**Napoleon Bonaparte**

“*One day this small island will astonish Europe”* (Rousseau)[[1]](#endnote-2). Little did Jean-Jacques Rousseau know of the implications his brief statement would produce. For that island, Corsica, would come to produce one of the most famous – and infamous – leaders of all time; the oft-debated, paradoxical character of Napoleon Bonaparte. The portrait that the name conveys fluctuates from mind to mind. For some, it represents a savior of France, a man of near-infinite military strength and political might. For others, it shows a tyrannical dictator, ruthless and relentless in nature. But which of these representations remains factual? How many stories left untainted, disregarding biased or subjective nature, uncluttered with misnomers? It is safe to say that the answer is *none*, for the character of Napoleon represents the paradox inherent in humans; that they possess both benevolent and malevolent characteristics, the latter of which is increasingly more noticeable under the influence of power. Power transforms even the most noble and pure-hearted men, as “*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”* (Lord Acton)[[2]](#endnote-3).

Yet Napoleon, in many minds, represents an individual who embraces power maliciously, who not only borders on egotism, but *wallows* in it, as these opinions come from those who have yet to comprehend the dualistic nature of humanity, better exemplified by Frederick Douglas in *The Frederick Douglas Papers:*

*“Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will*.”[[3]](#endnote-4) (Douglas)

In other words, Napoleon’s lust for power and tyranny is natural and intrinsic; to view him as the direct precursor of the totalitarian dictators and the racial-genocidal atrocities of the 20th century is a frivolous and unduly claim. While it is true that he was a dictator, the term itself is inherently ambiguous and implies the possibility for good and evil[[4]](#endnote-5). In the wake of a panic-driven society, political theorist Mark Lilla observes that Nazi-fascism is so completely dominative in post-war ideology, that past ‘respect’ for any ancient nuances and gradations of power had been gradually cast away for a newfound hatred for any totalitarian-like foundations[[5]](#endnote-6). Thus, society is compelled to believe that a person with such authority and power as Napoleon must therefore be ruthless and impassive. On the contrary, Napoleon’s sweeping reforms as a politician, revolutionary tactics as a strategist, and meritocratic rise to power bear witness to the fact that his imprint upon history has been a profoundly positive one.

The great German physicist Albert Einstein once described politics as “*a pendulum, whose swings between anarchy and tyranny are fueled by perpetually rejuvenated illusions” [[6]](#endnote-7)*(Einstein).That statement not only applies to the Nazi-dominated society back then, but also to Napoleon’s time as well and certainly during the aftermath of the French Revolution. After a decade of war and tumultuous oppression from the Jacobins, and then the Directory, France was an open stage on which Napoleon could become a star, entrancing his subjects with false promises and political propaganda. Unlike Louis XVI before him, whom he noted that “*If Louis XVI had climbed up on a horse, victory would have been his*”[[7]](#endnote-8) (Bonaparte), Napoleon’s method of keeping his fame and stature was to appear to his subjects first and foremost, as a hero. While his military exploits sustained him and projected him, his political career was the mainstay of his grandeur image. No other monarch in French history had crowned themselves Emperor, an even more remarkable feat considering Napoleon was not of royal descent. He was the paragon of seizing opportunities and manipulating circumstances (which will be discussed further on), and understood that strong centralized power in the hands of meritocratically appointed individuals was what was needed to effectively run a state. Napoleon himself once spoke of the republic he once ruled during his exile on St. Helena:

“*The republic is the organization that best raises the soul and possesses in the highest degree the seeds of great things. But its greatness devours it sooner or later, for in becoming powerful, it has, of necessity, to found unity of action, which in turn, leads to the despotism of man or an aristocrat.”[[8]](#endnote-9)* (Bonaparte)

