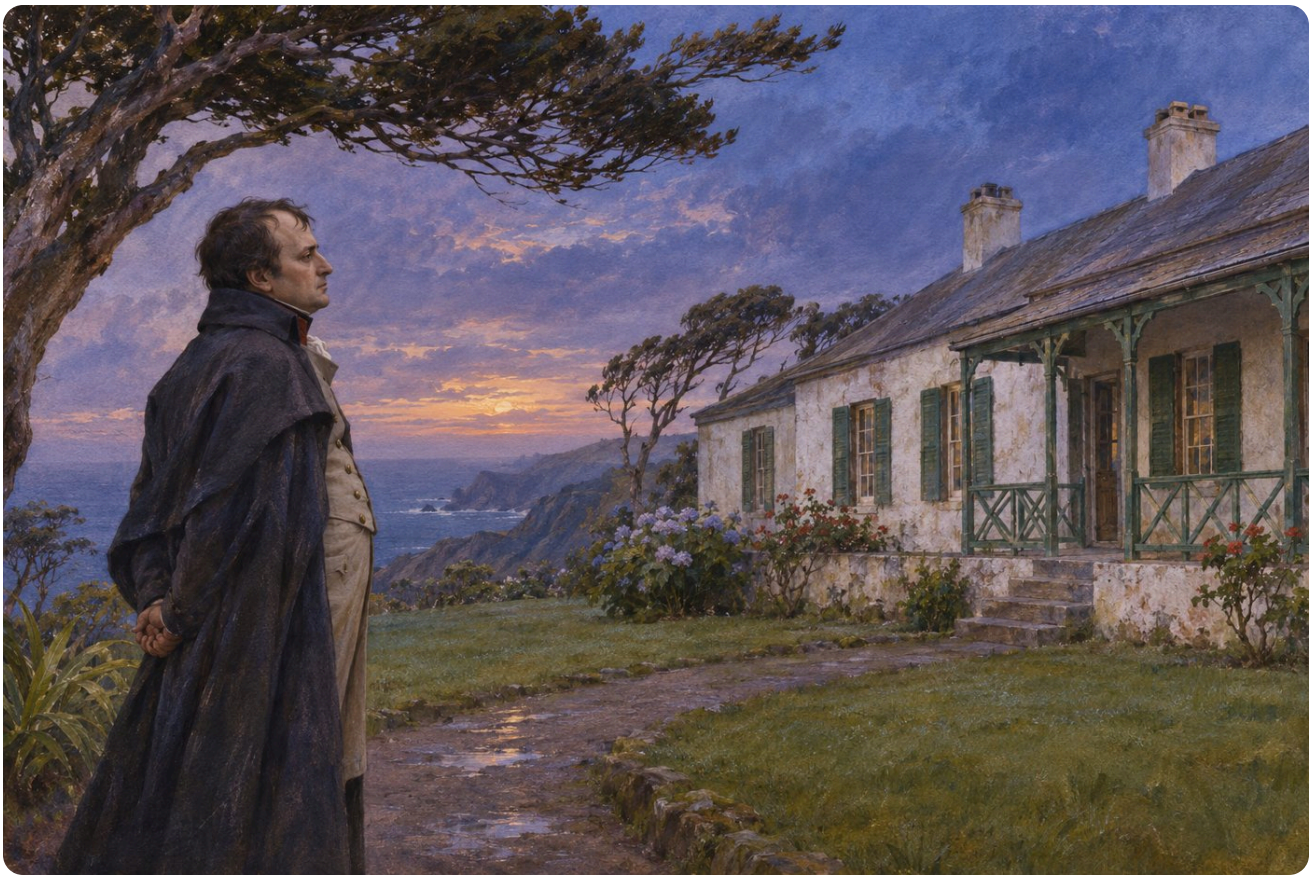
AN IMAGINED DIALOGUE

The Weight of Glory

A Twilight Conversation with Napoleon Bonaparte

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Napoleon at Longwood House, St Helena · Original AI-generated illustration



An imagined dialogue on power, ambition, failure, and legacy.

AN IMAGINED CONVERSATION

I created these fictional interviews as learning pieces: a way to explore leadership, judgment, and the consequences of power through imagined conversations with historical figures. In this imagined encounter, I bring a present-day perspective to his years in exile. I draw on the historical record, but the dialogue is my own. At times, I make an interviewee more willing to consider a challenge or accept a conclusion than that person likely would have been in life. That is a deliberate creative choice to serve the learning purpose, not a claim about what the person actually said or believed.

Too often, portrayals of Napoleon in film and popular literature feel oversimplified, heavily biased, or stripped of meaningful context. I believe it's important to revisit such towering figures with a mindset rooted in nuance, not caricature.

Napoleon emerged from the upheaval of the French Revolution and reshaped the legal, political, and geographical order of Europe. His military achievements and institutional reforms were extraordinary, but their legacy cannot be separated from authoritarian rule, colonial violence, and the human cost of his ambitions. What interests me is how those achievements and failures belonged to the same man—and what we can learn by examining them together.

THE SETTING

Longwood House, Saint Helena, around 1817. In this imagined visit, I arrive as the last light falls across the windswept grounds. Napoleon lives here under British guard. His followers still regard him as emperor, although his British captors refuse him that title. I have chosen to address him as Your Majesty.

In a modest drawing room, Napoleon Bonaparte sits by a fireplace, wrapped in a military cloak. For this evening, I imagine his attendants withdrawn and the papers of his captivity set aside. He looks up and

motions to the empty chair beside him.

This is an imagined interview, not a historical transcript. The dialogue and reflections are fictional and should not be read as authenticated quotations from Napoleon.

PART I

The Rise and the Crown

ED Your Majesty, I am honored that you have agreed to receive me. I have studied your leadership journey from afar and have been deeply impressed by your leadership acumen and accomplishments.

NAPOLEON Be seated, monsieur. You have come a considerable distance to examine a man whose affairs are now conducted in a rather smaller room. Let us see what you wish to know.

ED Your Majesty, something strikes me now that we are meeting in person. There is a persistent image in popular accounts of you as an unusually short man. Yet you appear to be of quite ordinary height for a Frenchman of your time, whatever the caricatures suggest. It seems the image has outlasted the facts.

NAPOLEON So even my inches are a territory to be disputed? The French foot and the English foot are not the same measure. Nor is a caricature a measurement. My enemies could reduce me upon paper more easily than they could upon a battlefield.

ED What interests me is how a description, repeated often enough, becomes an explanation of someone's whole character.

NAPOLEON Yes—and saves the writer the trouble of examining the character. But I will not pretend that I was indifferent to appearances. I understood the value of an image myself. I merely object to being required to answer for one drawn by

my enemies.

ED You spent a great deal of your life on horseback. Did you enjoy riding, or was it simply part of commanding an army?

NAPOLEON Both. I made no claim to the finest seat in Europe, but I could spend a long day in the saddle. A commander who sees the roads and the men for himself knows things a dispatch may omit. Here, I have had considerably more leisure for riding—and considerably less freedom to go where I please.

ED What interests me is how someone develops that kind of capacity—and what happens when the very qualities that drive success begin to work against him.

NAPOLEON Then you have come with a better question than whether I was a hero or a monster. Men prefer those two portraits; they save them the labor of thinking. You admire the ascent. Very well. But if you wish to understand it, you must also look at the ground on which the ladder stood.

ED Let's go back to the beginning. You were born in Corsica, far from the center of French power. Your family had a name, but nothing like the wealth or influence of the great families. How did you move from that position to leading a continent?

NAPOLEON Because I saw the cracks in the old world and walked through them while other men stood examining the ruin. My family belonged to the lesser nobility; I will not improve my story by pretending I was born a peasant. Yet in France I was a provincial, a Corsican with an accent, without the advantages that opened the finest doors.

