous competitor. As a result, he did all he could to isolate them, form pacts with their rivals and prevent them from attaining resources for their war effort.

France had supported the American Revolution. The enmity with Britain was still fresh in the minds of the former colonists three decades after the Declaration of Independence. Napoleon needed money to defend France. America offered a chance to attain the resources he needed. The United States wanted foreign powers off their shores. They dreamed of stretching their nation from sea to sea. France owned choice land along the Mississippi River, stretching from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. It was called Louisiana. Napoleon offered to sell it.

President Thomas Jefferson knew the French well. He realized this was an opportunity that was too good to pass up. By purchasing Louisiana, the territory of the fledgling country would more than double. Major French towns and settlements along the Great Lakes and the Mississippi would come under American dominion. Napoleon would get gold for his wars. By selling his holdings in America, he would keep the British off balance. The growing strength of their former colonists and their need to consolidate their new acquisition assured the Emperor that the United States would be neutral as France and Britain moved closer to war. Timing was everything. The revenue from the sale of Louisiana came at a perfect moment for Napoleon. It was 1803, just two years before his campaign against the Russians and Austrians.

Jerry Manas, in his book, "Napoleon on Project Management," boils down his abilities to the following six principles:

**1. Exactitude:** Napoleon was a perfectionist, but not a micromanager. He wanted precision. This involved constantly being aware of external and internal factors that could impact the realization of his vision.

Napoleon felt the pulse of his people, troops, officers and administrators. Before his battles, he would talk to his soldiers and officers to check their morale. He was concerned about what they thought and what they needed.

His spies would pay local merchants, fisherman, traders, and travelers for data on enemy movements and plans. Gossip could be useful. Napoleon mastered the art of disseminating false information. It often drove his enemies into his hands, with the minimum of losses.



François Pascal Simon Gérard (1770–1837) Victory at Austerlitz, Palace of Versailles

He was constantly culling data and researching the nature of the situation he and his country faced. He had teams reading and analyzing newspapers and periodicals in France and abroad. His intelligence apparatus throughout the continent fed him valuable information for analysis. He needed to predict the future. With the right data, properly analyzed, he could do just that. Napoleon turned this function into a valuable skill that became intrinsic to French government foreign policy. It involved collection of facts and communication via confidential channels.

As he developed as a leader, he learned that experience was the best teacher. He did not always succeed. In a battle, during the Revolution, he failed because fellow officers refused to fight in poor weather. There were too many people involved in decision-making. The mission became badly coordinated. The results were disastrous. This experience taught him the need for tight command and control and a single head to give orders and be responsible for results. It also showed him the value of experience and how to apply it while adhering to sound principles of leadership.

Napoleon was a student of history. He knew the past could reveal lessons for tomorrow. He analyzed past battles in and along the same terrain he would face. The same was true with new public works projects. He examined carefully what had been attempted before, so he could learn what might be ahead. He was audacious but cautious. He never decided out of impulse.

**2. Speed:** He surveyed the terrain. His intelligence officers explained where the enemy was, which direction they were moving and where they would meet them in battle. His key objective was to attack with the element of surprise, take advantage of all conditions and meet his foes where and when they least expected it. To do so, he needed to focus on speed.

Napoleon insisted on a sense of urgency on the part of his officers and troops. If something needed to be done, it needed to be done immediately. Speed was a key advantage of the French army, a trait that he engrained in their training and preparation. To obtain the rapidity he required, he made sure there were few obstacles in his way. As he approached Ulm, he reassured himself that the Bavarians and Prussians would not interrupt his advance. His diplomatic emissaries reaffirmed their agreement. His scouts planned the advance through towns and valleys to secure them ahead of the operation. Once all was in place, Napoleon

moved his army. They took the fastest and shortest route possible. He concentrated his forces on the principal objective.