This quote by itself exemplifies the kind of hypocrisy Napoleon was famous for; he himself was well aware of his state of ‘enlightened despotism’, and exploited it to its limits while maintaining the state of France both as the First Consul, and later, its Emperor. The Napoleonic Regime differed from that of its Bourbon predecessors – and much of the pseudo-feudal fiefdoms of the era – in that he was a social liberal and an internationalist, disregarding foolish notions of class, as well as the libertarian ideology that had been the bane of the pre-revolutionary government. He essentially fabricated the modern foundations of monarchy and – it must be said – dictatorship by transforming France from a war-torn state into an efficient empire, abolishing the remnants of feudalism and serfdom, and establishing a semi-autocratic rule in its wake, often instating his brothers or puppet rulers of those regions he conquered, thereby ensuring that the Bonaparte regime will live on. Furthermore, Napoleon’s progressive legacies – the Napoleonic Code & the Concordat of 1801 in particular – and their repercussions are still seen today, long integrated into the civil code of Europe. This is especially evident in parts of Italy, Holland, Germany, Poland, Austria and of course, France. The Napoleonic Code was especially remarkable in the fact that it was the first successful codification and strongly influenced the civil code of the aforementioned countries[[9]](#endnote-10). The Code itself was an amalgamation of the old rationalist universalism of the Enlightenment and the new post-revolutionary notions of individualism, nationalism, and a hint of democracy as well, though it swayed towards preserving the patriarchal model of family and continued denigrating women as subordinates[[10]](#endnote-11). The Concordat, by contrast, was more of an affirmation of Napoleon’s growing gains, yet Napoleon recognized the danger in not allying with the church: it could be used as a weapon against him by counterrevolutionaries in the West, Britain in particular. To ignore the church’s influence was tantamount to saying “*there are men about the house with lighted torches, but leave them alone, and arrest them only if they set it on fire*”[[11]](#endnote-12) (Bonaparte)*.* Napoleon’s alignment with the ecclesiastical gained him the support of the Catholics as well, and secured him even more power; power thrives on power. Napoleon’s achievements as an Emperor were not limited to setting a civil law or dealings with the papacy however; he reorganized the banking system and tax system, instituted state-funded education, and reorganized the civil administration, leading to an improved and productive method of governing. The latter is shown in Steven Englund’s *Napoleon: A Political Life:*

*“As there were not enough civil servants and administrative structures to carry out State policy effectively, render services, or bring in the taxes, data, and conscripts deemed to be due from an empire spanning thirty seven million, the Consulate layered on new levels of fonctionnaires – the prefect at the head of each department and the subprefect at the head of each of four hundred arrondissements. It was these men’s productivity and efficiency, not their number that was extraordinary and marked the era. For this, Bonaparte – by his personal example of work and his outsized demands on his subordinates – was largely responsible.”[[12]](#endnote-13)* (Englund)

Napoleon’s idealism differed vastly from either Louis XVI, who he found to be far too lenient and unpatriotic, or Robespierre, who governs by decree and executes counter-revolutionaries. Instead, Bonaparte simply takes what the revolution had started, and continued it under the pretentious label of a republic. He observed that “*You cannot rule a nation unless you adjust your political contrivances to suit the peculiar temperament*”[[13]](#endnote-14) (Bonaparte). In a nation overran with revolutionary fervor, he resolves to put the drama of political polarization behind him, playing to the people’s whims while also turning the tide in his favor. Bonaparte’s regime could be called a constitutional monarchy, a dictatorship, a republic, democracy, autocracy, despotism, but in truth, it contained elements of each, though classified as none. The public could have cared less – France at that time favored anything that wasn’t the *ancient regime* – as Napoleon states in his own words “*When all is organized… it is natural that the work of administration should increase and that of legislation decrease*”[[14]](#endnote-15) (Bonaparte). In actuality, his administration was that of a sovereignty sans the control of the legislation; He ruled by decree, invoked law “*derived from the administration, enforced by the administration, interpreted by the administration*”[[15]](#endnote-16) (Fisher). One thing is clear though – the public supported Napoleon overwhelmingly – as his rule as First Consul, and later, Emperor were consented and approved by the public. What would’ve occurred had France not been in a state of turmoil or the public required of a leader is unknown, but one fact remains evident: Napoleon Bonaparte reshaped France as a political whole, assembled an empire from the ashes of the revolution, and instituted reforms which are still evident today.

