

## 22. Greatness

### *Of winners and losers*

It is difficult to avoid the impression that there is something terribly wrong with the history of western civilization when the exploits and achievements of its greatest men are constantly recounted. These begin with Alexander the Great, responsible for at least 3.5 million deaths of soldiers and civilians (a rough guess) resulting from his constant wars and pillage; Julius Caesar, so forgiving, but responsible for around 3.5 million deaths (another rough guess) resulting from his battles, not to mention cutting off the hands of all men and boys in a village that refused to acknowledge his supremacy; Napoleon Bonaparte, around 3.5 million including 1 million French civilians, plus the deaths of his enemies in battle and massacre of those civilians.

The numbers, of course, do not carry much weight in and of themselves. We are numbed by their abstraction. Besides, they have been disputed many times over by various historians and other experts. But what is not disputed is that the Great Men, all to a man, obviously loved war. They reported, or more accurately bragged, of their exploits, the battles they won, the territories they acquired, and, especially for Napoleon (he worshipped both Caesar and Alexander) they publicized and basked in the glory of winning. One can only assume that Napoleon actually believed the numbers Caesar reported (many unbelievable), though, one must also acknowledge that Napoleon, like Caesar, was a master at propaganda and communications. He established his own magazine, or one might say today Twitter account, and relentlessly pounded his adoring French citizens with a recounting of his amazing exploits, full of incredible numbers of the vanquished, and the heroic exploits fashioned and made possible by him, the Great Leader. This was a man who was not even French (a kind of Sardinian Corsican), who had sided with the revolutionary movements against royalty that led to the French Revolution of 1789 and eventually the beheading of King Louis XVI in 1793. Yet in the aftermath of the bloody revolution,

in 1795 a National Convention was held in which a five member directorate was appointed by parliament to govern France. It had as its direct governing tool, an effective army to suppress any dissent from those (Jacobins and Royalists) who objected to the Directorate. The army was commanded by General Napoleon Bonaparte, who ruthlessly put down any insurrections or even public demonstrations of dissent.

In 1799, amidst financial crises and other objections to the government of the Directorate, Bonaparte staged a coup d'état, appointed himself "first consul," mimicking the first Emperor of Rome, Augustus, who insisted on being called first citizen, "Princeps" rather than "Emperor." On the gold coin Napoleon had struck to commemorate this big event, his depiction as "first consul" looks very much like that of Julius Caesar on his various coins. It wasn't long, though, before Bonaparte called himself Emperor, established a dynasty and obsessed with having progeny so that the accession to the throne of France would be inherited by his offspring.

And for a while it worked. But as is well known, after his having fought many battles, broken many peace treaties, conquered almost all of Europe, he did what all Great Men are supposed not to do. He lost a decisive battle, the Battle of Leipzig that alone cost some 90,000 casualties. He was thus eventually deposed from the throne by the Sénat conservateur, and as part of the peace Treaty of Fontainebleau between France and the Allies (the rest of Europe fighting against Napoleon), exiled to the Isle of Elba.

The story could end there, we all know, it did not. Yet we should pause for a moment and reflect on what made this man so great. His failures up to this point were few, if we think of success and failure as being winning or losing battles. But historians have nevertheless sung praises to him for his great accomplishments in other fields of governing: he completely reorganized the decrepit bureaucracies that governed France, invented an acclaimed legal code that remains dominant to this day, introduced a centralized system of education for all citizens, a model that influenced much of Europe, enhanced and supported the sciences and the arts, set the bases for introduction of the metric system throughout Europe, and much more.

All these accomplishments must be measured against the violence and destruction he reaped, driven by his obvious love of war. Would not many of these accomplishments of science, education and law have occurred without his interventions? Were so many wars and killings really necessary to introduce a new education system throughout Europe, for example? This is, of course, a silly “what if” notion. But surely humans, civilized humans, are capable of improvement in their ways of doing things (education, law, governance) without such carnage? Is carnage a necessary requirement for progress?

Putting silly questions aside, what we are concerned with in this small essay is to answer the more serious and human question: did Napoleon get (deserve) what was coming to him? His love of war killed and maimed countless people. Should he not pay a price for this? Any ordinary person who did one tiny inkling of what he did, would surely be punished for it.

No doubt you are already answering my question. He met his Waterloo.