He avoided, at all costs, opening up a second front. He knew that, if he did, he would dilute his strength and risk failure. "One battle, one war at a time" was his motto. When he deviated from this, he fell into a trap of his own creation.

**3. Flexibility:** As he organized his army, he had to make sure that he could build into it flexibility and the skill to change at a moment's notice. To attain this, he divided his army into mobile units that could be separated rapidly and which could move in different directions as conditions changed. His army was trained to be prepared for alterations in the weather, the terrain, and to take a different route and to move with fewer supplies. It could even abandon heavy artillery, if need be. They were prepared for opportunities. Napoleon believed in luck. Good fortune came to those ready to receive it and in a position to exploit it.

To do so, he maintained strong command and control, communicated frequently and prepared his forces for all eventualities, long before the campaign began. Weeks prior to Ulm and Austerlitz, his officers and men knew the objectives, the mission, and the goals to be achieved. He warned them of uncertainties and how the enemy would conduct the battles. His field commanders were empowered to execute their mission and carry out his orders.

He studied his adversaries. Napoleon researched the backgrounds, experience, and techniques of the officers in charge of enemy armies. He was able to predict how they would move under certain conditions. Napoleon played chess on the battlefield. He anticipated his moves and those of his adversaries. In this way, he could employ speed as well as flexibility to attain his mission.

**4. Simplicity:** Napoleon looked carefully at the model of the terrain that stretched from where his army was positioned to Ulm. He saw the concentration of population, the widest and narrowest roads, rivers and bridges, hills, mountains, and plateaus. To achieve the element of surprise and reach the Austrian army before the Russians could help them, he had to develop the simplest plan of attack. Simplicity was a virtue. He cultivated simple ideas and simple instructions. He rarely cast his plans into the far future. This he kept to himself. To his officers, troops and the people of France, he gave clear, unambiguous messages.

As a result, his orders were prepared in a uniform manner, were precise as to the goal, how to reach it and all the elements and actions required in achieving them. He left no room for doubt. He questioned his team to make sure they understood. He allowed dissent, but once the decision was made, he stuck to it, unless overriding reasons demanded a change of tactics. As the French army approached Ulm, each soldier knew where he was going and how he would get there. He knew what to expect and his role in dealing with it. The element of surprise would be imposed on the enemy, not on the French. No room for surprise was left for doubt.

**5. Character:** Napoleon preferred people of character to intellect. If they had both, it was an advantage, but not a necessity. For him, character consisted of integrity, calmness, and a strong sense of responsibility. For Napoleon, these were the key ingredients of leadership. He was the first to value them. He demanded that his subordinates respect them as well in any and all situations.

For example, he insisted that in cities and towns conquered by France, there be applied the same spirit of justice and fairness he ingrained in his country. Local customs and habits needed to be respected as long as they did not infringe on the spirit of fairness and equality before the law. The conduct of his soldiers in occupied places was a constant concern. The severest punishments were meted out to those who violated his precepts of proper behavior. As he advanced his military campaigns, the Emperor was still running France. He had not forgotten the ideals of the Revolution of equality and justice. He set in motion a reform of the nation's laws that exist to the present day. The Code of Napoleon maintained the essence of equality as well as simplicity. His view was that judges needed to understand clearly the purpose of the law, in order for them to administer equal justice. Citizens were to be informed as to why a law was in place and what its consequences were.

Most of all, he set the example. He refused to override laws and show favoritism. He kept his vision clear and made this his mantra in all that he did. For Napoleon, his efforts to spread the faith of the Revolution and free the people of Europe were for the glory of France and its people, not for him. He took on the title of Emperor as a tool to consolidate power and unify the country. When statues were erected to honor him, he tore them down. He liberated people throughout the empire who had been unjustly treated because of their faith or nationality. Jews, Muslims, and others were freed. Ghettos were torn down.

