

# Napoleon and the Art of Diplomacy: The Matrix of Character, Circumstance, and Choice

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*"Nature, among other talents, has given  
me a great deal of character."*  
Napoleon Bonaparte

*"Diplomacy is essential and inseparable from war."*  
Napoleon Bonaparte

How does someone become himself?<sup>1</sup> Each of us is a dynamic, changing, unique matrix of constant genes and shifting circumstances. Everyone develops to varying degrees and in varying ways with time, each according to how one's character reacts to a succession of choices and constraints over one's life. The difference between a choice and a constraint, however, is not always clear. The ability to determine that difference is itself the product of how one's character collides with and interprets experiences and later reinterprets them. How many of us look back with the sigh: "If only I knew then what I know now?" And how different would each of our lives be had we been armed with that knowledge when we most needed it?

Which brings us to Napoleon Bonaparte. As he rose through the ranks of first military and then

political power, the choices he made affected the fates of ever more people. In exile on Saint Helena his dictated memoirs are filled with justifications, celebrations, and regrets for the choices he made.<sup>2</sup>

Napoleon was among those individuals who held an obsessively clear vision of who he thought he was and what more he might become. He believed that he was a child of "destiny," that somehow for unknown and mysterious reasons he was destined to do great things. That belief animated how he reacted to a succession of astonishing opportunities that arose before him throughout most of his life.

Apparently from an early age Napoleon had inklings of that he was destined for greatness. But as he says in his memoirs, it was as a young general after his victorious battle of Lodi in 1796 that he shed his lingering uncertainties.<sup>3</sup> That vision would remain largely unfazed over the next nineteen years all the way to Waterloo no matter how many disasters he eventually inflicted on himself, the rest of Europe, and beyond.

So what then is the content of Napoleon's character? Countless contemporaries then and analysts since have struggled to answer that question. Napoleon may well be history's most debatable character.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless most observers

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on personality and politics is vast. Among the works that informed this study are: Jerrod M. Post, *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004); Martha L. Cottam et al, *Introduction to Political Psychology* (Mahwah, N.J., 2004); Russell Dalton, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* (New York, 2007); David Haughton, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases* (London, 2008); Greg Odgen and Daniel Meyer, *Leadership Essentials: Shaping Vision, Multiplying Influence, Defining Character* (Downers Grove, Ill., 2007); Catherine Fitzgerald, *Developing Leaders: Research and Applications in Psychological Types and Leadership* (New York, 1997); Oliv Woshinsky, *Explaining Politics: Cultural Institutions and Political Behavior* (London, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Auguste Dieudonne Las Cases, *Memorial de Sainte Helene* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Las Cases, 193.

<sup>4</sup> For excellent literature reviews of that debate, see: Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (New Haven, 1949). Charles J. Esdaile, "The Napoleonic Period: Some

share some insights. In addition to his belief that he was destined for greatness, Napoleon had an implacable will, unwavering courage in combat, boundless energy, insatiable curiosity, an ability to think and act outside conventional thought and action, and a vision for the revolutionary transformation of France and Europe from feudalism into modernity. All those who met him spoke of his overpowering magnetism.

In his personal life he could be tender and loving. His early letters to Josephine are among the most romantic and passionate left to history. He never stopping caring for his family, sharing with them his favors whether he was a penniless lieutenant or a mighty emperor with entire kingdoms to bestow. He genuinely adored children and was perhaps at his happiest when he was care-freely romping with them. And he was a devoted friend who could not hold back his tears as one after another was killed before him.

Crucial dimensions of his character, however, did change with time and not for the better. His dazzling political and military triumphs, along with the brutality of eventually sixty battles, warped him. As his power swelled he increasingly tended to overestimate his own powers and underestimate those of others, especially his enemies. He increasingly saw himself as near God-like, invincible, indestructible, omnipotent, and omniscient. And those were his more Olympian faults. On a more pedestrian level he could be pompous, petty, cruel, bullying, and rude.

