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# NAPOLEON ON THE ART OF COMMAND

by

JAY LUVAAS

**M**y son should read and meditate often about history," Napoleon asserted to one of the generals sharing his last days on St. Helena: "this is the only true philosophy. And he should read and meditate about the wars of the Great Captains; that is the only way to study war."<sup>1</sup>

Although much has been written about Napoleon as a general, analyzing in elaborate detail his tactical and strategical maneuvers from the Italian campaign of 1796 to the repulse of the Imperial Guard at Waterloo, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what Napoleon thought and *wrote* about leadership. His 78 maxims, which were extracted from his dictations on St. Helena several years after his death, contain practical advice on what a general should do in planning marches, fighting battles, and conducting sieges, but only three or four maxims have to do with leadership per se, ending with the startling revelation that "generals in chief are guided by their own experience or genius."<sup>2</sup>

When Napoleon advised his son to study the campaigns of the Great Captains, it was not so much to discover the principles of war as it was to see how these had been applied. Only by imitating these great models, that is, by understanding the basis for their decisions and studying the reasons for their success, could the modern officer hope to approach them.

Had Napoleon wished to instruct his son on the fine points of military leadership, however, he could have found no better way

than to make available a selection of his own letters and papers, which contain a wealth of information and insights on the art of command. His letters to his brother Joseph and his stepson Eugene are especially revealing, for here Napoleon clearly was trying to educate members of his family to become good military leaders. To his marshals and other subordinates he said in effect, "do it," and sometimes when he was impatient of delay, Napoleon would invoke a convenient "principle" to lend infallible authority to his wishes. (This may be one reason why Napoleon often was ambivalent about the so-called "principles of war," asserting that genius acts by inspiration, that what is good in one case is bad in another, and that when a soldier becomes accustomed to affairs he tends to scorn all theories.)<sup>3</sup> To his brother and stepson, however, Napoleon went to great lengths to explain *why* and *how* they should execute his wishes, in the process revealing many of his secrets of leadership.

Although he did not express himself in the analytical terms of the famed Prussian theorist on war, Karl von Clausewitz, Napoleon would have agreed that good leadership was a combination of two kinds of qualities—qualities of the intellect, which are trained and cultivated; and those of temperament, which can be improved by determination and self-discipline. Good military leadership therefore is a blend of the two, the product of superior insight and will, and rarely, according to Napoleon, do all of the qualities that produce a great general

combine in a single individual. When this happy combination does occur, the result is a military genius, "a gift from heaven."<sup>4</sup>

**O**f those intellectual qualities essential for high command, Napoleon would probably have placed calculation at the head of his list. "I am used to thinking three or four months in advance about what I must do, and I calculate on the worst," he explained to Joseph. "In war nothing is achieved except by calculation. Everything that is not soundly planned in its details yields no result."<sup>5</sup> "If I take so many precautions it is because it is my custom to leave nothing to chance."<sup>6</sup> A plan of campaign was faulty in Napoleon's eyes unless it anticipated everything that the enemy might do and provided the means for outmaneuvering him.<sup>7</sup> Napoleon recognized, of course, that in all affairs one must leave something to circumstances: the best of plans can fail as a result of what Clausewitz called friction, that is, "the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper," those "countless minor incidents" a general never could foresee.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, sometimes even poor plans succeeded through a freak of fortune.<sup>9</sup>

To be a good general, Napoleon once commented to one of his military entourage on St. Helena, "you need to know mathematics. That is useful in a thousand circumstances to correct ideas. Perhaps I owe my success to my mathematical ideas; a general must never make a picture for himself. That is the worst thing of all."<sup>10</sup> Toward the end of his career Napoleon sometimes was guilty of "making pictures," but in his early days he had the ability to penetrate to the heart of a question and to see the entire situation clearly.

