Ambition Giveth and Ambition Taketh Away: The Life of Napoleon

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Author notes:
Napoleon was, and still is, a larger-than-life figure known for his incredible ambition and drive. When I learned of his teenage years as a budding writer participating in writing competitions and how he derided ambition as a "disordered passion," it just stuck with me. I could not shake how much that contrasted with the ambition he used to forge an empire.

Faculty notes:
In this ambitious essay, Clayton Cardinal cogently argues that ambition helps explain both the rise and fall of a man who gave his name to an entire age: Napoleon. Having himself at an early age derided ambition, Napoleon soon came to self-consciously embody it, comparing himself favorably to, as Cardinal shows, “an Olympic athlete,” “a shooting star,” and “the envoy of the Grand Nation,” France. Napoleon’s desire to create what he called an “empire of the world,” however, ultimately led to his ruin. Throughout the essay, Cardinal demonstrates strong command of the sources, which are interpreted with sophistication and nuance and seamlessly incorporated into the prose. Thanks to its clarity and concision, the writing is a pleasure to read.
Ambition Giveth and Ambition Taketh Away: The Life of Napoleon

Napoleon was a man defined by ambition. In his early life, before he joined the military, he
derided ambition as “a violent and unthinking delirium.”¹ Once he joined the military, however, he
used his military brilliance and ambition to quickly rise through the ranks during the wars of the
French Revolution, thrusting himself to the spotlight in the process. Napoleon took advantage of
this situation to seize power, first establishing the consulate, then declaring himself emperor.
However, ambition began to lead Napoleon astray after a naval defeat to the British at Trafalgar in
1805. In an attempt to starve Britain of resources, Napoleon established the Continental System and
rapidly expanded French influence across the continent to enforce the System. This overextension
reached a climax with Napoleon’s ill-fated invasion of Russia, which led to his eventual defeat a
couple years later. Napoleon refused to accept this defeat and returned from exile only a year later to
try again, but this attempt was short-lived and lasted a mere hundred days. This relentless ambition
may have driven Napoleon to greatness, but it ultimately drove him to ruin.

The story of Napoleon began in 1769 on the 15th of August on the island of Corsica, just
one year after the French conquered the island. Though he did attend a French military school from
1778-1785, this setting was “not a happy one,” according to Steven Englund in his biography of
Napoleon.² Englund would go on to claim that “young Bonaparte … reacted with revulsion to his
new surroundings” due to the school’s focus on “the ways of the court.”³ David A. Bell, in his
biography of Napoleon, notes that due to the circumstances of the time, “a literary vocation made
more sense” than a military one, given Napoleon’s heritage as a Corsican making it nearly impossible
to have a distinguished military career.⁴ As such, Napoleon’s early life was characterized by his skill
as a writer. Bell turns to Napoleon himself on this matter, whom he quotes to have said of his
teenage life, “I lived like a bear … always alone in my small room with my books … my only
friends!”⁵ Bell would go on to quote how Napoleon introduced himself to Enlightenment thinker
Raynal, “I am not yet eighteen, but I am already a writer.”⁶

In 1791, Napoleon remained true to his conviction of being a writer and entered a writing
contest. Though he did not win, his views on ambition were especially notable. “Ambition, like all
disordered passions,” he wrote, “is a violent and unthinking delirium. … Like a fire fed by a pitiless
wind, it only burns out after having consumed everything in its path.”⁷ Given the career Napoleon
would go on to have, this quote is fascinating and something to keep in mind as the story of
Napoleon unfolds.

His budding literary career, however, was not given the chance to flourish. The French
Revolution significantly altered the potential trajectory of a military career. In this post-Revolution
world, Napoleon’s Corsican heritage no longer held him back from having a distinguished military
career. Napoleon put down the pen and took up a position as an artillery officer. By 1793, he took
command of the artillery during the siege of Toulon, and his prowess on the battlefield saw him
promoted to the rank of brigadier general.

¹ David A. Bell, Napoleon: A Concise Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 17.
³ Englund, 21-22.
⁴ Bell, 16.
⁵ Bell, 16.
⁶ Bell, 17.
⁷ As quoted in Bell, 17.
In late 1795, Napoleon was given the task of defending the Convention from the Vendemiarie Uprising. A member of the uprising, a man named Jean-Charles-Dominique Lacretelle, later wrote on Napoleon’s victory over the royalist rebellion, saying, “The Republic thought it had triumphed that day, but only under the protection of a warrior who would soon destroy it.”8 While Lacretelle’s commentary has the benefit of hindsight, Jean-Barthelemy Le Couteulx de Canteleu’s recollection of his first meeting with Napoleon does not, and yet it was a similarly eerie prediction of the future, this time through a recalled quote from Napoleon, “In France we have silver, cannon, barrels of flour. … That is what is needed against anarchy; but today the government can obtain neither silver, nor flour, nor cannon.”9 Both accounts here set the stage for what is to come: Napoleon’s campaigns in Italy and Egypt and his rise to power over not just the military but the entirety of France.