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Thoughts on Recent Historiography," *European History Quarterly*, 23 (1993), 415-32; Leigh Ann Whaley, *The Impact of Napoleon, 1800-1815* (Lanham, Md, 1997). Hundreds of books have been written on Napoleon. Among the more prominent recent biographies that I have used for this study are: Jean Tulard, *Napoleon ou le Mythe du Sauveur* (Paris, 1987); Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1997); Robert Asprey, *The Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte*, New York, 2000); Steven Englund, *Napoleon, A Political Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004.) By far, the most up-to-date analysis of Napoleon as a ruler is the three-volume modern classic by Thierry Lentz, *Le Grand Consulat, 1799-1804* (Paris, 1999); *Nouvelle Histoire du Premier Empire: Napoleon et la Conquete de l'Europe* (Paris, 2002); *Nouvelle Histoire du Premier Empire: l'Effondrement du Systeme Napoleonien, 1810-1814* (Paris, 2004).

If one's character shapes one's choices, then one's character is perhaps best revealed by how one makes and then acts on choices. If so, then the tougher the choices the more they reveal one's character. What choices could be more critical than those affecting life and death, war and peace?

Napoleon Bonaparte is best known as a military genius. Was the power that he wielded to assert his foreign policies nothing more than war or the threat of war? Warriors are not generally known for their diplomatic skills and Napoleon was no exception. Conquerors are accustomed to imposing rather than negotiating terms. Yet, contrary to the popular image, Napoleon often was just as brilliant and successful at diplomacy as he was at war.<sup>5</sup> Indeed he

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<sup>5</sup> Small libraries could be stocked with all the books on the man and his times. Even nearly two centuries after his height of power the debate among writers over whether Napoleon had a more progressive or destructive impact on France, Europe, and beyond range from the most fawning of hagiography to the most vehement of condemnations, although the vast majority try to offer balanced accounts. Diplomacy, however, is peripheral to the field of Napoleon studies. Only one English-speaking author and a couple of French authors have attempted to analyze Napoleon's entire diplomatic career. The only book-length attempt in English is a good but dated introduction: Richard B. Mowat, *The Diplomacy of Napoleon* (London, 1924). For French authors, see: J. Lovie et A. Palleul Guillard, *L'Episode Napoleonienne: Aspects Exterieurs* (Paris, 1972); Roger Dufraisse and Michael Kerautret, *La France Napoleonienne: Aspects Exterieur, 1799-1815* (Paris, 1999). Many more books explore specific diplomatic conflicts or statesmen, of which the most prominent in English are: H.A.L. Fisher, *Napoleonic Statesmanship: Germany* (Oxford, 1903); Emile Dard, *Napoleon and Talleyrand* (New York, 1937); Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge LA, 1950); E.E.Y. Hales, *Revolution and the Papacy, 1769-1846* (London, 1960); E.E.Y. Hales, *Napoleon and the Pope* (London, 1962); Gabriel H. Lovett, *Napoleon and the Birth of Modern Spain*, 2 vols. (New York, 1965); Michael Glover, *Legacy of Glory: The Bonaparte Kingdom of Spain, 1808-1813* (London, 1972); Owen Connelly, *Napoleon's Satellite Kingdoms* (New York, 1965); Harold C. Deutsch, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Imperialism* (Philadelphia, 1975); Edward A. Whitcomb, *Napoleon's Diplomatic Service* (Durham, NC, 1979); D.G. Wright, *Napoleon and Europe* (London, 1984); Stuart J. Woolf, *Napoleon's Integration of Europe* (London, 1991); Geoffrey Ellis, *The Napoleonic Empire* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1991). The most

nearly always thought a dozen or so moves ahead on as many related or distinct diplomatic chessboards. Alas at times he could also be as disastrous at diplomacy as he was at war. And regardless, depending on circumstances, he could be a model of decorum or brutality.