If there were two intellectual qualities that set Napoleon apart from most men, it was his prodigious memory and his infinite capacity for mastering detail. "A very curious thing about me is my memory," he told Gourgaud. "As a young man I knew the logarithms of more than thirty to forty numbers. I knew, in France, not only the names of the officers of all the regiments, but

the places where the regiments were recruited and had gained distinction."<sup>11</sup>

Napoleon constantly fretted in letters to his generals about the need for them to pay strict attention to their muster rolls.

The good condition of my armies comes from the fact that I devote an hour or two every day to them, and when I am sent the returns of my troops and my ships each month, which fills twenty large volumes, I set every other occupation aside to read them in detail in order to discern the difference that exists from one month to another. I take greater pleasure in this reading than a young lady would get from reading a novel.<sup>12</sup>

Napoleon kept a critical eye on every detail of military intelligence, the movement and supply of troops, and army organization and administration. Woe to the subordinate general who failed to provide the date, place, and even the hour where a dispatch had been penned, or who did not provide information in sufficient detail. "The direction of military affairs is only half the work of a general,"<sup>13</sup> Napoleon insisted. Obviously, the other half involved a detailed knowledge of all parts of the military machine. In large measure, Napoleon's own mastery over men was possible because of his mastery of information, for as he explained to one of the generals sharing his captivity: "All that I am, everything that I have been I owe to the work habits that I have acquired from my boyhood."<sup>14</sup> There can be no doubt that

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Napoleon, had he been spared to supervise the military education of his own son, would have driven this point home time and again, and with all the forces at his command.

In Napoleon's case, a trained memory was reinforced by an absorbing interest in the minutiae of military activity. One cannot read his dictations on St. Helena without being impressed by the facts at his fingertips—how much dirt a soldier could dig in a specified time; minute details of tactics, and organization, and logistics; the smallest facts from his own campaigns and those of the other Great Captains. When asked one day how, after so many years, he could recollect the names and numbers of the units engaged in one of his early combats, Napoleon responded: "Madam, this is a lover's recollection of his former mistresses."<sup>15</sup>

Brilliance was not essential for a general, at least not so far as Napoleon was concerned. "Too much intellect is not necessary in war," he once reminded his brother Jerome. What was essential was precision, a strong personality, and the ability to keep things in a clear perspective.<sup>16</sup> Probably the most desirable attribute of all, or so he told Las Cases, "is that a man's judgment should be . . . above the common level."<sup>17</sup> Success in war depends on prudence, good conduct, and experience.<sup>18</sup>

By prudence Napoleon did not mean that a good general should be cautious in the conduct of operations. *Au contraire*: a good general "must be slow in deliberation and quick in execution."<sup>19</sup> Whenever Napoleon used the term prudence, what he intended to convey was careful management and presence of mind.

**W**e have now slipped over into what Clausewitz called "moral qualities," and what Napoleon undoubtedly had in mind at the time he urged that his son should read and re-read the campaigns of the Great Captains. "But all that . . . he will learn will be of little use to him," Napoleon warned, "if he does not have the sacred fire in the depths of his heart, this driving ambition which alone can enable one to perform great deeds."<sup>20</sup>

The moral quality that Napoleon most admired was boldness; here again, he would have agreed with Clausewitz, who asserted that "a distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable."<sup>21</sup> Napoleon saw boldness as *the* common denominator among the Great Captains. Alexander succeeded because "everything was profoundly calculated, boldly executed, and wisely managed."<sup>22</sup> Hannibal was bolder still,<sup>23</sup> and Caesar was "a man of great genius and great boldness."<sup>24</sup> Napoleon did not consider Gustavus Adolphus in a league with the others, if only because his early death meant that he must be judged on the basis of only a few campaigns, but he was impressed by the "boldness and swift movements" of the Swedish king's last campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

Clausewitz in one of his more discerning passages observed that "boldness grows less common in the higher ranks . . . . Nearly every general known to us from history as mediocre, even vacillating, was noted for dash and determination as a junior officer."<sup>26</sup>