It is by their actions that individuals define what punishment they deserve, or will be visited upon them. The means of this carriage of punishment is expressed in the common observation, “he brought it on himself.” Does this apply to Napoleon, the Great Man of history?

Keeping in mind his love of war and conquest (of quite a few women as well), let us look at how he fared after failure. One of the perplexing and really annoying things about Great Men who reap terrible devastation is that, even when, on the rare occasions they lose a battle (easily the worst disaster they can imagine), their followers nevertheless rally around, and cling to them, through much of this death and destruction. Their loyalty is buttressed by certain rules of war that help a great man overcome his losses in battle. Those of the military who see the loss coming, and desert, are often punished severely, often by execution. They are cowards. Those remaining loyal are heroes. This rule serves well to deflect responsibility for any defeat away from the Great Leader, on to the pathetic, cowardly men under his command. The great general is depicted as having empathy for his troops, he eats and sleeps in the same quarters as do they (Julius Caesar, or so he wrote, supposedly also Alexander the

Great, probably not Hitler though he was once a common soldier). Churchill, another great man was also a great lover of war and glory. He lived it as an officer in the Boer war and World War I and wrote about it as a war correspondent. He also worshiped Napoleon.

But back to Napoleon. Although he was forced to abdicate, as his punishment, he was sent to the Isle of Elba where, incredibly, he was given sovereignty over the island of 12,000 people and allowed to retain the title of Emperor. Thereupon he supposedly started a revision of its governmental structure, introduced modern education and health systems, and much more. It is hard to see this exile as anything other than a cynical joke. Especially, as the promised income was not forthcoming, and it was the British of the allies who were administering his exile. So it was that on 26 February 1815 with 700 men, Napoleon escaped in the brig of a ship disguised as British, while his British overseer was away in Italy visiting his doctor. (Though there may have been a woman involved). Thenceforth, with his small band he landed at Golfe-Juan and made his way north to Paris. Contrary to the expectations of the powers that controlled France from Paris, and totally unforeseen by the allies, most or many of the troops of the standing French army went over to Napoleon, so that by the time Napoleon arrived in Paris, he was once again Emperor and commander of a large, though eventually not large enough, army. King Louis XVIII fled to Belgium. On 13 March the Congress of Vienna declared Napoleon an outlaw and the allies, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia pledged to raise 100,000 men to oppose him. Through what might have been, in retrospect, an unpopular move, Napoleon introduced conscription and managed to expand his army to 200,000 men.

The die was cast. Napoleon, as usual, decided to go on the offensive, and having studied carefully the locations of the allied forces, chose a strategy that had worked well for him in the past: divide and conquer. He planned to make sure the two enemy forces that sat in quite different locations were kept apart. He would keep them divided, attack and destroy the British force commanded by the Duke of Wellington, and then turn his army against the Austrian force commanded by Prince Blücher. These

two battles came to be known as the Battle of Waterloo that began on 18 June 1815. Incredibly, Wellington had ignored the warnings of his spies that Napoleon was approaching. He even attended a ball the night before the battle, a great social event attended by all his top generals and senior officers. Such was the attitude of the allies who simply could not believe that Napoleon was any immediate threat. Most had also believed that the French standing army would not go over to him.

Much has been written about these events, Wellington's attendance and approval of the ball seen as some kind of dereliction of duty. Wellington did, however, since all his top officers were in attendance at the ball, give instructions and orders to his officers while at the ball, so that eventually the army was ready to respond to what would be a tough onslaught by Napoleon's forces. Wellington had also, days before the ball, reconnoitered the expected battlefield, so knew the terrain and the advantages and disadvantages it would present for his army.

How battles proceed, the thrusts and counter-thrusts, the movement of troops, the delivery or confused delivery of orders and commands, the importance of the terrain at particular points of battle, and probably the most important of all, the morale of the troops, are of great fascination to students of warfare and those whose job it is to do battle. And in this case, certainly in the early stages, Wellington's apparent inadequate preparation for the battle, augured well for yet another amazing victory by the little genius Napoleon. After all, Wellington when asked what he thought of Napoleon, replied that Napoleon's presence on the battlefield was equivalent to 40,000 men.

