Napoleon Bonaparte, French painting probably based on 1798 engraving by Elisabeth Herhan and Franz Gabriel Fiesinger, after drawing by Jean Urbain Guérin, oil on wood (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Napoleon Revisited

By George DiMichele

Since Napoleon Bonaparte's death, in 1821, he has continued to command the fervent interest of many admirers. Military thinkers persist in the search for the secrets of his success. Countless books and articles have been written in an attempt to unlock his astonishing abilities.

The United States would greatly benefit by uncovering such secrets. Great Power competition is on the horizon, national defense costs continue rising rapidly, and national security remains a pressing concern. U.S. leaders need to reexamine Napoleon's methods to see what they can learn from this renowned military leader to help surmount today's challenges. This article explores Napoleon's military talents, examines his pioneering use of operational art and design, and then argues that the United States must become the 21st-century master of art and design.

Napoleon lived during a transitional period in European history. In the late 18th century, the practice of limited warfare was coming to an end. The French Revolution created upheaval.

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Much larger armed forces took shape; the French *levée en masse* army shook the foundations of military thinking.[1] As a general, Napoleon led the French army to success in Italy in the 1790s, building his reputation as a skillful military leader.[2] Born in 1769, Napoleon was remarkably young when he engineered those victories, but the experiences were central to transforming General Bonaparte into the great Emperor Napoleon.

An astute student of military history during his youth, Napoleon showed the effect of his education in the way he planned and commanded his conquests.[3] Later in life, after fighting many battles, Napoleon claimed that he had gained no new knowledge beyond what he gleaned in his younger years.[4] This view is surprising, given that in later years he could look back on stunning victories at Austerlitz and Jena, upon which his reputation was built.

Napoleon's battlefield triumphs provide rich examples of his skills and use of speed, maneuver, and surprise. They also point to a conventional, rather than a revolutionary, thinker.[5] Whereas admirers called him a genius, the facts speak of something different: it is highly likely his talents were mostly the result of conventional hard work.

Consider his swiftness in battle. He often attacked opponents before their armies could mass in overwhelming numbers.[6] In 1806, he attacked and defeated Prussia at the battle of Jena-Auerstedt before Prussia's allies could join. During the climactic battle of Waterloo in 1815, he again preferred to attack before his enemies could mass against him.[7]

"Divide and conquer," attributed to Julius Caesar, was another principle Bonaparte exercised repeatedly and successfully. He likely absorbed it during his youthful study, which prepared him at a level his rivals did not understand and could not match.[8] Napoleon provides one of the best examples of the maxim that success comes to those who have put in the work of studying and learning.

Napoleon is believed to have said, "If I always appear prepared, it is because before entering an undertaking, I have meditated long and have foreseen what may occur. It is not genius which reveals to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by others; it is thought and preparation." If he in fact made this statement, he was simply confirming that there was no great magician's achievement in his abilities; it was meticulous effort.[9] Unfortunately, "effort" does not sound as attractive as "genius" or "brilliance." Yet if the result of arduous work is victory, the achievement is as laudable.

A key measure of Napoleon's skill was his ability to counter the unexpected on the battlefield. He has been described as a "superb improviser."[10] The ability to think quickly and respond to an unforeseen situation is a sought-after skill; in Napoleon's case, was it the result of improvisation or simply of contemplation and preparedness? Bonaparte did his homework on opponents, their armed forces, his own forces, geography, and, of course, politics.[11] During the Spanish campaign, he instructed French General Jean-Andoche Junot to send "descriptions of the provinces through which you pass"—one of many examples of his ceaseless drive to understand future battlefields and to master campaigns.[12]

After his initial victories in Italy, Napoleon compiled a sound basis of successful experiences around which he anchored much of his thinking.[13] For Napoleon, success bred more success. His accomplishments provided him with a powerful sense of self-confidence as he planned future campaigns.