Napoleon probably would have concurred, for he once described Turenne as "the only general whose boldness had increased with the years and experience." Napoleon, it should be added, preferred Turenne for another, more personal reason. "I like him all the more because he acts exactly as I would have done in his position . . . . He is a man who, had he come near me at Wagram, would have understood everything at once." From St. Helena he mused: "If I had had a man like Turenne to assist me in my campaigns, I would have been master of the world."<sup>27</sup>

In Napoleon's comments about Prince Eugene, we again read of a "very bold march crowned by the most brilliant successes,"<sup>28</sup> and while he often criticized the tactics and strategy of the Great Frederick, he had only praise for the "bold resolutions" that had enabled Frederick to survive the Seven Years' War and emerge with his state—and his army—intact.<sup>29</sup>

Frederick possessed great moral boldness . . . . What distinguishes him most is

not the skill of his maneuvers, but his boldness. He carried off what I never dared attempt. He abandoned his line of operation and often acted as if he had no knowledge of the military art. Always superior to his enemies in numbers at the beginning of a campaign, he is regularly inferior to them on the field of battle.

"I may be daring," Napoleon concluded, "but Frederick was much more so."<sup>30</sup> He was especially great "at the most critical moments," which was the highest praise that Napoleon could bestow.<sup>31</sup>

A general was expected to be brave, but Napoleon insisted that bravery be tempered by good judgment. If courage was the predominating quality of a general, he would be apt to "rashly embark in enterprises above his conceptions." On the other hand, if a general lacked character or courage he probably would not venture to carry out his ideas.<sup>32</sup>

Marshal Ney, "the bravest of the brave," was a case in point. "He was good when it came to leading 10,000 men," Napoleon acknowledged, "but beyond that he was a real fool." Always the first under fire, Ney was inclined to forget those troops who were not under his immediate supervision.<sup>33</sup> Murat was another who was brave in action but in other respects had "neither vigor nor character."<sup>34</sup> Napoleon distinguished between the bravery that a commander must display and that required of a division commander, and neither, he wrote, should be the same as the bravery of a captain of grenadiers.<sup>35</sup>

When he mentioned courage, Napoleon had also in mind moral courage—what he liked to call "two o'clock in the morning courage." When bad news comes to a person at that hour, it is dark, he is alone, and his spirits are at low ebb; it requires a special brand of courage at such a time to make the necessary decision. Such courage is spontaneous rather than conscious, but it enables a general to exercise his judgment and make decisions despite the unexpected or the unfortunate surprises.<sup>36</sup>

Firmness—what Clausewitz would call perseverance—was another requisite for good generalship. "The most essential quality of a general is firmness of character and the resolution to conquer at any price."<sup>37</sup>

The foremost quality of a commander is to have a cool head, receiving accurate impressions of what is happening without ever getting excited, or dazzled, or intoxicated by good or bad news. The successive or simultaneous sensations that the commander received during the course of a day are classified in the mind and occupy only as much attention as they deserve, for good sense and judgment flow from the comparison of several sensations taken into equal consideration. There are men who, by the moral and physical composition, distort a picture of everything. No matter how much knowledge, intellect, courage and other good qualities they might have, nature has not called them to command armies or to direct the great operations of war.<sup>38</sup>

The worst error a general can make is to distort what he sees or hears. Merely because some partisan has captured an enemy picket is no reason for the general to believe that the entire army is on hand. "My great talent," he told Gourgaud, "the one that distinguishes me the most, is to see the entire picture distinctly."<sup>39</sup>