The Revolution broke those doors. It also left France bleeding, divided, and uncertain who could govern. I had studied my profession. When opportunity came, I could place artillery, move men, and produce a result. I did not merely announce that the old order was finished. I demonstrated what might take its place.

ED So it was preparation meeting an opening. A lot of people recognize an opportunity. Far fewer are ready to do something with it.

NAPOLEON Precisely. An opportunity is of little use to a man who has not prepared to seize it. Others had courage. Others had ambition. I joined those things to work: maps, figures, reports, the condition of the roads, the number of guns. Men saw the speed of my decisions and imagined that I decided without labor. They did not see the labor that made speed possible.

An opportunity is of little use to a man who has not prepared to seize it.

NAPOLEON

ED And you moved before doubt had time to stop you. But there is a fine line between being decisive and being reckless. How did you know which side you were on?

NAPOLEON Reckless? You pronounce the word rather easily. A commander who waits until every danger has disappeared will discover that the enemy has occupied his position while he was satisfying his doubts. Many of the decisions men now praise as my genius would have been called recklessness had they failed. The decision itself would have been the same.

ED That's fair. What I'm trying to understand is how you tested your own judgment before the result was known.

NAPOLEON By work. By comparing reports, calculating distances, asking what the enemy could accomplish in the time available. I did not throw an army forward because I enjoyed the sensation. At my best, I knew which uncertainties mattered and which had to be accepted.

Still—there were occasions when I had already decided what I wanted and gave the examination less freedom than I imagined. I will grant you that much. But do not allow the failures at the end to make the preparation behind the

victories disappear.

ED Your victories brought you influence. Taking power in 1799 required something different. At Brumaire, you helped overturn the government. By what right did you set it aside?

NAPOLEON By what right did the Directory continue to expose France to disorder and defeat? You speak of a government as though its title alone could supply the authority it had lost. The Republic needed an executive capable of acting. I was not the only man in France who had reached that conclusion.

ED But deciding a government has failed doesn't automatically give a general the right to replace it. Soldiers helped settle a political dispute. What made that legitimate?

NAPOLEON The arrangement which followed gave France a government, secured property, and restored confidence. You would have me defend the matter as a lawyer examining a clause. I was dealing with a state that could not be preserved by reverence for its existing forms.

ED Those are arguments about what you accomplished afterward. They don't settle whether you were entitled to take power in the first place.

NAPOLEON No accomplishment will settle it for a man determined to judge the means separately. Very well; distinguish them. I shall continue to maintain that leaving the Directory to its course would have served neither liberty nor France. A ruler must answer for what he does, but also for what he permits to happen through inaction.

ED That brings us to the crown. You placed it on your own head at Notre-Dame. People sometimes describe it as though you surprised the Pope. But the ceremony had been negotiated beforehand, hadn't it? What did you want that moment to mean?

NAPOLEON Certainly it had been arranged. Do you imagine that we summoned the Holy Father to Paris and then left the principal act of the ceremony to an impulse? Our representatives had disputed the prayers and the gestures in considerable detail. He came to consecrate the sovereign; he did not come to dispose of the sovereignty.

The meaning was clear enough. My authority did not depend upon a crown bestowed at another man's pleasure. The Revolution, the army, the institutions of France—and my own services—had brought me there. I wished the ceremony to reconcile what could be reconciled without surrendering that fact.

You may call that ambition. It was. You may also call it an arrangement of symbols. Government requires both substance and the appearance of permanence. France had endured one fragile authority after another. I intended mine to endure.

ED You opened doors for talent, but you also created a dynasty. Isn't there a contradiction there?

NAPOLEON A contradiction only if you suppose France could live indefinitely upon a succession of experiments. Every court in Europe asked who would govern after me. Every faction in France had an answer favorable to itself. Was I to leave the state exposed to another struggle merely to preserve the elegance of a principle?

I wanted a succession that would give the new order time to take root. The son of a marshal would not lose his opportunity because my own son inherited the throne. Those questions were not identical.

ED I can understand the need for continuity. Did putting your family at the center of it make the country more secure, or make its security depend too much on you?

NAPOLEON Both, perhaps. An established dynasty possesses an acceptance that cannot be manufactured by decree. I tried to create that acceptance while still fighting those who denied my right to govern at all. The arrangement did not endure. I will admit that result. I do not admit that leaving no arrangement would have been wiser.

ED What did power mean to you when you had the most of it?

NAPOLEON The capacity to give effect to a decision. To replace a confusion of laws with a code. To turn a gathering of frightened men into an army. To make tomorrow different from yesterday. But power also removes obstacles that ought occasionally to remain. A man accustomed to overcoming resistance begins to think resistance itself is proof that he must continue.

PART II

Command and the People Around You

ED You had extraordinary people around you—Davout, Ney, Lannes, Murat. How did you decide whom to trust with responsibility?

NAPOLEON By observing what a man could actually do. Courage was necessary, but courage alone did not make a commander. Davout had discipline, precision, and the capacity to carry a difficult responsibility without constant supervision. Ney could put heart into men when the situation seemed hopeless. Murat could make cavalry appear irresistible. These were different instruments. One does not ask a trumpet to perform the work of a drum.

I studied my commanders as I studied terrain: their strength, their weakness, the conditions in which they were useful. Affection could not relieve me of that duty, though I sometimes allowed it to cloud my judgment.

ED I see leaders make the mistake of assuming that because someone is exceptional at one thing, he should be promoted to something very different. Were you always good at avoiding that?

NAPOLEON Not always. The qualities required for one command did not necessarily equip a man for the next. Yet many men of ability rose because I recognized them when others would have looked first at their ancestry. I did not build those armies

by promoting mediocrity.

As for my family, a ruler needs men whose interests are bound to his own. A capable governor who changes allegiance at the first reverse may be a poorer choice than a less gifted man whose loyalty is secure. That consideration was real, though my brothers sometimes made a determined effort to deprive me of its benefits.

ED So loyalty was part of the calculation. Where did you give it more weight than ability justified?

NAPOLEON In expecting a title and instructions to supply qualities a man had not yet shown. Joseph was not without ability, but Spain required more than the qualities I wished to find in him. I could change his position more easily than his nature. There—you have your admission. Do not enlarge it into a judgment upon every man I appointed.

ED What did you expect from people once you put them in command?

NAPOLEON Preparation, execution, and intelligence enough to understand my intention when circumstances altered the particulars. I could not stand beside every battalion. A commander had to know what the movement was meant to accomplish, not simply repeat the words of an order written hours before.

Yet I also demanded much, and I did not always make contradiction easy. When men learn that their sovereign dislikes a report, some begin improving the report instead of improving the situation. That is a dangerous service to render a commander.

ED That's something every leader needs to hear. If people are afraid to bring you bad news, you are going to make decisions with an incomplete picture. Did you recognize when that was happening?

NAPOLEON You make it sound as though I sat in a gilded room accepting compliments. I demanded returns, questioned officers, compared accounts, and discovered omissions that the men responsible would have preferred me to overlook. I knew very well that a pleasing report could conceal an army in poor condition.

But I was severe. A man who had failed to carry out an order knew the interview would not be comfortable. Some undoubtedly confused my anger at their negligence with a refusal to hear what had happened.

ED Could they always tell the difference? Even a leader who wants accurate information can make people think twice about delivering it.

NAPOLEON Perhaps they could not always tell. But I could not conduct a campaign by assuring every officer that his feelings were safe. I required the truth, and a man entrusted with soldiers was expected to have the courage to speak it. There were occasions when I dismissed an objection too quickly; I will allow that. It does not follow that every man who concealed a difficulty did so because I had made honesty impossible.

ED People often compare the movement of armies to chess. From your experience, what does that comparison leave out?