For Napoleon the arts of war and diplomacy meshed. If Karl von Clausewitz famously asserted that war is the continuation of politics by other means, Napoleon added the truism that diplomacy can be the continuation of war by other means: "Diplomacy is essential and inseparable from war."<sup>6</sup> Ideally diplomacy makes war unnecessary; if not it precedes, joins, and ends a war that advances one's interests. As such Napoleon usually mapped out his grand diplomatic strategy as carefully as he did his military campaigns. Most of his own correspondence and behavior along with the memoirs of other participants reveal Napoleon as a genuine master of diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

Napoleon's art of diplomacy also mirrored his art of war at the negotiating table, the tactical level. His

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prominent studies of specific diplomatic conflicts and statesmen in French are: Albert Vandal, *Napoleon et Alexandre Ier: L'Alliance Russe sous le Premier Empire*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1891-96); Arthur Levy, *Napoleon et la Paix* (Paris, 1902); E. Guillon, *Napoleon et la Suisse* (Paris, 1910); Edouard Driault, *La Politique Orientale de Napoleon, 1806-08* (Paris, 1904); Edouard Driault, *Napoleon en Italie, 1800-1812* (Paris, 1905); Edouard Driault, *Napoleon et l'Europe: La Politique Extérieure du premier consul, 1800-1803* (Paris, 1910); Edouard Driault, *Tilsit: France et Russie sous le Premier Empire* (Paris, 1917); Andre Fugier, *Napoleon et l'Italie* (Paris, 1947); Marcel Dunan, *Napoleon et l'Allemagne: le Systeme Continental et les Debuts du Royaume, 1806-1810* (Paris, 1942); Marcel Dunan, *Le Systeme Continental et des Debuts du Royaume de Baviere* (Paris, 1943); Marcel Dunan, *L'Allemagne de la Revolution et de l'Empire* (Paris, 1954); Francois Crouzet, *L'Economie Britannique et le Blocus Continental* (Paris, 1987); J. Trainie, *Napoleon et l'Angleterre, 1793-1815* (Paris, 1994); Rodney J. Dean, *Constitutionnelle, Napoleon, et le Concordat de 1801* (Paris, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Bonaparte to Directory, June 21, 1796, in Thierry Lentz, ed., *Napoleon Bonaparte, Correspondance Générale: Les Apprentissages, 1784-1797* [hereafter cited as *Correspondance Générale*] (Paris, 2005), 710.

<sup>7</sup> See Thierry Lentz, ed. *Napoleon Bonaparte: Correspondance Générale* (Paris: Fayard, 2004, 2005, 2006); Claude Tchou, ed., *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier* (hereafter cited as *Correspondance*), 16 vols. (Paris, 2002).

axiom, "one engages and then one sees" captures his improvisory approach to tactics. He would probe to provoke a response that revealed the enemy's position, and only then devise a more comprehensive plan. At his best with his diplomatic foils, he at once paid very careful attention to protocol and was sensitive to the most subtle of nuances, while he systematically presented the rational and emotional arguments for his position until the other, sooner or later, yielded.

But if that did not work he unleashed a style of personnel diplomacy that can be called "the Napoleon treatment," whereby he would wear down his opponent with an unceasing bombardment of mingled threats and allurements, bluster and charm, and arguments rooted in cold reason and warm feelings, before finally marching his most important demands at the enemy's weakest positions. Most of the time the outraged, bewildered, and intimidated foreign envoy would give way.

Armand Augustin de Caulaincourt, one of Napoleon's finest diplomats and ministers, described what it was like to be on the receiving end: "The harder the Emperor found it to persuade me, the more art and persistence he put forth to attain that end. His calculated wiles and the language he used would have made anyone believe that I was one of the powers whom he was so much concerned to win over...He acted so towards all whom he wished to persuade, and he was always wanting to persuade someone. I enter into these details because they delineate his character...Certain is it that the success which he was accustomed to obtain thus must be his predilection for dealing with sovereigns, and his habit of dealing in any particularly delicate and important matters directly with the ministers and ambassadors of foreign powers. When he so wished there could be a power of persuasion and fascination in his voice, his expression, his very manner, giving him an advantage over his interlocutor as great as the superiority and flexibility of his mind. Never was there a man more fascinating when he chose to be; to withstand him one had to realize, as I did, the political errors which lay concealed beneath his art, often specious but always clever and full of apt comparisons as useful to illustrate his own ideas and to conceal the end he wished to obtain...He never failed to shift the center of argument when he

encountered opposition. Woe to him that admitted a single modification, for the adroit interlocutor led him from concession to concession to the end he had in view."<sup>8</sup>