**B**ecause of the variety of intellectual and moral factors, Napoleon recognized that "in the profession of war, like that of letters, each man has his style." Messena might excel in sharp, prolonged attacks, but for defensive purposes Jourdan would be preferable.<sup>40</sup> Reynier, a topographical engineer, was known as a man of sound advice, but he was a loner, cold and silent by nature and not very communicative. Obviously, he was no man to electrify or dominate soldiers. Lannes was "wise, prudent and bold," a man of little formal education but great natural ability and a man of imperturbable *sang froid*. Moreau was personally brave but knew nothing of grand

tactics. Desaix, on the other hand, understood *la grand guerre* almost as well as Napoleon—or so Napoleon claimed after he had been sent into exile.<sup>41</sup>

It follows, therefore, that generals were not to be treated as interchangeable parts. Each was particularly well suited for some kinds of tasks, but as Napoleon wrote on more than one occasion, a great general—by which he may well have meant a complete general—“is no common thing.”<sup>42</sup>

Because Napoleon never bothered to write a book of practical advice to his son, of the kind written by several contemporaries in France and England,<sup>43</sup> we can only surmise some of the things he might have said. Nevertheless, many of his strong convictions snap to attention and salute as one reads his published correspondence. The following excerpts probably should be considered for promotion to the level of maxims, to serve as pithy aphorisms on the art of command.

There are no precise or determined rules; everything depends on the character that nature has given to the general, on his qualities, his shortcomings, on the nature of the troops, on the range of firearms, on the season and on a thousand other circumstances which are never the same.<sup>44</sup>

War is a serious sport, in which one can endanger his reputation and his country: a rational man must feel and know whether or not he is cut out for this profession.<sup>45</sup>

The honor of a general consists in obeying, in keeping subalterns under his orders on the honest path, in maintaining good discipline, devoting oneself solely to the interests of the State and the sovereign, and in scorning completely his private interests.<sup>46</sup>

In war one sees his own troubles and not those of the enemy.<sup>47</sup>

In war the commander alone understands the importance of certain things. He alone, by his will and superior insight, can conquer and overcome all difficulties.<sup>48</sup>

Hold no council of war, but accept the views of each, one by one . . . . The secret is to make each alike . . . believe that he has your confidence.<sup>49</sup>

Take nobody into your confidence, not even your chief of staff.<sup>50</sup>

Soldiers must never be witnesses to the discussions of the commanders.<sup>51</sup>

Generals always make requests—it is in the nature of things. There is not a one who cannot be counted upon for that. It is quite natural that the man who is entrusted with only one task thinks only about it, and the more men he has the better guarantee he has for success.<sup>52</sup>

One always has enough troops when he knows how to use them.<sup>53</sup>

Once you have made up your mind, stick to it; there is no longer any *if* or *but* . . . .<sup>54</sup>

War is waged only with vigor, decision and unshaken will; one must not grope or hesitate.<sup>55</sup>

It is at night when a commander must work: if he tires himself to no purpose during the day, fatigue overcomes him at night . . . . A commander is not expected to sleep.<sup>56</sup>

Give your orders so that they cannot be disobeyed.<sup>57</sup>

It is not enough to give orders, they must be obeyed.<sup>58</sup>

In military operations, hours determine success and campaigns.<sup>59</sup>

The loss of time is irretrievable in war: the excuses that are advanced are always bad ones, for operations go wrong only through delays.<sup>60</sup>

You must be slow in deliberation and quick in execution.<sup>61</sup>

Intelligent and fearless generals assure the success of affairs.<sup>62</sup>

I may be accused of rashness, but not of sluggishness.<sup>63</sup>

It is by vigor and energy that one spares his troops, earns their esteem, and forces some of it on the reprobates.<sup>64</sup>

You must not needlessly fatigue troops.<sup>65</sup>

You must avoid countermanding orders: unless the soldier can see a good reason for benefit, he becomes discouraged and loses confidence.<sup>66</sup>

Pay no attention to those who would keep you far from fire: you want to prove yourself a man of courage. If there are opportunities, expose yourself conspicuously. As for real danger, it is everywhere in war.<sup>67</sup>

In war the foremost principle of the commander is to disguise what he does, to see if he has the means of overcoming the obstacles, and to do everything to surmount them when he is resolved.<sup>68</sup>