Napoleon was calm, despite the challenges he faced and the goals he achieved. Calmness, especially under stress, was a key component of leadership, in his view. No one would follow a general who lacked self-composure, didn't keep his emotions in check or failed to control his temper. Such actions would lead to a lack of trust and loyalty, two things that Napoleon prized in his subordinates. He would do all he could to never violate either one.

Keeping his wits about him and having a sense of responsibility went hand in hand for Napoleon. He conveyed a need for accountability at all levels. He rarely took credit for his triumphs. He left success to his subordinates. Napoleon was quick to praise them publicly and criticize privately. He knew that every victory served a higher purpose. Losses, failures, and disputes were his and his alone. He took responsibility for what went wrong. It was the only way to project an image of trust, integrity, and calmness under pressure.

**6. Moral Force:** Above all other qualities, Napoleon stressed what he termed "moral force," as the key to great leadership. The spirit was greater than the sword, in his view. Passion needed to be the guiding light that could make a band of disorganized, ignorant people into a strong, loyal, dynamic fighting force. Leaders had to communicate passion at all levels.

The love of ideals, higher principles, and a sense of commonality and community were bound together in a passion to achieve. Napoleon was passionate about all he did. He exuded it by his presence, his speeches, his conversations, and his sense of order and control. He wanted all those around him to share the same moral force and feelings of spiritual commitment for the cause of the glory of France. He rewarded those who succeeded and punished those who failed or betrayed the principles he espoused.

Napoleon exhibited this quality of moral force again and again, even at the end of his rule. For example, he escaped after spending the famous "one hundred days" in exile after his defeat by the allies. With a tiny army at his side, he confronted a regiment of French soldiers

sent by Louis XVIII to destroy him. He dismounted from his horse, approached the regiment alone, and said, "Here I am, kill your Emperor if you wish." They responded, "Vive L'Empereur," and followed him to Paris. The king fled. Napoleon returned to his throne.

### **Promote Ambition**

Napoleon promoted ambition. He believed that it would drive ordinary men to greatness. He prized it. Those who demonstrated audacity and a desire to achieve were recognized. He gave promotions and medals and commendations. He gave incentives to those who took responsibility and attained results. It was when he failed to keep his own ambition under control that all would be lost. As soon as he deviated from his own principles, he sowed the seeds of his destruction and carried those who followed him with him. Napoleon began to believe that he was infallible. He felt that he could alter his course, that he could move away from his basic elements that made him great and seek expediency, instead.



*Napoleon's Empire at its greatest extent.  
Map of Europe under Napoleon comes from  
Napoleon Bonaparte by Alan Schom, Harper  
Collins, New York, 1997, page 196.*

### **Strive for Fairness**

Napoleon tried to cultivate an image of being fair and promoting justice. He emphasized this in France and in his diplomatic affairs. As more enemies grew to fight him, he started to change. After defeating the fourth coalition against him, he moved to consolidate his gains and neutralize England. Two allies were not treated fairly in the process, Prussia and Austria. He was ready to give Hanover to England for peace. This violated promises to his partners. His integrity was now in question. He also failed to give the same freedoms and benefits to the people of Austria and Prussia, as he had done in Italy and Egypt. Napoleon forgot that those who were smaller could cause as much damage as those who were larger. His armies plundered treasures in towns and cities across the Continent. He condoned this and amassed wealth beyond all measure and carried it to France. French museums would house his booty for centuries.

### **Stay in Direct Contact**

For most of his career, he maintained direct contact with his troops, the people of France and even those whom he defeated. He insisted on primary evidence and information. He knew that his presence and the people's access to him were essential to keep control and keep morale

high. He wandered inexorably away from his own code of conduct. He created a palace guard of bureaucrats to control entry to the imperial court. He became unapproachable. This delayed the flow of information and created intrigue and plots. He failed to screen those who were being put into positions of high command and responsibility. As a result, he was slowly being surrounded by morally inept and corrupt officials. His ambition was blinding him. He felt more powerful than he truly was. It led him to overextend himself. This was leading to his destruction and that of those who followed him.