Perhaps the most indisputable characteristic of Napoleon – and the one that few dare disagree on – is that he was a brilliant strategist and military leader, perhaps one of the most notorious in history. He had an insatiable appetite for books, particularly the military campaigns of his predecessors such as Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, and Frederick the Great. Based on his mathematical prowess and the knowledge he had absorbed from his reading, he would devise and improvise the most successful tactics and campaigns in history, so successful that his rivals would emulate him and imitate his strategies. Yet battle merely served to earn him victories, and victories to earn him power and reputation, both of was critical in his overthrow of the Directory upon his return from his Egyptian campaign. He states “*I have fought 60 battles, and there is not a single thing I have learnt that I didn’t know at the beginning*”[[16]](#endnote-17) (Bonaparte). The first time that he had witnessed bloodshed was during the attack on the Tuileries Palace in Paris at the beginning of the revolution, when corpses littered the ground - bodies maimed and disemboweled - when Napoleon became disillusioned and hardened towards society and began his lifelong doctrine to utilize and control his subjects rather than the other way around. He expresses his about face in attitude:

“*If I had received the order to turn my cannons against the people, I do not doubt that habit, prejudice, education, the name of the king; all would have made me obey it. But the national oath, once taken, put me past these things. Now I knew only the nation. My natural inclinations from then on were in harmony with my duties and fitted in marvelously with the metaphysic of the National Assembly.”[[17]](#endnote-18)* (Bonaparte)

It comes off unsurprisingly then, that Napoleon’s ruthlessness in war came from an insatiable desire to win. This relentless ambition is perhaps what accounts for his innovative strategies and inventive techniques during battle, disregarding all notions of formality for surprise and effectiveness instead. He trained his soldiers to live off the land (minimalizing the need for supply lines and taking mass army dependence on the land), and paid close attention to the daily routines of his subordinate leaders, as well as watching his enemies. He also arranged his schedule so as to be available during certain times of the day, optimizing time efficiently, and championed erratic and unpredictable changes in artillery positions and battle formations. Because he had a photographic memory, he could memorize entire battle formulas and simulate them in his head before making his decision. Massing artillery against a portion of the enemy’s line, extending the adversary’s defenses by obliging him to defend against flanked moves, and use of climatic assaults at precise moments are just some examples of Napoleon’s foresight and genius. His strategies were most prominent in the Battle of Castiglione (1796), Battle of Ulm (1805), and the Battle of Austerlitz (1805) that followed, where he defeated the Austrian-Russian army swiftly and tactfully, although he has utilized his methods on battlefields as far removed such as Eylau (1807), Lutzen (1813), Montmirail (1814), and Borodino (1812). “*The great art of winning a battle*,” said Napoleon during his exile on St. Helena, “*consists in changing one’s line of operations in the middle of the action*”. For Napoleon, Battle was like a drama with a beginning, middle, and end:

“*The battle order and preliminary maneuvers formed the exposition. The counter maneuvers of the opposing armies constitute the dramatic complication. They in turn, lead to new measures and bring about the crisis*. *A leader’s role consists in first calculating all the possibilities accurately and then making an almost mathematically exact allowance for accident. In war, nothing can be gained except by calculation, military genius lay in finding the balance between the forecasting and accident, and in being constantly prepared to exploit accidents. There is a moment in every battle, at which the least maneuver is decisive and gives superiority, as one drop of water causes overflow*”[[18]](#endnote-19) (Bonaparte).