NAPOLEON Nearly everything that makes war terrible. A chess piece does not become hungry, lose its way, misunderstand an order, or watch its friend die. The comparison concerns position and combination; it must not become an excuse for forgetting men. Morale, fatigue, weather, and the arrival of a wagon can overturn an elegant conception.

I sought to concentrate strength at the decisive point. But strength is not merely the number written on a return. An army exists in the bodies of men. Forget their condition and your figures become fiction.

PART III

The Victories

ED Your reputation was built on an extraordinary succession of victories. I would like to understand what you did so well. Let's begin with Italy in 1796 and 1797. You were a young commander with an army that lacked much of what it needed. How did you turn that into a successful campaign?

He sits a little straighter. For the first time in several minutes, he seems eager for the next question.

NAPOLEON By giving the army an object and bringing it against enemies who could be beaten before they could unite their strength. A soldier without shoes requires shoes, certainly. He also requires some reason to believe that marching tomorrow will improve his condition. I gave the men victories they could see, advancement they could hope for, and a commander who intended to employ their courage.

But do not imagine that the army began with my arrival. It already contained brave soldiers and officers who knew their profession. My task was to bring their efforts together and move faster than the enemy could arrange a sufficient answer. The Austrians and their allies did not always act as one force. That gave me opportunities which I did not leave unused.

ED How did you turn those victories into food, pay, and equipment for the next march?

NAPOLEON By obtaining resources in the country where we operated, as well as by making the army's administration do its work. Contributions and supplies drawn from the territories we occupied helped sustain the campaign. Victory opened magazines and gave us the means to demand what defeat would have denied us. It was not an inexhaustible provision, and those who supplied it had reason to feel the burden. But an army could not march upon promises from Paris alone.

ED Was Rivoli a good example of that—recognizing where the real danger was and getting enough strength there in time?

NAPOLEON Rivoli, in January 1797, is an excellent example. The Austrians were attempting to relieve Mantua. Their movements through difficult country did not permit all their forces to strike together. We had to judge where the decisive effort would fall, bring troops to the threatened ground, and deal with attacks before they could support one another effectively.

Read the account with a map beside you. The heights, the approaches, the hours at which men could arrive—these explain more than the word genius. Joubert's troops on the heights, Masséna and the men who came to reinforce them, deserve their place in that account. Mantua fell soon afterward. That was the importance of the victory: it helped bring an obstinate campaign toward its conclusion.

ED Austerlitz is the battle people most often associate with your genius. What made December 2, 1805, such a complete success?

NAPOLEON I understood the opportunity in the enemy's movement and had an army capable of exploiting it. The Austrians and Russians directed a great effort against my right. As their troops moved away from the Pratzen heights, their center became vulnerable. Soult's attack there divided their position while the fighting on our right continued.

The temptation, when one part of a line is pressed, is to send everything toward the danger. That may preserve the appearance of safety and surrender the means of winning. I needed the right to hold while the blow elsewhere decided the battle. Davout's arriving troops and the men already engaged there made that possible. Soult, Lannes, the cavalry, the divisions and regiments—each had work to perform. A conception without those men would have remained a conversation over a map.

ED So you were reading what the enemy was doing while deciding where your own strength could have the greatest effect. How much came from preparation, and how much depended on judgment that morning?

NAPOLEON Both. I had examined the ground and considered the movements I wished to encourage. But the enemy was not an actor obliged to recite my lines. Reports had to be judged; troops had to arrive; the attack had to be delivered at the proper time. You cannot command a battle by insisting that it resemble the account you intend to write afterward.

At Austerlitz, the circumstances, the army, and my judgment came together particularly well. I do not object to calling it a masterpiece. I object when the compliment relieves the reader of studying how it was accomplished.

ED **What about Jena in 1806? The speed with which Prussian resistance broke down was remarkable. And Davout won at Auerstedt on the same day, against the main Prussian force. What does that double victory tell us about your army?**

NAPOLEON That it could do more than assemble around the Emperor and await his next gesture. At Jena I defeated the force before me. At Auerstedt, Davout encountered the main Prussian army and defeated it with his corps. That was his achievement, and a very great one. His discipline and firmness were qualities I had good reason to value.

ED **You believed the main Prussian force was at Jena. Davout's victory meant your army succeeded even when your picture was incomplete.**

NAPOLEON Certainly my information did not place the whole enemy before me. That did not prevent us from defeating him on both fields. Davout was entrusted with a corps because he could exercise a command, not merely wait for me to remove every uncertainty. His conduct justified that trust.

We developed formations the revolutionary armies had already begun to employ. The corps gave us forces which could march on separate roads, sustain an engagement, and support the wider operation. Infantry, cavalry, and guns had to work together; the commanders had to understand more than their immediate patch of ground. After the battles, pursuit mattered enormously. Defeat must be

exploited before the enemy has time to recover his order. The campaign's speed came from marching and continued pressure, not merely from the hours of firing at Jena.

ED You have mentioned the work of your marshals several times. What was your own particular contribution when all of this worked at its best?

NAPOLEON To see the campaign as a whole while requiring exact attention to its parts. Where is the enemy? Where can he be tomorrow? Which road will carry the guns? Which corps must arrive first, and which can be held for the decision? Berthier and the staff helped turn intentions into orders which armies could execute. The marshals then had to make those orders effective amid circumstances no headquarters could know completely.

I could retain the larger object while changing the movement by which I intended to reach it. I could also decide. A favorable opportunity does not remain available while a commander asks every person in the room whether he ought to use it. There were men as brave as I, and men more learned in particular branches of war. Few brought the whole calculation to a decision as quickly.

ED In 1807, Friedland helped bring Russia to negotiations at Tilsit. What made that victory decisive?

NAPOLEON Lannes held the Russians engaged while I brought additional strength to the field. The Alle behind their position made a reverse especially dangerous for them; the opportunity had to be used before they withdrew. We gained a victory that helped bring Alexander to negotiations at Tilsit. That is the connection to examine—an army's action, the defeat imposed upon the enemy, and the settlement it allows a ruler to seek.

ED Wagram in 1809 was a different kind of victory. You had been checked at Aspern-Essling. What allowed you to return across the Danube and defeat Archduke Charles?

NAPOLEON Preparation on a scale the earlier crossing had lacked. We strengthened the bridges, prepared several crossing points and the means to keep the army supplied across them, and assembled forces and artillery. Lobau became a base from which a great army could operate. At Wagram, the fighting required the control of a wide field, the concentration of guns, and the efforts of commanders such as Davout and Masséna under severe pressure.

It was not Austerlitz repeated. Charles was a capable opponent, and the victory was costly. But I recovered the initiative and obtained the military result required. An enemy who checks one operation has not necessarily defeated the commander conducting it. The next operation must be prepared according to what has actually happened, not according to the satisfaction your opponent takes in his success.

ED Looking across those victories, what do you think people underestimate most about your success?

NAPOLEON The labor, and the quality of the army that performed it. They remember a gesture, a proclamation, a charge. They remember less readily the training, the staff work, the marching, and the arrangement of troops before a battle becomes visible to the public. They also separate battles which belonged to a campaign. A victory mattered because of what it made possible afterward.

PART IV

The Difficulty of Stopping

ED You won victories that would have defined almost anyone else's career. After Austerlitz, Jena, or Wagram, did you ever think, "This is enough. Now I need to protect what I have built"?

NAPOLEON Yes. There were moments when the sword might have been sheathed and the work of consolidation given precedence. But understand the circumstances before you offer the comfort of hindsight. The monarchs of Europe did not regard

my existence with tranquility. A treaty might settle the terms of a defeat without settling the resentment beneath it. Alliances shifted. Armies returned.

Do not imagine that peace lay waiting for me like an empty chair, and that I declined to sit because I preferred the noise of cannon. I had enemies who regarded any settlement with me as temporary. That was not a fancy produced by my ambition.

ED I accept that the threats were real. How did you distinguish the wars you believed necessary from the ones your own ambition helped make necessary?