### **Carefully Calculate the Limits of Power**

It was June 22, 1812. Summer was approaching. Napoleon was determined to end his war with Britain, punish Russia for violating its accords and wrest complete control of Europe. His empire rivaled that of Rome. Busts and paintings depicted him as a Roman emperor. Now, he would consolidate his gains and rule from the Atlantic to the Urals, from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. He would subdue the Russians with the largest fighting force known to man, cross the continent and take the crown jewel of the British Empire, India.

### **Do Not Believe Your Own Propaganda**

It was warm. It was summer in Poland. Five hundred thousand soldiers from all parts of Europe were assembled on the banks of the Niemen River. It was the same day that France would fall to Nazi Germany, 128 years later.

The Emperor was convinced of an easy victory. He was hailed as a military and administrative genius. He considered himself the greatest leader in history. He paraded before his troops like an ancient conqueror. Parades, colorful flags, bright uniforms and fanfare were everywhere. The most magnificent force prepared by man was on the march. It would be unstoppable and invulnerable. It would bring far greater glory to the man on the white horse than anything dreamed by Alexander, Caesar, or Cyrus the Great.

He would engage the Tsar at Vilna, in Lithuania, and force him into submission. The Russian empire would be his, with all its possessions. He would go unopposed to India, take tons of British gold and bankrupt “the nation of shopkeepers” that refused to give in to the greatest leader since Caesar.

### **Never Underestimate Your Enemy**

As Napoleon advanced, the Russians retreated. He failed to anticipate this tactic. His army was ill-equipped. It did not have the supplies for a long war. Thousands of invaders scoured the homes and villages of Poland and Lithuania in a vain attempt to feed and water themselves. Famine was not enough for the Grand Armée. A far greater calamity was crawling into the blood of the Emperor’s invincible army: typhus.

The cottages of the impoverished peasants of Poland and Lithuania were infested with insects. The hoard of humanity crossing into the areas, living, and plundering, was not used to the climate or the diseases of the local population. The torrid heat made matters worse. Thirst and starvation and exhaustion plagued the best and brightest young men of Europe.

Thousands of soldiers came down with rashes, high fevers, and dysentery. Within a month, Napoleon lost twenty percent of his army without engaging the enemy. The Emperor’s central



fighting force of French veterans was cut in half, less than two months into the campaign.

### **Double Check Your Information**

Napoleon's intelligence apparatus was failing him. His information was wrong. He failed to check and double check his facts. His enemy was getting the best of him. Most of all, he could not predict their moves. The Russians continued to draw Napoleon into the bosom of the country. They fought him in the battle of Borodino. Eighty thousand soldiers died on both sides. Napoleon continued to advance. The Russians continued to retreat. The comfort of Moscow lay ahead of him. He would take the city and his army would rest through the winter in safe shelters. He was wrong.

He reached the outskirts of the Russian capital, less than three months from crossing the Niemen. He entered Moscow and found a ghost town. The Tsar's palace was abandoned. Napoleon was outraged. He expected his enemy to negotiate peace. The Tsar was in St. Petersburg waiting for the first flakes of snow to fall on the Grand Armée.

The day after he took Moscow, the Emperor and his troops were startled to see smoke circle the turrets and roofs of the town. Red and orange lights lit the sky over Moscow. The city was in flames. Three quarters would be burned to the ground. The inhabitants carried all that was edible and usable. They left the Grand Armée with little to eat, little to drink, and little shelter



*Adolf Northern (1828-1876), Napoleon's retreat from Moscow*

to protect them from the frightening winter. Thousands died in the next month. On October 19, Napoleon led the remnants of his army in retreat. He had one hundred thousand exhausted, starving, and demoralized soldiers to return to France.