Table. Timeline of Napoleon's Military Career

1769	**Born on the island of Corsica**
1796	**Campaigns in Italy**
1798	**Campaigns in Egypt**
1804	**Crowned Emperor**
1805	**Wins Battle of Austerlitz**
1806	**Wins Battle of Jena-Auerstedt**
1808	**Begins ongoing warfare in Spain**
1812	**Fails to conquer Russia**
1813	**Defeated at the Battle of Leipzig**
1814	**Exiled to the island of Elba**
1815	**Returns to France and begins the Hundred Days campaign**
1815	**Defeated at the Battle of Waterloo**
1815	**Exiled to the island of St. Helena**
1821	**Dies on St. Helena**

Operational Art and Design

Napoleon recognized the value of thought, planning, and preparedness in what he intended to do. He put into practice what today's Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, describes as operational art and design—a "cognitive approach" that encompasses "the ability to anticipate . . . and the skill to plan, prepare, execute, and assess."[14] It is further described as being "used by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means."[15] In short, success comes from thorough planning.

Napoleon stated that he had foreseen what could occur and was therefore

Coronation of Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine in Notre-Dame de Paris, December 2, 1804, by Jacques-Louis David and Georges Rouget, ca. 1805–1807, oil on canvas (Louvre Museum)

prepared if it did. His early study of operational art and design provided the advantage of insight. JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*, describes the operational art and design framework as granting an "understanding" of how to fight and win, beyond aggregate numbers of soldiers or weapons.[16] The French emperor sought to out-think as well as out-fight opponents; he designed plans based on the deeper understanding his cognitive preparation had enabled.

Design "supports operational art with a methodology intended to enhance understanding of the situation and the problem."[17] JP 3-0 describes design as "the conception and construction of the framework that underpins a campaign or major [operational plan] and its subsequent execution. It extends operational art's vision with a creative process to help commanders and planners answer the ends-ways-means-risk questions."[18] JP 3-0 notes:

Operational art and design enable understanding. Understanding is more than just knowledge of the capabilities and capacities of the relevant actors or the scope and nature of the [operational environment]*; it provides context for decision making and how the many facets of the problem are likely to interact, enabling commanders and planners to identify hazards, threats, consequences, opportunities, and risk.*[19]

Operational art and design are intellectual efforts; their proficient accomplishment is anchored in experience, research, and thought. Ideally, Bonaparte's writings would provide key clues to his use of them, but he wrote little, and much of what is believed to be his military work is tactical in nature. However, there are glimpses of operational thought.

In *Military Maxims*, he advised planning for what the enemy could do.[20] To Napoleon, operational design's "understanding" was key; such planning was a contemplative effort. What are the enemy's goals? What does the enemy value? Comprehending such matters required drawing on his knowledge and experience. Bonaparte had to place himself in his opponent's shoes and consider his adversary's viewpoint.

Napoleon also referenced preparedness, especially for an enemy that could appear at any time.[21] Reconnaissance and intelligence were not yet scientific fields. The element of surprise—both Napoleon's use of it and his preparedness for an enemy's use of it—was an immensely powerful weapon. Preparedness at such a high level demanded vision, thought, and analysis.

Napoleon's studiousness served him well during his early years. By 1804, he was emperor of France. He could direct his armies as he wanted[22] and as emperor was not slowed by the friction of bureaucracy. He was subject only to the limits of his own decisive mind.

Action Defeats Fog and Friction

Napoleon's successes in Italy shaped the foundation for his understanding of operational warfare. This gave him a well-developed *coup d'oeil*, or special insight, as Carl von Clausewitz described it.[23] Bonaparte's early victories fed his instincts for battle. He used his planning skills to limit the impact of friction in war.[24] The more Napoleon

could contemplate scenarios and possibilities, the less likely friction would hinder the execution of his plans.