His expression hardens. For a moment he studies me as though deciding whether the question deserves an answer.

NAPOLEON You distribute necessity and ambition very neatly from that chair. In government they arrive together, with the same dispatch. If I acted, I was grasping; if I waited and an alliance formed against me, I was careless. The men judging me would have discovered a fault in either course.

ED I can see why that would frustrate you. Was there a point, though, when another victory was being asked to solve a problem that victory itself could no longer solve?

NAPOLEON You assume that a settlement I accepted would also have been respected by my enemies. That remains to be proved. Still, each success extended my obligations as well as my authority. Spain, above all, added a burden I had not sufficiently measured. There were occasions when a less ambitious settlement would have served me better. Whether it would have lasted is another question.

There were enterprises I should not have undertaken. Spain is one. That is different from admitting that every advance arose from an inability to remain still. You have the advantage of knowing which settlements failed. I had to decide which might hold, while my enemies were deciding how to overturn them.

ED Spain seems to expose that problem. You believed you could impose a better arrangement. Instead, the resistance drained you for years. What did you fail to understand?

NAPOLEON First remember the monarchy I found there: its quarrels, its weakness, the uncertainty of an ally upon whom France could not safely depend. I did not disturb some model of wise and contented government. I believed a more capable administration, supported by French power, could secure the peninsula and bring reforms worth having.

ED Yet people who had little reason to admire their own government still resisted yours. What did you miss?

NAPOLEON The force of the insult. Their king, their faith, their local loyalties—I treated too much of this as something an arrangement between rulers could settle. Joseph could occupy the throne; that did not mean the Spaniards would accept his right to it. Resistance appeared in villages, on roads, behind my armies. We could defeat forces in the field and still find the country rising again.

ED So having what you consider a better answer doesn't give you permission to dismiss the people who have to live with it.

NAPOLEON You turn the matter into a lesson in manners. I was attempting to secure France against hostile influence on a vital frontier. Nevertheless, yes: I gave too little weight to what the Spaniards would defend, even against reforms I regarded as beneficial. Their interests and mine were not the same. I expected power to close that distance. It did not.

ED What would you want a leader to take from that?

NAPOLEON That possession is not acceptance. You may occupy a palace and discover that you govern very little beyond its walls. Understand the loyalties already present before you demand that they be transferred to you. An empire held only by force must continually purchase obedience with more force. There is no end to that expenditure.

PART V

When the Plan Meets Reality

— Egypt

ED Before we get to Russia, I want to go back to Egypt. You won battles there, but the larger expedition failed. Nelson destroyed the fleet at Aboukir, Acre held out, and you eventually returned to France while your army remained. How do you assess that campaign?

NAPOLEON You have assembled the indictment before asking for the account. We defeated the Mamelukes, occupied Cairo, and demonstrated what a French army could accomplish far from Europe. The expedition had a strategic purpose: to establish French influence in the East and threaten British interests. It was not merely an excursion arranged to satisfy my imagination.

And we brought men who studied the country—its antiquities, its geography, its natural history. What they learned did not vanish because our soldiers eventually departed.

ED Those achievements deserve their place. But the military position became unsustainable. Where did the plan break down?

NAPOLEON At sea, decisively. Nelson's destruction of the fleet deprived us of the secure connection upon which the enterprise depended. You may win on land and still discover that the means of sustaining victory lie beyond your reach. In Syria, Acre resisted. Its Ottoman defenders had British naval assistance, and the siege consumed time and men without giving us the result we required. Disease made the situation worse.

Do not conclude that our troops lacked ability because a fortress held. But yes, I had expected the advance to achieve more than our means could support. The campaign had limits that success in the field could not remove.

ED And leaving the army? I would think the men who had followed you there might have seen your departure very differently from the people who welcomed you back in France.

He shifts in his chair, and the brief warmth of recollection gives way to a colder attention.

NAPOLEON I left Kléber in command of an army that could still fight. I did not surrender it to the enemy. France was in danger, its government discredited, its position in Europe deteriorating. I believed my presence there could accomplish more than remaining in Egypt. That was my judgment, and events in France did not prove it foolish.

ED They remained for another two years. Kléber was assassinated in 1800, and under Menou the expedition ended in surrender in 1801. What had you left them beyond a successor?

NAPOLEON An army, an administration, and instructions—not merely a name upon a paper. Kléber himself subsequently won at Heliopolis. His murder and the later operations were not events I could direct from Paris. You may question my departure; do not speak as though the army had ceased to possess either strength or officers when I sailed in August 1799.

ED I take your point about what happened afterward. But returning to France advanced your position. Did that make it easier to defend a decision whose consequences other men had to manage?

NAPOLEON Naturally, you will suspect ambition whenever my return is discussed. Ambition was present; I have never claimed otherwise. But France's difficulties were real also. You cannot remove them simply because I benefited from

addressing them.

I will concede this: my departure did not solve the problem of the army I left behind. The expedition ultimately ended in evacuation, not the durable French position we had sought. Let the scientific work retain its value and the victories their credit. Neither changes that strategic failure.

ED There is also a question about that campaign which isn't answered by calling it a strategic failure. At Jaffa in 1799, you ordered prisoners put to death after the town fell. What limit did necessity place on your authority over men who had surrendered?

He watches me without answering at once.
When he speaks, each word is deliberate.

NAPOLEON You have chosen the act that my enemies have never tired of placing before the public. I had prisoners whom I could not easily feed or guard, an army advancing in hostile country, and the prospect of men released returning to fight us. That was the predicament. It was not an exercise in cruelty undertaken for its own sake.

ED That explains the difficulty. It doesn't establish that killing the prisoners was the only course. If a commander can declare necessity whenever keeping prisoners becomes dangerous or costly, what protection does surrender offer?

NAPOLEON I will not pretend that the order was another man's. But neither will I accept a judgment that removes every danger from the decision and then announces how easily it might have been avoided. My first obligation was to the army entrusted to me.

ED And the men in your power had no claim upon you? You have spoken about responsibility for your own soldiers. Surely command also carries obligations toward people who can no longer defend themselves.

NAPOLEON They were in my power. The order must therefore be judged as mine. You ask me to admit that my account of military necessity did not justify the order. I do not accept your judgment of the circumstances. I see that you do not accept my defense. We shall not persuade one another by repeating ourselves.

I leave the disagreement where it stands.

ED On the military question, Egypt had shown you that winning battles and achieving the purpose of a campaign were different things.

NAPOLEON It had. But a lesson learned in one country does not announce itself in precisely the same form in another. A commander must recognize it beneath new circumstances—and sometimes he recognizes it too late.

— Russia

ED Let's turn to Russia. What troubles me is how a leader with your experience could commit so much and still misjudge the situation so badly.

NAPOLEON I expected military pressure to obtain a political result before the distances made the campaign unmanageable. I had broken coalitions before. Russia's conduct threatened the system upon which I believed French security depended. The object was to compel Alexander to a settlement. The failure was in my estimate of what would compel him, and how soon.

We prepared on an enormous scale. But the Russians continued retreating, denied us supplies, and obliged us to cover distances that consumed our strength. The political result I expected receded with them.

I reached Moscow, their ancient capital, though the imperial government was in St Petersburg. But occupying that great city did not place Alexander's will in my hands. Fire devastated much of it. The peace I expected did not come. I had seized a place and failed to obtain the result for which I had seized it.

ED At that point, what kept you there?

NAPOLEON The possibility of peace. You call it waiting because you know the answer never arrived. I had to decide while that answer was still uncertain. Leaving Moscow meant surrendering the strongest bargaining position I believed I possessed, without obtaining the purpose of the campaign.

ED I understand why leaving was difficult. When did waiting become the greater danger?

NAPOLEON Earlier than I admitted. There. The army's condition required more weight than I gave it, and the hope of a favorable message required less. I stayed too long.