### **Prepare for All Eventualities**

As they marched, another enemy surfaced: winter. The temperature dropped suddenly. Less than three weeks into their retreat, on November 3rd, the first snow covered the men, their horses, and

carts, guns, and cannons. They marched. They froze. They starved. Ten thousand carcasses of horses lay cannibalized across the Russian plains. Napoleon had not prepared his army for a long campaign that could extend from summer to winter. He had not studied the possible maladies that could infect his troops. This information was available. It was never analyzed.

By Christmas, 1812, of the nearly half million men who had crossed the Niemen six months earlier, less than ten percent returned to cross it again. The Russian campaign destroyed the French army. It was led by the man who commanded Europe for a decade and a half and conquered each piece with fire and diplomacy.

Now, in the snow of the Russian winter, his empire was dying due to his lack of planning,

failure to assemble facts and intelligence, and overarching ambition and micromanagement.

Five years earlier, Napoleon united with Spain to defeat Portugal. The next year, he turned on his partner and invaded Spain, planting the French flag across the Iberian Peninsula. His injustices resulted in guerrilla warfare. His troops were not trained for this kind of combat. The French regime in Spain was harsh and capricious. Napoleon was forced to deploy badly needed troops as uprisings grew throughout the peninsula and into Europe. The British fought the French and secured Portugal. By the time Napoleon retreated from Moscow, the Grand Armée was trapped in a growing two-front war on both sides of the continent.

As his armies left Eastern Europe, the Emperor carried whatever plunder he could from the soil of Russia and returned to Paris. He had swept wealth from the palaces of the Continent and taken it to France. By 1812, Napoleon was the richest man on the planet and in all history.

His gold and plundered treasures, though, would not save him or his empire from collapse. A year later, he would be defeated by resurgent enemies throughout his empire. Three years after crossing the Niemen, he would face his enemies in a Belgian village named Waterloo.

The greatest conqueror in European history died in exile on an island in the Atlantic. He was 52.

The rise, decline, and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte was a dramatic and tragic chapter in world history. It is worth summarizing what went wrong as an example of how leaders can make one error after another, eventually leading to their downfall:

**1. Betrayal of Allies:** He failed to keep his promises to Austria and Prussia. He turned on Spain and sparked uprisings from one part of the empire to another.

**2. Overarching Ambition:** The Russian campaign was poorly planned and a victim of Napoleon's insatiable appetite for conquest. He took on the mantra of the absolute monarchs of the past. He sought an heir to his throne and gave greater privileges to his family. His betrayal of the values of the Revolution became obvious.

**3. Isolation:** The Emperor was alone. His aides controlled access to him. He lost touch with reality. He failed to give his personal touch to dealing with problems. Information was inaccurate and false. His intelligence network was disintegrating from neglect. Napoleon no longer sought advice from his experts and field commanders. In his last years, he failed to stay healthy. He indulged in opulent living. He abandoned the Spartan life style that gave him the energy and enthusiasm to succeed. It affected his health and judgment. He was demoralized and faced exhaustion. This affected his ability to make clear decisions and use the same techniques that made him successful.

**4. Political Intrigue:** As Napoleon became more isolated, political problems surged throughout the empire. He could not control events, any longer. Events were controlling him. He failed to bring vital stakeholders into the decision-making process and instead he turned them into his enemies. He had lost key leaders that helped him govern. He was forced to micromanage, which resulted in mistakes.

**5. Repression:** French repression of nationalist uprisings led to atrocities. This fomented even greater hatred against the conquerors. More resources were needed to suppress guerrilla warfare.

**6. Failing to Plan for Failure:** Napoleon prepared extensively, but not enough, for the Russian war. He was certain of victory. He planned the terrain, the movement of troops, and had good intelligence, but his intelligence was incomplete.

His campaign was not designed to reach Moscow, but only to go as far as Smolensk. With this assumption, he failed to conduct an extensive cost benefit analysis and examine external and internal factors that could affect his plans. He failed to convince his soldiers of his sense of optimism, as disease and hunger overcame them. As he entered Moscow with his troops decimated, the city was not an inviting place of protection. It proved to be a tomb for more of his men, and it demoralized the survivors and their families in France and across the empire.