Rather than the battle-centered motifs of old, Napoleon chose to employ anticipation, predicaments, and contingencies in his strategies instead, often maneuvering so as to gain secondary objectives that put the adversary at a grave disadvantage if the latter refused to accept battle under conditions of the emperor’s choosing. He also realized the value that a soldier’s allegiance and morale made to an effective army; thus, he often joked and drank with his troops, awarded them ranks based on merit[[19]](#endnote-20), and generally worked to gain a soldier’s trust, “*as a soldier who had received The Emperor’s good favor was ten times more likely to do better in battle[[20]](#endnote-21)*” (Martin). Unlike many other generals of his time, and vital to Napoleon’s unadulterated command over his troops, he understood that “*of all the passions that inspire men into battle, none…is so powerful and so constant as the longing for honor and renown…according to their origins, these feelings must be reckoned among the noblest in human nature, and in war they are the true breath of life that endows the monstrous body with a soul[[21]](#endnote-22)*” (Bonaparte). As Napoleon’s victories grew however, so did his zeal for power, thus the Continental System[[22]](#endnote-23) came into being from his vendetta with Britain[[23]](#endnote-24). His disastrous Spanish campaign invoked the Peninsular War, and his decision to invade Russia also sprang from his frustration with Britain, as well as the increasing tension between him and the Russian czar, Alexander I. Eventually, Napoleon’s walls of fortitude began to crumble, which gradually led to his abdication following Leizpig (1813), and then his exile following the more famous Waterloo (1815), which undermined his career indefinitely. His reputation however – his *legend –* as a strategist and military general remains one of the most undisputed and reverent of all time. Ultimately, his archrival Arthur Wellesley (better known as the Duke of Wellington) admits that “*Napoleon’s presence on the battlefield was equal to that of forty thousand men*”[[24]](#endnote-25) (Wellesley), solidifying Napoleon’s reputation as one of history’s greatest generals.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Napoleon’s character is his ability to seize opportunities, making the best of the situation, and turning the odds in his favor. It is unquestionable that, had the French Revolution not occurred, there would have been no Napoleon. It was solely because of France’s political turmoil, revolutionary fervor, and – perhaps her greatest commodity – war, that had demanded for, and thereby produced such a man as Napoleon, whose victories and fame permitted him to become the future emperor of France. His evolution from a young, prospective Corsican lieutenant to Brigadier General to First Consul was nothing short of extraordinary, filled with pathos and ardency; the frustration and uncertainty that he would later refer to as ‘*emotional anchors’* or ‘*doing more harm than good’*. Nevertheless, it is an expressive reminder of how Napoleon is human after all, and although he states that “*We walk faster when we walk alone[[25]](#endnote-26)*”, the period of reckoning before he overthrew the Directory remains an empathetic, even tragic one. Following the torrential and emblematic Jacobin reign of terror, the people of France were in greater need of a hero, someone who could score victories against her adversaries, and lead France out of the pit that Louis XVI had dug her into. Napoleon’s gradual rise to fame came in the form of Toulon[[26]](#endnote-27), and his rambunctious defending of the Tuileries palace[[27]](#endnote-28), and finally secured it with his coup d’etat following his successful Italian campaign[[28]](#endnote-29), and the not-so-successful Egyptian Campaign[[29]](#endnote-30). Upon his ascension, he proclaims:

*“Frenchmen, you will no doubt recognize in my conduct the zeal of a soldier of liberty and of a devoted citizen of the Republic. Liberal, beneficent, and traditional ideas have returned to their rightful place through the dispersal of the odious and despicable factions which sought to overawe the Councils.[[30]](#endnote-31)”* (Bonaparte)

Here, any past compunctions or regrets about the revolution and the Terror was overruled by Napoleon’s ascertaining of glorified rule, proclaiming that he was ‘a man of destiny’. How true it was, that power conceives more power, as one historian describes it:

“*How came it, one asks in wonder, that after the short space of fifteen years a world-wide movement depended on a single life, that the infinitudes of 1789 lived on only in the form, and by the pleasure, of the First Consul? Here surely is a political incarnation unparalleled in the whole course of human history*.”[[31]](#endnote-32) (Rose)