The cold made the retreat more dreadful, but hunger, disease, exhaustion, desertion, and combat had already diminished the army. Those who attribute everything to winter simplify the matter. Those who attribute everything to my vanity simplify it also. I misjudged what military success could compel Alexander to do, and then allowed that misjudgment to delay our departure.

ED The losses were enormous. When you look back, can you still think of them simply as the cost of a campaign?

NAPOLEON Simply? You think a commander can regard the destruction of his army simply? I knew those regiments. I had watched men earn their promotions, seen the same faces through years of campaigning. You have no need to inform me that they were human.

His voice has risen. I let the silence settle before continuing.

ED I don't doubt that you knew them or that the losses weighed on you. I'm asking how you carry the responsibility for a decision that cost so many of them their lives.

NAPOLEON Badly, on some nights. And on others I return to the orders, the missed opportunities, the things that might have changed the outcome. A commander is trained to seek the point at which the operation could have been saved. That habit does not release him from the men who were not saved.

They followed me because I had led them to victories, and because France required an army. Do not reduce their service to confidence in one man, even when that man was myself. I commanded the expedition; my decisions must therefore be examined. Examine also what the Russians did, what my officers knew, and what could actually have been done at each stage.

The dead cannot be restored. I know it. But neither are they honored by an explanation which makes the whole catastrophe a single fault in their commander's character.

— The Escape from Elba

ED Before we get to Waterloo, how did you escape from your first exile on Elba? It is an extraordinary leap—from ruling that small island to being back in Paris within weeks. How did you make it happen?

NAPOLEON First, dismiss the picture of a prisoner climbing out of a window. Elba was not this place. Under the settlement of 1814 I retained a title, sovereignty over the island, a small guard, and vessels. My freedom was reduced, but I possessed means with which to act. I governed, made improvements, and watched what happened beyond the horizon.

Reports reached me of discontent in France. Men who had served the Empire resented their treatment under the Bourbons. I judged that the restored monarchy possessed less loyalty than its appearance suggested. The question was whether that discontent would become action when I appeared.

ED And the practical side? How did you leave without being stopped?

NAPOLEON We prepared the ships and the men discreetly. The British commissioner, Campbell, was away in Italy. That gave me an opening; it did not guarantee the voyage. We sailed from Portoferraio on 26 February 1815, with the Inconstant and a small flotilla, and landed at Golfe-Juan on 1 March.

The more difficult part began on shore. I had too few men to conquer France by force. I needed the troops sent against me to recognize their former commander and decide that the King's orders mattered less than their attachment to the Empire. We took the inland road toward Grenoble. Speed mattered, but so did the choice of ground upon which I would put that loyalty to the test.

ED At Laffrey, soldiers sent to stop you joined you instead. You were putting your life in the hands of men who had orders to oppose you. How could you be confident enough to do that?

NAPOLEON Confident enough to advance is not the same as certain of the result. They might have fired. But an exchange of shots between French soldiers would have changed the character of everything that followed. I went forward and let them see whom they had been ordered to arrest. They chose to join me.

His expression brightens. For the moment, the confinement of Longwood seems to have receded.

NAPOLEON That was the force I carried from Elba: a memory still alive in men who had marched with me. The column grew. On 20 March I entered Paris; Louis XVIII had left. My enemies had treated my departure in 1814 as the end of the matter. France had supplied a different answer.

ED France has had many kings, rulers, and military leaders. What was it about you that made you stand out? Why do you think you were so beloved by so many of the people—enough that soldiers sent to stop you would join you instead?

NAPOLEON Because I gave them something they could recognize in their own lives. France had endured upheaval, uncertainty, and humiliation. I brought authority that could act, victories that restored pride, and a place for abilities the old order

had too often ignored. A man could look at an officer who had risen from modest circumstances and imagine that his own son might rise also.

The Bourbons returned with a family history. I returned with a history many of those men had helped make. They had marched, fought, and advanced under my command. To ask them to forget the Empire was to ask them to forget part of themselves. A dynasty could reclaim a palace more easily than it could command that attachment.

ED That explains the opportunities and the pride. But there was also a personal connection. What did you do that made people feel they knew you, even when most could never know you well?

NAPOLEON I did not require a soldier to become a courtier before I could speak to him. I went among the men, asked questions, recognized service, and let them see that their conduct could attract my attention. Their general was not merely a name at the bottom of an order. They saw me on the road and on the field; they knew the coat and the hat.

Of course the bulletins, the ceremonies, and the portraits extended that presence. You have already discovered that I understood images. But an image alone would not have made those men come over at Laffrey. It worked upon memories and expectations that were already theirs.

ED Your return certainly shows how strong that bond could be. But France also included families exhausted by conscription, taxes, and loss. How do you reconcile their experience with the devotion you describe?

NAPOLEON Must every acknowledgment of affection be followed by a demand that I disprove every grievance? I did not say that every household blessed my name. A mother who feared another summons for her son had reasons that no proclamation could remove. Nor did every opponent of the Bourbons wish for my return.

France was not one voice. There were men who saw an opportunity in my rule and others who saw another burden. Sometimes they lived beneath the same roof. I would not have mistaken them so easily for a single opinion when governing as you might suppose from hearing me defend my record now.

But the attachment was real. I gave many people the conviction that they belonged to a France capable of great things, and that their own abilities mattered within it. You may dispute what I asked of that conviction. You cannot explain its strength by imagining that everyone who felt it had been deceived.

ED It was a remarkable return. But did the welcome convince you that you could also overcome the opposition of the rest of Europe?

NAPOLEON The welcome confirmed that my cause still had life in France. It could not tell me what the sovereigns of Europe would accept. I sought peace upon my return, but they refused to accept me. Their determination belongs in the account also.

ED Certainly. What I'm asking is whether regaining power and being able to keep it required two very different judgments.

NAPOLEON They did. The soldiers who came over to me could open the road to Paris; they could not compel the courts of Europe to leave me there. I knew there was danger. I believed I could meet it. The return succeeded, and I will not pretend otherwise because the campaign that followed failed. But its success did not settle the larger question. That remained to be fought—and France would again bear the cost.

— Waterloo

ED And then Waterloo. Was that another case of relying too much on what had worked before?

NAPOLEON Waterloo was not a ceremony arranged to demonstrate a defect in my character. It was a battle that could have ended differently. Wellington held his ground with determination; the Prussians arrived; movements upon which I depended did not occur as I intended. Delay, communication, the condition of the field—these were causes, not ornaments to a moral tale.

ED Certainly. What part of the outcome do you put on your own decisions?

NAPOLEON I commanded, and the dispositions were mine. I shall not deny what every soldier knows. But if a marshal failed to accomplish the movement entrusted to him, that failure remains a cause; it does not disappear merely because the Emperor bears the final responsibility. I expected my orders to produce results they did not produce. You may question that expectation without pretending that their execution was unimportant.

But I will not pretend the result was inevitable. We might have won that day. The question I find harder to dismiss is what winning would have secured. Another battle still lay beyond it, another coalition, another demand upon France. My return had not resolved the reasons Europe united against me.

ED You have referred to movements that failed to happen. You blamed Marshal Grouchy. What had you ordered him to do, and where do you believe his conduct departed from those orders?

NAPOLEON I detached him after Ligny to pursue the Prussians. The purpose was to keep pressure upon them while I turned against Wellington. Yet Blücher brought substantial forces to Waterloo while Grouchy remained engaged toward Wavre. The enemy I required him to occupy appeared upon my flank. That is where I believe his conduct failed the purpose of the command.

A marshal must understand what his movement is meant to accomplish. Following an enemy's track is of little use if the force that matters is marching elsewhere. I expected judgment from a man entrusted with a separate command.

ED He might answer that he was carrying out your orders to pursue the Prussians. How much of this belongs to his judgment, and how much to the instructions and information he received?