The power of charisma can at times sweep away any position grounded in reason or interest. Napoleon's atavistic force of mind and personality mesmerized all who meet him, and could sway to his bidding the rawest of recruits in battle or the loftiest of European statesmen in diplomacy. Even his foes were not immune to his spells. Austrian Foreign Minister Klemens Wenzel von Metternich insisted that "my admiration for Bonaparte has always been great and sincere." After Tilsit Russian Tsar Alexander considered the emperor his lifelong "friend." Foreign Minister Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, a man not known for his sentimentality, admitted his "love for Napoleon." Although a fierce opponent of his policies and power, the writer Rene Chateaubriand explained that the man exuded "the most powerful breath of life that ever animated human clay."<sup>9</sup> Wielding such diplomatic tactics that depended as much on the force of Napoleon's personality as on his strategic position could work to a point. Diplomacy in a conflict rarely ends with a written deal. The treaties that envoys negotiate must be ratified and then implemented. A sovereign can always dare to spurn a treaty whose tenets exceeded his envoy's instructions, or sign it and drag his feet on fulfilling it. Contrary to Napoleon's own perceptions, deals tended to last longer when he offered his opponent face-saving restraint rather than crippling impositions of French power.

When Napoleon could not be at the negotiating table, he would instruct his ministers and envoys not only in the broad ends and means of his policies, but often went into minute detail on just how to play a particular diplomatic game. Talleyrand received one such missive in May 1803 as the Peace of Amiens between France and Britain teetered on the brink of collapse. Napoleon coached Talleyrand on an array of subtle mind games with which to manipulate British ambassador Charles, lord Withworth:

"Display aloofness, haughtiness, and no little pride!!! If he issues an ultimatum, let him feel the aggression of his words and the arrogance of his condescending manner. If...the ultimatum is not withdrawn...terrify him of the consequences ...If he is unshakeable, have him escort you to your salon and on the point of parting" ask rhetorically "whether Britain had lived up to its treaty obligations by evacuating the Cape of Good Hope and Isle de Goree. Then soften a bit and invite him to another meeting before he pens an official notice of the break to his court."<sup>10</sup>

There was the Napoleon treatment in a nutshell—the coolly calibrated, constantly shifting blend of intimacy and intimidation to impose on the hapless foreign envoy overwhelming feelings of guilt, obligation, and fear in the justness of French demands and the invincibility of French power. Yet those tactics did not work in this case. Napoleon's game of brinksmanship provoked an unwanted war rather than the concessions and peace that he desired. And that, of course, was hardly his only instance of diplomatic miscalculation.

Many believed then and since that Napoleon was an insatiable aggressor who caused all the wars that he fought as head of state. Actually, he entered most wars with reluctance and only when he believed he had exhausted his diplomatic options, and thus needed a crushing military victory to bolster his diplomatic power in which to negotiate a peace that further bolstered his military power. Each war that he fought as the head of France from 1800 to 1815, and the diplomacy which engulfed it, had its own distinct set of causes in which blame can be widely shared among those involved.

Napoleon Bonaparte's diplomatic skills like his military skills varied considerably from one conflict to the next. Not surprisingly his finesse decreased as he amassed more power. Years of military and diplomatic victories, along with the grandeur of being Emperor Napoleon rather than General Bonaparte, swelled his hubris and blinded him to the vital need for restraint and symbolic compromises that won his ends while not savaging his opponent's pride and provoking an obsession for vengeance.

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<sup>8</sup> Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia: The Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza*, ed. Jean Hanoteau (New York, 1935), 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> 4. Gregory Dallas, *The Final Act: The Roads to Waterloo* (New York, 1996), 266.

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<sup>10</sup> Napoleon to Talleyrand, May 10, 1803, 7629, in *Correspondance Générale*, IV, 127.

In Napoleon's mind, there was a clear rationale for that shift in diplomatic strategy--the bitter lessons of previous experiences. He concluded that appeasement just did not work. The Austrians especially would not give up. In concluding the first two wars against them, he offered relatively mild terms at Campoformio in 1797 and Luneville in 1801. But Austrian aggression in 1805 forever changed his mind about mild versus harsh peaces. Starting then Napoleon abandoned a diplomatic strategy of compromise and inducement for one of punishment, containment, and deterrence. Never again would he offer more carrots than sticks. He would instead seek to chastise and weaken rather than reward and entice. He would take much and give little or nothing. His attitude toward diplomacy became "take it or leave it." Once a treaty had been negotiated and publicized the monarch had better swiftly ratify it because the next set of terms would be much harsher.