True wisdom for a general is in vigorous determination.<sup>69</sup>

In war everything is perception—perception about the enemy, perception about one's own soldiers. After a battle is lost, the difference between victor and vanquished is very little; it is, however, incommensurable with perception, for two or three cavalry squadrons are enough to produce a great effect.<sup>70</sup>

If one constantly feels humanity he cannot wage war. I do not understand war with perfume.<sup>71</sup>

An army of lions commanded by a deer will never be an army of lions.<sup>72</sup>

Whether these or other maxims still apply today is for others to determine. The

point is, they applied in Napoleon's day. At least they reflected his experience, and for that reason alone they reveal much about Napoleon and his philosophy of command.

#### NOTES

1. "Extraits des récits de la captivité," *Correspondance de Napoléon 1er* (32 vols.; Paris: 1858-70), XXXII, 379.
2. There are many editions of Napoleon's maxims: this quotation is from the translation by L. E. Henry, *Napoleon's War Maxims* (London: 1899), p. 39. In *The Mind of Napoleon*, J. Christopher Herold includes a conversation recorded by Las Cases and a letter from Napoleon to one of his generals on the subject of command, and additional insights can be inferred from extracts of Napoleon's views of the Great Captains. (See *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21, 224-30.) The comprehensive collection of Napoleon's thoughts on military topics assembled by Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Picard devotes only three out of 575 pages to the heading "Qualities of Command." *Préceptes et Jugements de Napoléon* (Paris: 1913), pp. 214-17.
3. Napoleon to Joseph, 4 May 1807, *Corres.*, No. 12530, XV, 188; General Gourgaud, *Sainte-Hélène, Journal inédit* (2 vols.; Paris: 1899), II, 20.
4. Comte de Montholon, *Récits de la captivité de l'empereur; Napoléon a Sainte-Hélène* (2 vols.; Paris: 1847), II, 240-41; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 190-92.
5. Napoleon to Joseph, 18 September 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10809, XIII, 210; XII, 442.
6. Napoleon to Marshal Murat, 14 March 1808, *Corres.*, No. 13652, XVI, 418.
7. "Ulm-Moreau," *Corres.*, XXX, 409.
8. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.
9. To Vice Admiral Decres, 16 June 1805, *Corres.*, No. 8897, X, 529; "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," XXXI, 417.
10. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 460.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
12. Napoleon to Joseph, 20 August 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10672, XIII, 87.
13. Napoleon to Eugene, 20 June 1809, *Corres.*, No. 15388, XIX, 140; to Berthier, 28 June 1805, No. 8957, X, 571; to Murat, 12 October 1805, No. 9372, XI, 316.
14. Montholon, *Récits*, I, 321.
15. Count de Las Cases, *Memoirs of the Life, Exile and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon* (4 vols.; London: 1836), II, 349.
16. Napoleon to Jerome, 2 May 1804, *Corres.*, No. 8832, X, 474; to Jerome, No. 12511, XV, 178.
17. Las Cases, *Memoirs*, I, 251.
18. "Note sur la situation actuelle de l'Espagne," 5 August 1808, *Corres.*, No. 14245, XVII, 429.
19. Napoleon to Eugene, 21 August 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10681, XIII, 9.
20. *Corres.*, XXXII, 379.
21. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 21.
22. Las Cases, *Memoirs*, IV, 140-41.
23. "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Corres.*, XXXI, 349.
24. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 162.
25. "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Corres.*, XXXI, 354.
26. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 191.
27. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 135-37.
28. "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Corres.*, XXXI, 355.
29. "Précis des guerres de Frédéric II," *Corres.*, XXXII, 238-39.

30. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 17, 20, 33-34.
31. "Précis des guerres de Frédéric II," *Corres.*, XXXII, 238.
32. Las Cases, *Memoirs*, I, 250-51.
33. "Campagne de 1815," *Corres.*, XXXI, 206-07; Gourgaud, *Journal*, I, 585.
34. Napoleon to Murat, 26 January 1813, Léonce de Brotonne, *Lettres inédites de Napoléon Ier* (Paris: 1898), No. 1033, p. 423.
35. "Campagne de 1815," *Corres.*, XXXI, 207.
36. Las Cases, *Memoirs*, I, 251.
37. Montholon, *Récits.*, II, 240-41; Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 426.
38. "Précis des guerres de Frédéric II," *Corres.*, XXXII, 182-83.
39. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 460.
40. Napoleon to Joseph, 6 June 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10325, XII, 440.
41. "Notes-Moreau," *Corres.*, XXX, 496; "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Ibid.*, XXXI, 380; Montholon, *Récits*, I, 176.
42. Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 423-24.
43. See *A Series of Letters recently written by a General Officer to his son . . .* (2 vols.; Salem: 1804). This American edition was from the second English edition, which bears a striking resemblance to M. le Baron D'A . . . , *Conseils d'un Militaire a son Fils* (Paris: 1874).
44. "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Corres.*, XXXI, 365.
45. Napoleon to Eugene, 30 April 1809, *Corres.*, No. 15144, XVIII, 525.
46. Napoleon to Marshal Berthier, 8 June 1811, *Corres.*, No. 17782, XXII, 215.
47. Napoleon to Eugene, 30 April 1809, *Corres.*, No. 15144, XVIII, 525.
48. "Observations sur les campagnes de 1796 et 1797," *Corres.*, XXIX, 341.
49. Napoleon to Joseph, 12 January 1806, *Corres.*, No. 9665, XI, 535.
50. Napoleon to Jerome, 26 May 1812, *Corres.*, No. 18727, XXIII, 436.
51. Napoleon to Marshal De Moncey, 31 March 1805, *Corres.*, No. 8507, X, 279.
52. Napoleon to Joseph, 4 March 1809, *Corres.*, No. 14846, XVIII, 308.
53. Napoleon to Joseph, 26 June 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10416, XII, 489.
54. Napoleon to Marshal Marmont, 18 February 1812, *Corres.*, No. 18503, XXIII, 229.
55. Napoleon to General Bertrand, 6 June 1813, *Corres.*, No. 20090, XXV, 363.
56. Napoleon conversation with Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 159.
57. Napoleon to Marshal Berthier, 29 March 1811, *Corres.*, No. 17529, XXI, 521.
58. Napoleon to Eugene, 11 June 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10350, XII, 270.
59. Napoleon to Admiral Mazarredo, 20 March 1800, *Corres.*, No. 4689, VI, 199.
60. Napoleon to Joseph, 20 March 1806, *Corres.*, No. 9997, XII, 204.
61. Napoleon to Eugene, 21 August 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10681, XIII, 96.
62. Napoleon to Marshal Mortier, 29 November 1806, *Corres.*, No. 113255, XIII, 588.
63. Napoleon to the Executive Director, 6 May 1796, *Corres.*, No. 337, I, 237.
64. Napoleon to Joseph, 28 July 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10558, XIII, 9.
65. Napoleon to Eugene, 29 July 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10563, XIII, 13.
66. Napoleon to Eugene, 5 August 1806, *Corres.*, No. 10699, XIII, 38.
67. Napoleon to Joseph, 2 February 1806, *Corres.*, No. 9738, XI, 573.
68. Napoleon to Marshal Berthier, 9 April 1810, *Corres.*, No. 16372, XX, 284.
69. "Précis des guerres de Frédéric II," *Corres.*, XXXII, 209.
70. Napoleon to Joseph, 22 September 1808, *Corres.*, No. 14343, XVII, 526.
71. Napoleon conversation with Gourgaud, *Journal*, II, 449.
72. "Campagnes d'Egypte et de Syrie," *Corres.*, XXX, 176.