NAPOLEON You will find a defender for every man who was absent when he was needed. Still, the wording of orders, the hours at which they were sent and received, the roads and the distances—all must be examined. I cannot demand initiative from a commander and then pretend that my own instructions need no scrutiny.

What I will not concede is that the result fulfilled the purpose. It did not. I entrusted him with a task upon which my own operation depended, and the Prussians escaped that restraint.

ED Some accounts make it sound as though marching toward the guns would automatically have saved you. Is that too easy an explanation?

NAPOLEON There is nothing automatic about moving thousands of men across country. A phrase spoken beside a fire is not a march accomplished upon a road. Whether a different movement could have brought him to the decisive place in time depends upon when it began and what stood in its way.

I believe he failed me. I do not need to invent a certainty about every alternative in order to say so. Nor does his failure remove the fact that I divided the army and built my plan upon what that division would achieve.

ED What, then, did you really think of Wellington as a commander?

NAPOLEON You expect generosity toward the man whose victory helped bring me to this room. I can acknowledge what he did without subscribing to every celebration of his genius. His soldiers showed admirable firmness. He held a strong position and did not allow himself to be dislodged before assistance arrived. That required steadiness.

But I do not place his manner of war above my own because one battle ended in his favor. He owes the Prussians a great deal. Had Blücher not arrived, the account written afterward might have been very different.

ED Holding his position until help arrived was part of his task, though. Does he deserve credit for judging that he could do it?

NAPOLEON For remaining firm and trusting that his ally would support him, yes. Do not mistake that admission for my agreement that everything he attempted was well conceived. I think he exposed himself to dangers that fortune helped him survive. But he remained on the field. I did not. That fact gives his admirers an argument I cannot silence merely by disliking it.

ED And Blücher? You had beaten him at Ligny only two days earlier. What made him so difficult to put away?

NAPOLEON He refused to behave like a man who had been sufficiently beaten. He was old, aggressive, and determined to return. Ligny had damaged his army; it had not destroyed it or extinguished his intention to support Wellington. His staff helped make that intention effective, and the Prussian troops endured the marching required of them.

I could criticize his methods—and have reason to—but contempt for an opponent is a poor substitute for preventing his arrival. He had the stubbornness to renew the contest when I needed him to remain occupied with his own defeat.

ED Wellington's army was itself a coalition—British, Dutch-Belgian, Hanoverian, and other German troops. That multinational army held while Blücher kept moving. Together they achieved something neither could have achieved in quite the same way alone.

NAPOLEON Together, yes. My object had been to separate them and defeat them before they could combine. Their cooperation survived the blows meant to break it. You may give them credit for that. I would only ask that you understand how close I

believed I was to preventing it, and why the movements of my own commanders still trouble me.

ED That is a different standard of leadership. Winning the next contest isn't enough if you have created a situation where you can never afford to lose.

NAPOLEON Perhaps. Though you must allow that my enemies helped create that situation; I did not command their intentions. Still, I had made too much depend upon my continued success. The laws could survive a defeat. The political arrangement I had constructed was less secure. I would have preferred to prove its durability by governing it for another twenty years. I was not given the opportunity.

PART VI

What Endures Beyond the Leader

ED Set the wars aside. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

NAPOLEON The Code. Not a bulletin announcing a victory—the civil law. France needed order that could be understood and applied beyond the reach of my voice. Portalis, Tronchet, Bigot de Préameneu, and Maleville supplied the jurist's work; I supplied the authority and urgency to bring the matter to a conclusion. We brought together what had been divided by custom, jurisdiction, and privilege. Property, civil relations, the authority of law: these enter a household every day, whether an army is marching or not.

Around that work stood administration, education, finance, and careers for men capable of doing the nation's business. No crowd assembles to cheer a well-kept register. Yet a state that cannot keep its registers will eventually discover how little its proclamations are worth.

No crowd assembles to cheer a well-kept register.

NAPOLEON

ED That resonates with me. Leaders often enjoy the big move, but the less visible work determines whether anything lasts. Still, your Code didn't extend equal freedom to everyone. Women remained under the authority of husbands and fathers. Doesn't that qualify the claim that you opened the door to merit?

NAPOLEON You ask a code made to settle France after a revolution to answer every objection of your own age. I regarded the family, with a recognized authority at its head, as part of the foundation of society. You disagree with that conception. I understand your disagreement; I do not share all the assumptions from which it proceeds.

ED Even on your own terms, though, merit and opportunity had limits. That matters when we assess the accomplishment.

NAPOLEON Then state the limits accurately. The Code was not a charter of unrestricted equality for every person. It secured property and civil relations within an order its authors believed could endure. If you say that women remained subject to restrictions you regard as unjust, I cannot deny the provisions. If you conclude that the whole work was therefore without value, I will dispute you until the fire is ashes.

ED There is another decision we need to discuss if we are going to talk honestly about your legacy. In 1802, your government preserved slavery in some colonies and restored it in others where people had already gained their freedom. How do you reconcile that with the opportunity and equality you claim for your rule?

He sets down his cup. When he answers, the warmth has gone from his voice.

NAPOLEON You pass from the civil law of France to the government of distant colonies as though the circumstances were identical. After Amiens, I sought to recover French commerce and authority overseas. The colonial interests insisted that production depended upon the old system. I considered those possessions as a ruler concerned with revenue, maritime power, and the strength of France.

ED That explains what you hoped to gain. It doesn't answer what you were taking from other people. The Revolution had abolished slavery in 1794. There were people in your own time who opposed restoring it. This isn't simply a judgment imported from mine.

NAPOLEON No. There were opposing counsels, and I chose the policy. But let us be precise: in some colonies slavery had never ceased; in others my government brought it back. The law of May 1802 maintained slavery in certain colonies; other measures restored it where abolition had taken effect. If you mean to accuse me, at least distinguish the measures.

ED I agree that the distinction matters. It doesn't make restoring slavery in Guadeloupe any less serious. We have talked about how you failed to understand Spanish resistance. Here, people were resisting the loss of their freedom. Why should French interests have counted for more than their lives?

NAPOLEON Because I was governing France and its possessions, not presiding over a society of philosophers. You will find that answer insufficient. Nevertheless, it is nearer to the calculation I made than the confession you appear to want. The attempt to recover Saint-Domingue ended disastrously. I misjudged what could be recovered and what the enterprise would cost.

ED A failed policy and a wrong done to people are not quite the same thing. Even if the colonies had become profitable, people would still have been enslaved.

NAPOLEON Profit would not have given them their liberty. On that point, there is nothing to dispute. I prohibited the slave trade when I returned in 1815; you should include that also.

ED I will. But ending the trade was not the same as freeing the people already enslaved. It did not undo the decisions of 1802.

NAPOLEON No, it did not undo them. You have made your distinction. I will not pretend that the measures were never mine, nor will I tell you that I governed by principles I did not consistently apply. If you set this against my account of opportunity, then set it there. We shall not settle the whole judgment upon my reign this evening.

ED You restricted the press and used the police to watch opponents. How could you know whether the agreement around you was conviction or fear?

NAPOLEON You speak as though every newspaper were a disinterested counselor and every conspiracy merely an unwelcome opinion. I had seen factions use the press as a weapon and governments lose the authority to defend themselves. A state cannot leave every means of disturbing it in the hands of those who wish it destroyed.

ED A conspiracy and criticism are different things. Did suppressing both make it easier to mistake silence for consent?

NAPOLEON Silence did not tell me everything, nor did the newspapers. I had reports, petitions, officials, and men with whom I argued face to face. There was support for my government as well as fear of it. You may say the restrictions concealed discontent. I say that allowing every faction to inflame it would not have given France a wiser government. The danger existed on both sides.

I consulted men who understood their subjects, argued in councils, and examined details. Final authority remained with me because I was responsible for the result. I will not apologize for providing a government where there had been so much uncertainty.