**7. Losing the Home Front.** Napoleon forgot the need to attend first and foremost to those who had lifted him to greatness: the people of France.

The losses in Russia affected his political base at home. Years of war and suffering had sapped the strength of his nation. From the turmoil of the Revolution, his people sought peace. Instead, they endured decades of mayhem that resulted in tens of thousands of Frenchmen never returning to the soil of home.

## Achievements

- **Economic Reforms:** He established the Bank of France and restored stability by granting the Bank sole authority to issue notes backed by silver and gold. Napoleon tightened rules on labor and controlled prices and food supplies to avoid hunger and the food riots that brought down the monarchy.
- **The Code Napoleon:** French law was codified and organized. It combined the spirit of the Revolution and the central control of the Emperor. Property rights were enforced, with clear guidelines on inheritance.
- **The Concordat:** The Emperor made peace with the Church. He recognized Catholicism as the state religion but granted religious freedom to other faiths as well. Catholic clergy were paid by the state. A charter of liberty for Protestants was issued. It made clear the power of France over the Church.
- **Administrative Reform:** Napoleon improved the administrative apparatus of the state and created professional civil servants trained for service to citizens.

### The Meaning in His Words:

- A Constitution should be short and obscure.
- Leaders should not depend on written documents to demonstrate their right to power.
- A leader is a dealer in hope.
- Leaders need to convey optimism, even in the face of despair.
- A man will fight harder for his interests than for his rights.
- It is essential to know people's self-interest. It will help control them. A picture is worth a thousand words.
- Visualizing a message is better than writing about it and it is a more effective to communicate it.
- A revolution is an idea which has found its bayonets.
- Strength is required to implement dramatic change at all levels.

- A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon. Glory and honor are greater incentives to achieve excellence than money or other inducements.
- A throne is only a bench covered with velvet.
- No leader should be enamored with the power of their position, which is temporary.
- Ability is nothing without opportunity.
- It is useless to be talented without being in an environment to use it.
- All religions have been made by men.
- Faith has its limits and should not be taken literally. Ambition...keeps pace with circumstances.
- A leader needs to be patient and understand that success is a function of preparation.
- Among those who dislike oppression are many who like to oppress. Oftentimes, those who lead often preach democracy but practice tyranny.
- An army marches on its stomach.
- Troops need to be well supplied and prepared for battle.
- Courage is like love; it must have hope for nourishment.
- Bravery is a function of a vision of success, which a leader must convey.
- Death is nothing, but to live defeated and inglorious is to die daily.
- There are fates worse than death and failure is one of them.
- Our hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.
- The power of the pen and the manipulation of public opinion can be as effective as military success.
- France has more need of me than I have need of France.
- Leaders often believe that they are more important than the institutions they govern. (Napoleon believed he was indispensable and irreplaceable.)
- From the heights of these pyramids, forty centuries look down on us.
- We should keep sight of history and the meaning in our lives and our professions.
- Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever.
- Success lasts a short time and we must be prepared for our time of retirement and leaving the scene.
- Great ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or very bad acts. All depends on the principles which direct them. Leaders need to be controlled at all times with moral and sound principles of governance.
- He who fears being conquered is sure of defeat.
- Fear can be just as dangerous as the reality of defeat.
- He who knows how to flatter also knows how to slander.
- Beware of those who praise us since they are also capable of lies.
- I am sometimes a fox and sometimes a lion. The whole secret of government lies in knowing when to be the one or the other.
- An effective leader knows how to be strong and clever. The key is to know when to be tough and when to be cunning.
- I can no longer obey; I have tasted command, and I cannot give it up. I have only one counsel for you—be master.
- It is better to govern than to be governed. Rule from the highest level possible.
- I love power. But it is as an artist that I love it. I love it as a musician loves his violin, to draw out its sounds and chords and harmonies.
- Understand how to use power as a tool and an instrument to achieve results not as an

end in itself.