Countless commanders throughout history have succumbed to war's fog and friction. Napoleon even suffered their ill effects later in life, especially during the Hundred Days campaign in 1815.[25] Yet during his younger years, his skills—and his devotion of considerable time to planning and preparedness—often triumphed. History teaches that the enemy is a thinking opponent that often does not do what is expected. Bonaparte mitigated the uncertainties of war by considering various actions an enemy could take and was often prepared when they materialized.

Operational art and design teach preparedness: considering the possible and rendering it expected. Understood another way: by Napoleon's contemplation of many scenarios, he reflected on many outcomes. Although 9 of every 10 scenarios never occurred, he was prepared for the one that did.

Yet that was only half of the equation. Napoleon crafted war plans and then executed them quickly and confidently, often making the first move rather than allowing his opponents the opportunity. Speed and surprise, then, became the keys to success.[26] And his boldness often prevented the unexpected from occurring; decisive execution provided a chance to control events rather than to allow others to shape them. The same can be said of today's operational art and design: a successful commander is one who is likely to execute plans with speed and decisiveness,[27] creating an operational tempo that an opponent cannot easily overcome.

Greatest Victories

Napoleon's battlefield successes at Ulm-Austerlitz in 1805 and Jena-Auerstedt in 1806 display his skillful use of speed, maneuver, and the element of surprise. As the emperor might have described it, the victories could best be attributed to deep thought, planning, and aggressive execution.

Many consider the 1805 defeat of Austria and Russia the crowning example of Napoleon's skill. His multicorps attack toward Ulm completely overwhelmed the Austrians. Their commander, General Karl Mack, believed Ulm far too strong a defensive position for Napoleon to overcome.[28] Yet speed and resolute French actions carried the day. French corps moved decisively at rates the Austrians could not match.

Later, at the battle of Austerlitz, Napoleon's army burst through the enemy's center and pursued its left wing until it was crushed. Austerlitz was an annihilation battle for the ages. Yet these few words do not do justice to the

The Battle of Jena, October 14, 1806, by Horace Vernet, 1836, oil on canvas, depicts Napoleon reprimanding grenadier of Imperial Guard, who (according to legend) eagerly shouted for attack during Battle of Jena-Auerstedt (Palace of Versailles)

effort the French emperor put into this triumph. What historians describe as the "Battle of the Three Emperors" came down to the superior preparation and actions of just one. The French emperor, despite his troops' being outnumbered, humbled Francis II of Austria and Alexander I of Russia on a scale that has rarely occurred. Bonaparte's skillful drawing of the Austrians and Russians toward him and the superior French execution decided the day;[29] his adversaries were simply routed.[30] This carefully planned battle underscores the importance of operational design. Napoleon's cleverly planned French deception and feigned weakness worked remarkably well.[31]

Andrew Roberts's *Napoleon: A Life* recounts detailed planning for the battle of Austerlitz. Roberts describes how Bonaparte went to great lengths to ensure that his key commanders understood exactly what was expected of them in the coming battle.[32] He understood that the application of the enduring principles of war coupled with speed of action made the difference on the battlefield.[33] The decisive execution of those principles was the crucial factor in his triumph; those time-tested tenets remain embedded in operational art and design today, as our joint publications demonstrate.

In fighting Prussia, Napoleon again used speed to engage and conquer his opponent quickly, before its allies might join in.[34] At the battle of Jena-Auerstedt, his forces fought two battles simultaneously, defeating the Prussians in both. Bonaparte relied on planning, deployed his forces, and engaged his foe. He did not use supernatural powers; it was simply his version of operational art and design.

General Bonaparte was subject to the French government during his Italian campaigns in the mid-1790s; his well-planned and speedy efforts led to victory despite this burden. In 1806, as emperor, he essentially was the French government. He engineered a rapid Prussian campaign unhindered by politics; his was the only political opinion that mattered.

Clearly, operational art is not a new concept. Claus Telp's *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740–1813* describes how operational art evolved during the period from Frederick the Great through the reign of Napoleon. The 1806 Prussian campaign and Jena battle are thoroughly examined. Well documented and easy to read, the book is a mainstay of the serious study of the period.