ED The ability to act was clearly a strength. Did keeping so much authority close make it harder for the system to function without you?

NAPOLEON That is a better question. Men became accustomed to referring matters upward, and I became accustomed to believing I could settle them better or faster. The habit was useful until too many matters required it. I can concede that without conceding that France would have benefited from a weak executive.

ED In other words, the organization can look strong while the leader is present and still be weaker than it appears.

NAPOLEON In some respects. Yet my laws and administration did survive my fall. That should count in your reckoning. The empire held together by victories was more vulnerable than the institutions established through daily government. Their survival is part of my answer to those who say that I built nothing durable. More years of peace might have strengthened them further. Whether my enemies would have allowed those years is precisely what your argument leaves uncertain.

ED If you could undo one decision, where would you begin?

NAPOLEON Spain. I would begin there. I expected an alteration of dynasty to settle a difficulty and instead opened a struggle that consumed men and authority for years. Russia presents another answer, though the circumstances that brought me to that war cannot simply be wished away.

You would prefer me to say that I should have stopped after Tilsit, or after Wagram. Perhaps. But a ruler must obtain a peace that others will keep, not merely resolve to be peaceful himself. Give me that assurance, and I will tell you what more I might have accomplished without another campaign.

PART VII

The Personal Price

ED We have talked about the country you hoped to build and the peace you needed to secure it. Your son was part of that future, too. What did he represent to you—beyond the continuation of your name?

NAPOLEON A future I might not have to command myself. That was the hope. A child might inherit a settled country and the acceptance I had spent my life trying to compel. But I placed the weight of an empire upon an infant before he could understand his own name.

ED Help me understand what happened to him. How did your son come to be in Austria, and why couldn't he return to you?

NAPOLEON He was born in 1811, the son of Marie-Louise and myself, and received the title King of Rome. After my fall in 1814, his mother took him to Vienna. Her father, Emperor Francis, is his grandfather. The child remained in Austria when I returned from Elba. When I abdicated after Waterloo in 1815, I did so in his favor. But naming a successor did not place him upon a throne. He remained beyond my reach, and the Bourbons returned to France.

Those who defeated me had no wish to see my son become the means of restoring the Empire. In Vienna he is surrounded by his mother's family; the decisions about his upbringing are theirs. I am permitted neither the ordinary authority of a father nor the authority I once possessed as sovereign.

ED Was he being mistreated, or was it the separation and their control over his future that troubled you most?

NAPOLEON I do not say that his grandfather denies him comfort or affection. Those are not the whole of a father's concern. Who will tell him what I attempted? What will he be taught about France? What place will he be allowed to occupy in the

world? To the courts of Europe he is a question of succession and security. To me he is also a child whom I cannot see.

A decree could once move armies for me. It cannot bring my son into this room.

ED That is a painful contrast. You could shape so much of the world and still lose the chance to shape your relationship with him.

NAPOLEON They took him beyond my reach. Let us be exact about that. My absence now is not a choice made for the convenience of another campaign. I would have him here—or be allowed to go to him—if those who hold our destinies permitted it.

ED Of course. I'm thinking also about the years when you did have more freedom to choose.

NAPOLEON Those years were fewer than I expected. I believed there would be time once the settlement was secure. Every ruler tells himself that; so, I imagine, does many a man with a smaller burden. I cannot know what more time with him would have changed. I know that titles and provisions cannot take the place of it. History will concern itself with the King of Rome. I think of the child.

ED What about Josephine? You divorced her to secure an heir, but she clearly mattered deeply to you. How do you make sense of that decision now?

NAPOLEON You speak of the heir as though it were a private preference. The succession concerned the future of France. Had I refused to provide for it and left the country to another contest after my death, you might now be asking why I placed my affection above my duty.

Josephine understood what was at stake, however painful it was. I made provision for her; I did not intend that the end of the marriage should mean the end of my concern for her.

ED Understanding your reasons did not mean she wanted the marriage to end.

NAPOLEON No, she did not wish it. Nor was the decision without pain for me. You need not suppose that I was ignorant of hers in order to question what I decided. I considered the succession a duty I could not put aside, even for her.

ED And personally? Once you set the reasons of state beside what you felt for her, what remained unresolved?

NAPOLEON That affection did not obey the decree. She had known me before the whole apparatus of empire stood between my person and the world. There was a life with her that no arrangement of courts could reproduce. I can still defend the decision as a ruler. It does not follow that the husband was at peace.

Do not turn us into a perfect romance. We wounded one another. We were both capable of folly. But the fact that a relationship is imperfect does not make it replaceable. Her death closed a door that power could not reopen.

ED We have spoken about Josephine, but Marie-Louise was your wife and the mother of your son. Does concentrating on the earlier marriage give an incomplete picture?

NAPOLEON Certainly. Marie-Louise was not merely the name of an alliance. She was my wife, and we had a life together. When my son was born, the future appeared more secure than it ever had. If you speak only of Josephine, you remove years from that life and then invite me to explain what remains.

ED How do you think of Marie-Louise now, with both her and your son beyond your reach?

NAPOLEON With less knowledge of her circumstances than I should wish, and no means of putting my questions to her as I once could. I can speak of what I hoped our marriage would secure. I cannot speak for her. Nor shall I arrange the women in my life in an order for the satisfaction of people who wish to make a romance of my captivity.

ED I think leaders can convince themselves that the people closest to them will understand—that there will be time to repair things later. The problem is that later isn't guaranteed.

NAPOLEON No. And the people who love you do not experience your ambitions as an admiring public does. They experience the absence, the interrupted meal, the departure, the promise deferred. A nation may applaud the reason you are away. Your family must live with the fact of it.

You ask whether I regret Josephine. I regret much that no victory could compensate. I can defend the reasons for a decision and still grieve what it destroyed. A reason is not a remedy.

ED If a leader listening to us recognizes that pattern in his own life, what would you tell him?

NAPOLEON Attend to it while there is still someone waiting for your return. Do not assume that because you have learned to command events, you command time. You cannot negotiate with an hour after it has passed. I have negotiated with emperors. The hour is less accommodating.

You cannot negotiate with an hour after it has passed. I have negotiated with emperors. The hour is less accommodating.

NAPOLEON

PART VIII

Silence and Judgment

ED Does the solitude of this place weigh on you? You once had thousands of people around you. Here, the world seems very far away.

NAPOLEON Even with a court and an army around him, a man may be alone. Everyone approaches the sovereign with a request, an interest, or a performance. The room can be crowded and the distance between people immense.

Here I have companions and attendants enough to prevent me from claiming that I am entirely alone. Yet I have lost the work, the command, and the power to act upon the news that reaches me. That is another kind of solitude. The world continues making decisions in which I have no part.

ED Is there anything useful in that silence?

NAPOLEON There is less opportunity to escape myself through another task. I can dictate, argue, remember. I can also arrange memory to my advantage, and you should not be so impressed by my misfortunes that you forget my talent for presenting a case.

There are decisions I examine again: Spain, the departure from Moscow, the movements before Waterloo. I do not find the same answer every day. Sometimes I see an error of my own; sometimes a report that came too late, or an order that was not obeyed. You may call that evasion. I call it the examination of events. The difficulty here is that I can make no further trial of what I conclude.

ED That makes me think a leader should find some of that quiet before circumstances impose it. Not withdraw from responsibility, but stop long enough to examine what he is doing.

NAPOLEON Let him examine the returns before he examines his soul. Are the troops supplied? Are the accounts true? Has an envoy told him something unwelcome that he has refused to consider? Those are useful beginnings. A room

without noise may still contain a great deal of folly. I have known men who deliberated endlessly and understood very little.

ED You studied Caesar and other great leaders. Do you believe you surpassed him?