- I made all my generals out of mud. Leaders are created by other leaders.
- You do not reason with intellectuals. You shoot them.
- It is a waste of time to attempt to reason with certain people and is better to avoid them. Do not allow them to have power.
- If you want a thing done well, do it yourself.
- The best way to attain results is to take personal control over what needs to be done.
- If you wish to be a success in the world, promise everything, deliver nothing. Leaders often do not live up to the vision they project. This sense of cynicism will lead to their downfall.
- Imagination rules the world.
- Promote creativity and new ideas and bring out people's talents. It will create success.

## Leadership Lessons

- **Be Passionate:** Napoleon was passionate about his goals and objectives. He conveyed energy, enthusiasm, and constantly spoke about the future and made sure that this was clear in the minds of those he led into battle.
- **Project a Vision:** He conceived a vision of where he wanted France to be and took action to move in that direction. He used the ideals of the Revolution as the foundation of that Promised Land and carried it throughout Europe. It was the vision that attracted so many to his cause.
- **Understand your People:** The Emperor was close to the people of France, his troops, and those who were loyal to him and his aspirations. He prided himself as one who was concerned with public opinion and the feelings of his team and one who had his ability to drive the people to support his cause. It was when he lost touch that he began to fail.
- **Show Persistence:** From the time he was a Corporal to crowning himself Emperor of France, Napoleon exhibited constant persistence in all that he undertook and demanded the same of others.
- **Communicate:** Napoleon knew that perception was reality. He worked to manipulate and control his message at all levels. He conveyed information via conversations, in letters, in the press, and in special messages from the Emperor. Each had a purpose and objective and was designed to be part of a pattern of communication.
- **The Medium is the Message:** He was conscious of his presence and the influence he had on others. He used this to command and control and was personally engaged in negotiations, discussions, and encounters, one on one. He controlled both the message and how it was conveyed.

---

## References

Abbott, John (2005). *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*. Kessinger Publishing Press.

Asprey, Robert (2002). *The Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte* and *The Reign of Napoleon Bonaparte*.

2 vol, Perseus Books Group.

- Barnett, Corelli (1978). *Bonaparte*. Hill & Wang Publishers.
- Bell, David A. (2015). *Napoleon: A Concise Biography*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University.
- Cronin, Vincent (1971). *Napoleon*, HarperCollins.
- Dwyer, Philip (2008). *Napoleon: The Path to Power, to 1799*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Dwyer, Philip (2013). *Citizen Emperor: Napoleon in Power*. Yale University Press.
- Emsley, Clive (2003). *Napoleon*. Oxfordshire Routledge Publishers.
- Englund, Steven (2004). *Napoleon: A Political Life*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Falk, Avner (2007). *Napoleon Against Himself: A Psychobiography*. Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing.
- Fisher, Herbert (1913). *Napoleon*. New York, NY: AbeBooks.
- Fournier, August (1903). *Napoleon the First: A Biography*. New York, NY: AbeBooks.
- Greiss, Thomas E. (1986). *West Point Atlas for the Wars of Napoleon*. New York, NY: Avery.
- Herold, J. Christopher (1963). *The Age of Napoleon*. New York, NY: AbeBooks.
- Johnson, Paul (2002). *Napoleon: A Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lefebvre, Georges (1969). *Napoleon from 18 Brumaire to Tilsit, 1799–1807*. Columbia University Press.
- Lefebvre, Georges (1969). *Napoleon: from Tilsit to Waterloo, 1807–1815*. Columbia University Press.
- Lyons, Martyn (1994). *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Markham, Felix (1963). *Napoleon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McLynn, Frank (2003). *Napoleon: A Biography*. New York, NY: Arcade Books.
- Roberts, Andrew (2014). *Napoleon: A Life*. London: Penguin Books.
-