There was another key to understanding Napoleon's diplomacy. If diplomatic strategy in other states was made by committee, Napoleon determined his own virtually on his own. He once famously quipped, "I'd rather fight than join a coalition." He rarely asked for advice and when he did rarely took the advice offered.

That worked fine when his analysis was correct and could be disastrous when he miscalculated. Although he was renowned for his decisiveness, he often mulled many possible diplomatic ends and means, and just as often overlooked others. Yet another force complicated his diplomacy. Making a decision was simple enough for the head of the French empire. Getting it carried out was an altogether different and often vexing challenge.

No matter how much power Napoleon amassed as first consul and then emperor it was never absolute. Like any leader he often found an unbridgeable gap between what he wanted to do and what he could do. His ambitions could be thwarted not just by the various international coalitions that arose against him. Within his inner circle, in his government and army, and in Paris and across the empire he faced individuals and groups with differing powers, ambitions, interests, hopes, and fears. Whether they merely sought to influence or outright oppose him, the collective weight of their

efforts often shifted minutely or sharply his diplomacy. Time after time, while Napoleon might justify his decisions as "raison d'etat," they at times reflected as much the quirks and interests (pecuniary and/or ideological) of the individuals and factions contending to shape policy as they did his own vision and strategy.

Nonetheless, Napoleon would insist that all along the key interest for which he maneuvered, bargained, and warred remained constant--French national security which depended on the expansion of French territory, satellite states, and glory. That view was hardly universal among his fellow countrymen, and those who sincerely supported it steadily dwindled with each year of war as the body count, national debt, prices, and taxes soared.

Over time ever more bold voices literally begged to differ. Just how to define and defend French interests was always subject to debate, no matter how much Napoleon tried to stifle it. Talleyrand championed openly an alternate vision. Peace, prosperity, and security reinforced one another and would depend upon a France satisfied with its "natural frontiers" of the Rhine, Alps, and Pyrenees, buffered by friendly smaller states with relations enriched by mutually advantageous economic, political, cultural, and military ties, and skillfully playing off the other great powers against one another.

Tragically, Napoleon's view prevailed to the bitter end. It did so for many reasons but one above all was decisive--his belief that national security depended on the expansion of French territorial power and satellite states appeared to be true. From the time he took command of the army of Italy in 1796 until his decision to invade Russia in 1812, he won most of his diplomatic conflicts. That string of nearly unbroken successes spoiled him. He dismissed Talleyrand's vision as a completely unwarranted capitulation of all that France had gained at such a terrible cost in blood and treasury.

Even after leaving the bones of a half million of his soldiers strewn across the Russian steppes and watching helplessly as his allies Prussia and Austria turned against him, he refused to recognize that France's power and thus its interests had radically changed, and with that the imperative that he compromise to keep something rather than gamble

all and lose all. In sum the reason for his succession of related diplomatic and military catastrophes from 1812 to 1815 was simple--he miscalculated his ends and means relative to those of his enemies.

And that, according to Caulaincourt, was his diplomatic Achilles heel: "Once he had an idea planted in his head the emperor was carried away by his own illusion. He cherished it, caressed it, became obsessed with it."<sup>11</sup> The decision to march into Russia was only the most notorious example of such a self-deluding obsession. He committed many others that eventually destroyed all that he was trying to build. Napoleon ultimately would fail as a conqueror because he failed as a diplomat.

Yet while hubris ultimately led to his fall, other forces propelled him on his paths. Just because Napoleon had an imperial vision did not mean that he had a long-range plan and timetable. Instead he reacted to changing circumstances by seizing opportunities and blunting challenges. However genuine his brilliance, he could no more foresee the future of his decisions in that tumultuous age than anyone else. He could merely assess, act, and then hope for the best.

In that, at least, he was no different from the rest of us. But what makes Napoleon Bonaparte among the great figures of history is that dynamic matrix among the astonishing power of his character and the equally astonishing era whose circumstances at once shaped and reflected his choices.

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<sup>11</sup> Caulaincourt, 28.