NAPOLEON In some arrangements of law and administration, I would argue my case vigorously. In conquest, the comparison would occupy a pleasant evening and prove very little. As for knowing when to stop, neither of us has escaped the criticism of posterity.

We both inherited civil struggles, and neither can be judged as though he had governed in settled times. To place one above the other is an amusement for posterity. One should at least compare our circumstances before pronouncing judgment upon our ambition.

ED I agree that the circumstances matter. So do the people who bore the cost of what each of you attempted.

NAPOLEON Certainly they belong in the account. But do not count only the costs of action and suppose that inaction would have cost them nothing.

ED Do you believe there is redemption in understanding your failures?

NAPOLEON Redemption? You would have me finish as a penitent, with my hands folded and my achievements placed upon the other side of a balance? I have acknowledged errors. I have not agreed that my life was an offense requiring an apology for its existence.

ED I mean whether understanding what went wrong can give something useful to the people who come after you.

NAPOLEON In that sense, certainly. Though understanding does not restore a life lost in Russia or return a father to his family. I should dislike a philosophy that allowed a man to purchase innocence merely by speaking eloquently about regret.

But if my failures make another ruler more prudent, then they need not be useless. Perhaps that is the redemption available to a man such as I: that those who admire his rise will study his limits with equal care.

PART IX

The Farewell

The fire settles. Beyond the window the last light has left the sea.
Napoleon draws his cloak closer and looks toward the darkened garden.

ED Before I leave, what do you most want people to remember? And what would you say to someone who is leading others now?

NAPOLEON Remember that I built as well as conquered. That I found men in obscure places and gave their abilities employment. That I tried to make the state something more coherent than a collection of inherited privileges. Remember the schools, the administration, and the law alongside the battlefields.

If you mean to judge my failures, first understand what I attempted and what stood against me. You have questioned me about the price of my decisions; I shall continue to ask what France might have become without the work we accomplished.

ED And what counsel would you give a leader who wants to avoid your mistakes?

NAPOLEON Know what you intend to accomplish and what means you possess. Do not ask courage to supply the place of bread, money, or sound intelligence. Give an able man the command he can exercise, and require him to tell you the truth. Establish laws and offices that will continue their work when another man occupies your chair.

And do not spend every affection as though another campaign will replenish it. The men who cheer your arrival will not necessarily sit beside you when the cheering ends. Attend to those who might.

ED Then the lesson isn't simply to have more vision or more discipline. It is to know what those qualities are serving—and to recognize when persistence has become an inability to stop.

NAPOLEON That is your conclusion. Keep the courage in it also. Do not make my failures an argument for a timid life. There are moments when hesitation is itself a failure of duty. Prepare yourself, judge the circumstances, and act. Then remain capable of judging again. A decision is not made wiser by refusing to reconsider it.

A decision is not made wiser by refusing to reconsider it.

NAPOLEON

ED Your Majesty, thank you for staying with some difficult questions. I came impressed by what you accomplished. I leave with a better understanding of the pressures behind your decisions, and of the judgment required to sustain an accomplishment without asking too much of the people who make it possible.

NAPOLEON Then you have not wasted the voyage. And perhaps you will allow that the man who made the decisions had a more difficult task than the man who questions them beside a fire. I ruled an empire once. Now I govern only memory, and even that territory is disputed. If the account of my life helps another man lead with greater discipline and a better sense of proportion, something useful may yet come from this rock.

I ruled an empire once. Now I govern only memory, and even that territory is disputed.

NAPOLEON

He offers his hand. For a moment there is neither a battlefield nor a throne between us, only the tired face of a man who has had time to revisit both.

NAPOLEON Have a purpose, Ed, and the courage to pursue it. But examine your means as carefully as your intentions. Applause is easily obtained and quickly lost. A sound law, an able man placed where he can serve, an administration that still works after a defeat—those are better witnesses in your favor.

He turns back toward the fire. The door closes softly behind me. Outside, the wind moves through the trees around Longwood House, and the island seems to hold its breath. I have come looking for the measure of a great leader. I leave considering the weight of what he asks others to carry.

Historical background for the imagined dialogue

These sources support the historical setting, events, and issues explored in the conversation. They do not authenticate the invented dialogue, motives, or private reflections. Eyewitness memoirs also require comparison and critical reading.

Campaigns and military command

Bibliothèque nationale de France · The Egyptian Campaign

The Napoleon Series · Jaffa 1799 (Mordechai Gichon)

The Napoleon Series · Grouchy's orders and movements in June 1815

National Army Museum · Battle of Waterloo

Musée de l'Armée · Napoleon as Strategist (battle summaries)

Fondation Napoléon · The Austerlitz campaign and battle

Fondation Napoléon · The Battle of Wagram

Centre des monuments nationaux · Napoleon in Italy and Egypt (French)

Napoleon's correspondence · Rivoli and Joubert (in The Corsican)

Fondation Napoléon · The Polish campaign and Friedland (French)

French Army · The origins of the army corps (French)

Government family and exile

Fondation Napoléon · A critical guide to the Saint Helena eyewitness accounts

Fondation Napoléon · Napoleon's Consecration and Coronation

French Senate · The drafting of the Civil Code (French)

Fondation Napoléon · Why did Napoleon bring back slavery?

The Napoleon Series · Decree Abolishing the Slave Trade (1815)

Fondation Napoléon · Napoleon's marriage dissolution and annulment

National Army Museum · Marengo and Napoleon's height

National Army Museum · Horse heroes

Postscript: Napoleon at Saint Helena

The interview above is imagined. The following account describes what actually happened.

Napoleon arrived at Saint Helena in October 1815, following his defeat at Waterloo and his second abdication. This time, there would be no return to power. The British held him on the remote South Atlantic island for the rest of his life. He moved into Longwood House in

December 1815.

His captivity was closely guarded, but he was not entirely alone. Companions and servants accompanied him into exile. He read, rode, gardened, and dictated accounts of his campaigns and decisions. Longwood's damp, windswept setting, restrictions on his movements, and disputes with the British governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, made daily life increasingly difficult. His health deteriorated, and he gradually withdrew from much of the activity that had occupied his earlier years there.

He also continued to fight for his place in history. His dictated recollections and the accounts of companions, especially Emmanuel de Las Cases's Memorial of Saint Helena, helped shape the Napoleonic legend after his death. These writings preserve valuable testimony, but they also reflect the loyalties and purposes of their authors. They should be read with that perspective in mind.

Napoleon died at Longwood on May 5, 1821, at the age of fifty-one. The autopsy findings and modern medical reviews strongly support advanced stomach cancer as the cause of death. Although poisoning theories later attracted attention, they have not displaced that explanation. He was buried on Saint Helena on May 9, 1821.

In 1840, King Louis-Philippe arranged for Napoleon's remains to be returned to France and brought to Les Invalides in Paris. On April 2, 1861, they were placed in the monumental tomb beneath its dome, where they remain today.

He never left Saint Helena alive. The man who had repeatedly returned from defeat spent his final years in captivity; the struggle over how to remember him continued long after his death.

What became of his son

Napoleon's son, known to Bonapartists as Napoleon II, never exercised power in France. He grew up in Austria under the care of his maternal grandfather, Emperor Francis I, and received the title Duke of Reichstadt in 1818. He later served in the Austrian army. Father and son never met again after their separation in 1814. Napoleon died in 1821 without knowing what his son's adult life would hold. The young duke died of tuberculosis at Schönbrunn Palace near Vienna on July 22, 1832, aged twenty-one, unmarried and without children.

Sources for the postscript

Fondation Napoléon · From Waterloo to the island of St Helena

Fondation Napoléon · Napoleon's Death

Lugli and colleagues (2021) · The gastric disease of Napoleon Bonaparte

Musée de l'Armée · The Dome (tomb of Napoleon)

Fondation Napoléon · Napoleon II

Schönbrunn Palace · Napoleon Room



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