Napoleon’s campaigns in Italy are considered “an exemplar of generalship” in the modern era.10 However, Napoleon felt the need to further sell his success via a newspaper he published regarding his success in Italy. To put it simply, Napoleon did not think lightly of himself. He described himself as “an Olympic athlete,” “a shooting star,” and “the envoy of the Grand Nation.”11 Perhaps more notable, however, was his claim regarding his “noble and virtuous ambition.”12 This newspaper was published in 1797, only six years after Napoleon himself derided ambition. Yet now, as he achieved military glory, it seemed such a negative view of ambition no longer suits him.

Napoleon’s high opinion of himself joined him when he left Italy for Egypt. After he easily defeated the reigning Mamelukes in 1798, Napoleon issued a bold proclamation to the Egyptian people. “I respect God, his Prophet, and the Koran more than the Mamelukes.”13 He went on to claim that it was the Mamelukes who destroyed Egypt’s historical grandeur and that it was through French intervention that Egyptian grandeur would be restored. This proved to be a false promise, as Napoleon was unable to properly administrate the Egyptian people and fled before a revolt could gather enough strength to defeat him. Yet despite this setback, perhaps because of the propaganda efforts from his Italian campaign, he returned to France to a hero’s welcome.

It only took a month from his return before Napoleon led a coup to seize power for himself. To encourage an apathetic French people tired of coups, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis justified this coup by claiming, “republic and liberty will no longer be empty words; a new era is beginning.”14 Then to discredit his co-conspirators and seize power for himself, Napoleon described their plans for government as “monstrous, composed of completely unreasonable, incompatible ideas.”15 Napoleon’s argument carried the day, and his plans for government were installed in December of 1799. This established the Consulate and named Napoleon the First Consul. Perhaps learning from his mistakes in Egypt, Napoleon sought to consolidate and legitimize his power.

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8 Jean-Charles-Dominique Lacretelle, “Account of the 1795 Vendemiarie Uprising,” 1875, in Rafe Blaufarb, Napoleon: Symbol for an Age: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 35.
9 Jean-Barthelemy Le Couteulx de Canteleu, “Bonaparte in Barras’s Salon,” 1875, in Blaufarb, 37.
10 Blaufarb, 37.
11 Napoleon Bonaparte, “Historical, Political, and Military Notes on the Army of Italy,” October 1797, in Blaufarb, 38.
12 Napoleon, “Army of Italy,” in Blaufarb, 38.
13 Napoleon Bonaparte, “Proclamation to the Egyptians,” 1798, in Blaufarb, 44.
Napoleon’s first step in this process was reconciliation with the Pope and the Catholic Church. In his letter to Cardinal Martiniana, Pope Pius VII expressed how eager he was to see France returned to Catholicism, writing “[w]e thus embrace happily the propitious occasion presented to us.”16 After successful negotiations, Napoleon and the Pope signed a treaty that made Catholicism the dominant religion in France.

Napoleon’s second step in this process was reconciling with the emigres, many of them the former nobility of France, who had fled or been displaced by the French Revolution. These attempts were a massive success, as reported by the prefect of the Vaucluse in 1805: “[w]hen they left their homes, they were fleeing anarchy … Can one imagine that they would not be totally devoted to the astonishing man whose first acts of government [tended] to destroy the enemy who had driven them out?”17 These steps at consolidation allowed Napoleon to properly administrate France and his immediate conquests.

Napoleon used this successful consolidation to declare himself Consul-for-Life in 1802, which in turn, allowed him to set up a hereditary government in 1804 and then declare himself Emperor a month later. This act, however, created a new problem. Napoleon had married his wife, Josephine, back in 1796, yet they had had no children together. Without an heir, Napoleon’s new dynasty was in jeopardy. After several more years with Josephine, Napoleon eventually decided to divorce her in 1809 to “[seek] a new, younger spouse whose grandeur would complement his own.”18 According to Napoleon, “Three reigning families could give France an empress; the Russian, Austrian, and Saxon.”19 Ultimately deciding on Marie Louise of Austria in 1810, this marriage gave him the heir he so desperately sought and brought legitimacy to his new dynasty among his European peers.

With his imperial ambitions unlocked, Napoleon set his sights on Britain. Unfortunately for Napoleon, his attempts to invade Britain were met with failure, as the British defeated his navy at Trafalgar in 1805. This defeat would ultimately mark the beginning of the end, as Napoleon’s quest to defeat Britain and realize his ambitions eventually drove him to ruin.