In any case, we do not need to concern ourselves with the intricacies of battles, the outcomes of which, in most if not all cases, are largely determined by unforeseen events, including the weather, that is, luck. By far the most important event is the outcome, because we know that the winner is always a hero of great character, and the loser is the one now deserving of punishment. In sum, Napoleon was vanquished. Wellington was the heroic victor, Napoleon the loser. He met his Waterloo.

But of course, losing is not really a punishment in itself, is it? For Napoleon it almost was because he was not used to losing, though he had lost big the first time round, resulting in his exile

to Elba. This time, the powers of Paris and the allies were bent on a more serious punishment. And certainly, given the deaths caused by Napoleon's provoking the Battle of Waterloo he deserved considerable punishment, don't you think? Although battle statistics are notoriously unreliable, the rough numbers are 41,000 casualties on Napoleon's side (no figure on how many of these were deaths), and 24,000 (4,700 killed) of the allies.

Sit back and ask yourself. What punishment do you think Napoleon deserved for this dreadful loss? How does one match the destruction and damage of the war to the punishment of one man, the instigator of the war? Is the humiliation of the loss a sufficient punishment?

This time, the allies took no chances. The punishment would be exile to the island of St. Helena, way too far from any large land mass, no people for Napoleon to govern. He was essentially a captive kept in a reasonably equipped house, but far from the palatial trappings he had during his stay at Elba. Though, given the death and destruction of the Battle of Waterloo, one could surely think of apt punishments that would match at least a little of the violence and carnage that resulted from Napoleon's battles and his obvious thirst for war.

Execution, perhaps? He showed no hesitation in executing Jacobins and others he deemed were a threat to his rise and reign. Not to mention the carnage, destruction, and plunder—which he took to a whole new level, just visit the Louvre to see a fraction of the spoils. The Prussians pressed Wellington to have Napoleon executed. Given the dreadful violence, maiming of his soldiers, blood and body parts strewn over a huge area, bodies piled on top of each other. Surely an execution would at least play a small part in matching Napoleon's crimes? But Wellington refused, telling the Prussians that, if they wanted Napoleon executed, let them do it. He would not, even though he had Napoleon in custody. And what of Napoleon's collaborators? Should they not also bear some of the blame for his love of war? Perhaps the practice in Roman times, to sell off the losers of a war or battle, into slavery? Especially as Bonaparte reintroduced slavery into French colonies.

One could go on. But it rapidly becomes clear that matching a punishment to crimes of such magnitude is an impossibility.

Because Napoleon “met his Waterloo” he got what he deserved, that is, he lost. And this, perhaps was the worst punishment of all, given how much he loved war and winning. Yet he was surely rewarded by historians of the future (his future that is). There are monuments throughout France and elsewhere to his fame and glory, to his non-military achievements (the Napoleonic legal code, education and agricultural reform etc.). Do all such achievements neutralize the terrible massacres of millions of lives caused by his wars?

His actual punishment, exile to British-held St. Helena on October 1815, was still a far more mild non-capital punishment than what he might have received if sent to one of the many horrible prisons of the period (they are not much better today). There he remained, eventually dying of a stomach ailment, probably cancer, on May 5, 1821. He had expressed his wish to have his remains buried “on the banks of the Seine, among the French people I have loved so much.” This was denied to him. Excepting that, in 1840 his remains were removed to a crypt at Les Invalides in Paris, in the dead company of other French military leaders.

And so in the end, Napoleon won perhaps the greatest battle of all, the battle of posterity. He left huge accomplishments behind him that outstripped the destruction of his wars, and for this we have to blame all subsequent historians, even those critical of his reign and exploits, for having recognized them as such. He was clearly not punished enough in posterity to make up for the “rewards” (benefits to civilization) of his non-military accomplishments.

Should the monuments that neutralize his bloodthirsty love of war be torn down? Should his punishment be ignominy, relegated to the dustbin of history? We are often told that these monuments are also a reminder of what happened in the past. That we should never forget them or else we may repeat them. Is this but a fanciful wish that humanity were something else? We should not forget that it was the “people” after all who made Napoleon possible. As far as punishment is concerned, maybe they also got what they deserved.

In sum. Winners are punished by losing, for which they are forgiven. Losers are killed or enslaved, and rarely forgiven.

**Moral: Winning in war is the moral justification for punishing the losers**



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