Here, Rose inquires that the ideals upheld by the revolution had condensed itself in the Bonaparte regime, and although Napoleon had effectively ended the revolution himself, the essential reforms it had implicated were enforced and regulated by a single person – the Emperor himself. In the course of a decade, Napoleon had ascended from an obscure Corsican soldier with little worth, to the ruler of France, and by playing his cards well – and by pure happenstance – had glorified himself and appealed to the majority of France. Because he had ‘ended’ the revolution, and in a nation of desperate measures and desperate times, the people were grateful for such a ‘savior’ as Napoleon:

“*People took their Bonaparte, not less glorious, but less pure now. They had taken him with his genius, but they would have taken him without it, they would have taken him any way they could, provided that he was powerful, so desirous were they in the days after the great disorders*.[[32]](#endnote-33)” (Thiers)

Napoleon had, in a way, succeeded Maximilien Robespierre in that he had captivated the people’s vision. His action, people felt, could do no wrong; it was strong and always ready to act[[33]](#endnote-34). Those who pondered about the validity of his meritocracy, that questioned his libertarian hopes, that he was instituting a new generation of beaurocratic nobility, or falsifying his ‘republican hero’ image were assured that the new ‘constitutional’ monarchy was rationable and permissable in France’s current state of warfare, a monarchy of “*eclectic symbols, strange characteristics, and idealogical paradoxes: a new kind of monarchy, democratic and representative in origin and legitimacy, Roman in style, liberal in aspiration, dictatorial in substance, occasioned by war but not requiring war, sustained by glory*”[[34]](#endnote-35). Of course, the success of the Bonaparte regime was largely substantiated with propaganda, and his empire maintained with the conception of conscription (both of which Napoleon pioneered, coming to full fruitition in the 20th century). Though Napoleon’s downfall was largely a reaction to his overarching and all-consuming goal of domination and oppression, his ascension and prevalency in a time of tumultous affairs and increasing tension cannot be understated. His manipulation of opportunities and cirumstantial happenings during the French Revolution made him what he is; History credits him as a politician, remembers him as a general, but also rewards him for his persistence.

In Harold Deutsch’s *The Genesis of Napoleonic Imperialism*, The Prince of Wales says of the Man of Destiny:

“*If Bonaparte were an ordinary man, he would not excite our fears and our jealousy, but with a man of such great talents and such genius we cannot rest secure with an ordinary armament. Under the [French] monarchy, it was the nation which gave the tone to the government; but today it is the First Consul who gives activity and movement to his country*”[[35]](#endnote-36).

Today, Napoleon Bonaparte is often thought of as a dictatorial menace, a short and temperamental conqueror with an ego as great as the empire he presided over. These are all based on common misconceptions: Napoleon’s regime was meant to be a republic – or more accurately, a constitutional monarchy with a hint of enlightened depotism, a welcome change over the feudalistic monarchy of old. He used the upswell of the Revolution, and its progressive sentiments to establish himself in a position of authority. This he did with unequivocal ease. His height is also a great misnomer of modern times; In fact he was five feet three, a considerable height especially when contemporaries at the time yielded height of five feet on average. He was also capable of being altruistic, especially towards his wife or his brothers, and often showed compassion and empathy towards his soldiers and established friendships with them. His tendancy to start wars is also exaggerated: Britain broke the treaty of Amiens which ignited Napoleon’s continued rivalry, the Spanish invasion was caused by their inability to comply with the continental system, and the invasion of Russia caused by surmounting tension between himself and Alexander I. Furthermore, every major defeat in Napoleon’s career was in a situation where Napoleon himself was not in command, or the troops were in inadequate positions to be presided over. All the misconceptions and negative perspectives aside, Napoleon’s positive influences were immense. His acheivements as a political power included reorganizing France’s civil administration, bank system and tax system, and introducing the concept of conscription while maintaining both civil and ecclesiastical obediance with the Napoleonic Code of 1804 and the Concordat of 1801, respectively. He had one of the most finest military minds of the time, pioneering such practices as living off the land and time optimization, innovating unconventional and surprising tactics, and understanding the importance of morale in a soldier. Lastly, his rise to fame and power was dramatic and filled with strife, but Napoleon knew when to take hold of an opportunity and hold on to it, eventually rising meritocratically from a Corsican soldier, overthrowing the Directory (subsequently becoming the First Consul), and becoming the Emperor of the French Empire (which was almost all of Europe). Thus, to compare to such individuals as Hitler and Stalin is both anachronistic and inaccurate; Napoleon was far from a megalomaniacal dictator or an oppressive tyrannical ruler. He was, as one French historian put it, "*a typical man of the 18th century, a rationalist, a philosophe who placed his trust in reason, in knowledge and in methodical effort*", a man of boundless ambition coupled with a grandiose image and an overarching ego. After him, “*feudalism was dead, society was secularized, the modern nation state replaced the dynastic state, and the bourgeoisie became the new class of privilege and status*”, and in his own words:

“*I closed the gulf of anarchy and brought order out of chaos. I rewarded merit regardless of birth or wealth, wherever I found it. I abolished feudalism and restored equality to all regardless of religion and before the law. I fought the decrepit monarchies of the Old Regime because the alternative was the destruction of all this. I purified the Revolution*.”[[36]](#endnote-37) (Bonaparte)

There is nothing more to be said than the imprint Napoleon left on French society and the repercussions that immortalize his legacy to this day and the words “*Vive L’Empereur*” that echo both in the hearts and minds of men.

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4. Christian Meier’s definition, *Ceasar*, 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. “The New Age of Tyranny”, *The New York Review of Books,* 28-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Albert Einstein, sourced from http://en.thinkexist.com [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. *Napoleon inconnu*, 2:396-397 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Napoleon at St. Helena [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Francois Furet, *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880*, 232. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. *The Concordat of 1801,* Henry Walsh, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Excerpt from *Napoleon: A Political Life,* Steven Englund, 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. *Bonapartism,* H.A.L Fisher, 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. *Le Bonapartisme, Frederic Bluche*, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. *Bonapartism,* H.A.L Fisher, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Cited from http://www.napoleonguide.com [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Excerpt from *Napoleon: A Political Life,* Steven Englund, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Dictated by Napoleon at St.Helena [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. The Imperial Guard was the most prominent example of this; they were the backbone of Napoleon’s army and were feared throughout Europe. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. *Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars*, Albert Martin. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. May or may not be Napoleon’s exact words, but attributed to him. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. A system where all continental trade was barred from Britain. Britain found a way around this, through smuggling. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. One year after the treaty of Amiens, Britain had regained control of the seas and defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar. Napoleon has had a lasting grudge against Britain since. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Stanhope: *Conversations with the Duke of Wellington, p. 81.* [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Cited from http://www.napoleonguide.com [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. At the siege of Toulon, Napoleon’s expertise with cannons was vital to the defeat of the counter-revolutionaries and earned him a promotion to general. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Again, Napoleon was promoted to brigadier general following his decisive defending of the Tuileries Palace. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Here, Napoleon truly glorified himself, consolidating most of Italy and piedmont, and setting favorable treaties in effect. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Napoleon had planned, in his vendetta against Britain, to conquer Egypt, but failed in the Battle of the Nile when Horatio Nelson defeated his army. The Campaign did however, serve France in gaining additional knowledge about Egyptian structures and edifices. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Napoleon Bonaparte, “*Proclamation to the French Nation*”, November 10, 1799 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. John Holland Rose, *The Life of Napoleon I*, 1:24. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
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36. Cited from http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95aug/napoleon.html [↑](#endnote-ref-37)