Napoleon turned from Britain to central Europe. In order to wage these massive wars, Napoleon was able to integrate a significantly larger percentage of the population than had previously been seen in Europe. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, reflected in his posthumous book On War on Napoleon’s innovations to the waging of war, “The people became a participant in the war; instead of governments and armies as heretofore, the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance.”20 With this massive increase in resources, Napoleon was able to consistently crush his opposition on land.

Within a year of Trafalgar, Napoleon had defeated the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz, forcing the Austrians to surrender; he had created the Confederation of the Rhine, dissolving the Holy Roman Empire, and he had defeated the Prussians at Jena and Auerstadt. By the end of 1807, he had forced Prussia and Russia to surrender, had created the Grand Duchy of Warsaw and the

18 Blaufarb, 112.
Kingdom of Westphalia, and sent troops in to pacify Spain. Furthermore, he used this rapid military success to establish what he called the Continental System. This System was a blockade that blocked all trade from continental Europe to Britain in an effort to starve Britain of resources, so it would be forced to capitulate to Napoleon.

For this System to work, Napoleon needed to be able to enforce it. To enforce it, Napoleon needed to have control over continental Europe, either directly or through alliances. Napoleon certainly believed this rapid expansion would work. “The first sovereign who … will embrace in good faith the cause of nations,” he wrote, “will find himself at the head of all Europe and will be able to attempt anything.” He also expressed this thought with a more specific example in a letter he wrote to his brother Jerome, king of Westphalia, in 1807, “What people would want to return to arbitrary Prussian government once it had tasted the benefits of a wise and liberal administration?”

As it turned out, the answer to Napoleon’s question was yes, those people would like to throw off their new French government, especially the Spanish. By 1808, the seeds of rebellion were growing in Spain. As the Supreme Governmental Junta explained to Spanish bishops, “[t]he French broke treaties and violated the laws of hospitality … If presented well and often, these facts … should convince [Spaniards] that the only alternative is victory or death.” The Supreme Governmental Junta was successful in its goal. It inspired a conflict lasting six years that eventually drove the French out of Spain, and while other nations and provinces may have appeared to stay loyal, as time would prove, it would only take one domino to fall for Napoleon’s overextension elsewhere to take effect. That domino would be his doomed invasion of Russia in 1812.

Napoleon’s invasion of Russia marked the height of his imperial ambition and overextension. The empire was already stretched thin, and discontent was rising, as evidenced by Spain’s rebellion. Invading Russia, even had he emerged victorious instead of being defeated, would have ultimately yielded the same result. When Napoleon first took over as First Consul of France, he made moves to consolidate and legitimize his power. His rapid expansion across Europe, however, was propped up by the establishment of puppet kingdoms ruled by his siblings. Napoleon’s defeat in Russia only accelerated those people throwing off their puppet governments to reestablish their own sovereignty. This can be seen in the Proclamation of Kalisch from the Prussian monarchy to the German populace. In this proclamation, the Prussians took advantage of rising German nationalism to encourage them to overthrow the occupying French government. “The Confederation of the Rhine … can be tolerated no longer because it is the result of foreign pressure and tool of foreign influence.”

Napoleon’s rule did not survive his disastrous invasion of Russia, an invasion where fewer than 100,000 of the original estimated 650,000-man army made it back home, and he was sent off to exile upon his defeat. This exile did not last, and Napoleon returned for one last attempt at seizing power. In a conversation he had with political writer Benjamin Constant, Napoleon stated, “I wanted the empire of the world, and to take it, I needed boundless power.” This last attempt did not last more than one hundred days, and after his defeat at Waterloo in 1815, Napoleon was exiled.

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24 “Proclamation of Kalisch,” March 1813, in Blaufarb, 189.
25 Emmanuel-Auguste de las Casas, “Account of a Conversation between Benjamin Constant and Napoleon,” 1815, in Blaufarb, 192.
a second time, this time for good. During this second exile, Napoleon reflected on his life and his ambition. “Finally, my ambition? Ah, doubtless I had much, but of perhaps the grandest and most elevated sort ever!”  

Perhaps Napoleon should have taken his own advice before his ambition “consumed everything in its path.”

Napoleon’s ambition drove him to succeed in Italy and take control of France as First Consul. He successfully consolidated his power and was able to properly administrate France. However, due to his inability to invade Britain, he sought to defeat them by alternate means. He established a Continental System that would block all trade from continental Europe to Britain. To make this Continental System work, Napoleon rapidly expanded the influence of the French Empire, bringing Spain, Austria, Germany, and Prussia to heel. This overextension first showed cracks via revolts in Spain and then completely shattered after his disastrous invasion of Russia. Napoleon’s ambitious overextension directly led to his own downfall, as he was defeated and banished not once, but twice. Ambition gave Napoleon the means to take the power he so desperately sought, and ambition drove him to throw it all away.

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26 Emmanuel-Auguste de las Casas, “Napoleon on Napoleon,” in Blaufarb, 213.