Telp's work, in addition to many others, also teaches that by the time of Napoleon's campaigns, things had changed. Limited war was basically a relic of the past. The French emperor understood the transformation—and operated in a manner that simply overwhelmed Austrian, Prussian, and Russian opponents. The resulting surrenders often saw enemies accepting peace on his terms. Forcing opponents to accept peace on one's own terms should sound familiar—it is often the goal for the United States today.

Such a goal trains the focus on operational art and design. And despite the two centuries between Napoleon's victories and JPs 3-0 and 5-0, the through line connecting then and now is unmistakable. A study of operational art and design is perhaps the best way for today's soldiers to understand the methods and actions of one of history's most brilliant tacticians.

Clearly, Bonaparte was subject to the same rules of speed, maneuver, and surprise that his peers were then and commanders are today.[35] He simply planned and executed military campaigns faster than his contemporaries. The French emperor understood that the principles of war are timeless. They can be seen in the ancient world, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and today.

Key Lessons for Today

Historians continue to study Napoleon as if they might discover his secrets, but he simply did the deep thought and research needed. He formulated his plan, then executed it at a pace opponents could not match.[36] The faster warrior often secures the victory. The Prussian army in 1806 was hopelessly outclassed by the speed at which Bonaparte operated.[37] One hundred and thirty-four years later, the German army executed blitzkrieg at a pace the British and French could not equal.

A key lesson is that Napoleon was remarkable largely because he prepared and fought at an unmatched pace. He simply accelerated the implementation of rudimentary operational art and design; his study of the past and early victories in Italy would have taught him the value of speed. Most of Napoleon's early foes, schooled in the 18th-century art of war,[38] were likely unaware of—and certainly unprepared for—his more modern skills. In analyses of Bonaparte, speed, maneuver, and surprise crop up again and again—and these studies remain relevant today because speed, maneuver, and surprise, like all other principles of war, remain relevant.

In the future, the United States may not have several years to win wars. It took the Allies 6 years to win World War II. The Gulf War, of 1991, was fought and decided in less than 6 weeks; the ground war was measured in hours. With the speed of technology today we should not expect a great deal of time to assemble victory. As former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously said, "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."[39] Future wars may be won or lost in a matter of weeks, perhaps days in extreme cases. Once a war begins, the United States will not have the time to do the required reading, deep thinking, and thorough planning. That preparation is what peace is for.

This article argues that the reading, thinking, and planning must occur now and remain ongoing. American taxpayers spend a great deal on defense. It can be argued that the United States has the best military equipment money can buy; we must spend more time on becoming the absolute best at operational art and design. We must do a great deal more reading, thinking, and planning around cyber and space in addition to the air, land, and sea domains.

Napoleon's empire was not a democracy; his was the only opinion he cared to consult. Democracies have slower decisionmaking processes. Political leaders are often cautious with major decisions such as war, seeking the maximum possible demonstration of bipartisanship and political unity. Whereas discussion,

debate, and consensus are a blessing in most things, in war they may be a disadvantage against a peer competitor. With that warning in mind, the lessons of the French emperor become most pressing. Preparedness in art and design is essential, not least to compensate for a potentially slower political process.

The lessons here are clear: Engage fully in the study of operational art and design. Consider what an opponent might do, and be ready for multiple scenarios. War-game plans repeatedly. Ensure that plans are updated in a timely manner. If or when the time comes, be prepared to execute quickly and mercilessly.

Conclusion

Now is the time to think like Napoleon regarding future opponents and conflicts. Future conflicts will require the United States to be faster than its foes. Napoleon repeatedly demonstrated the value of speed, maneuver, and surprise. He contemplated the risk and reward and then acted decisively. The United States can ill afford to be slow in the prosecution of conflict against a peer opponent.

Now is the time to think and plan, considering ends, ways, means, and risk. As Bonaparte demonstrated, it was not sorcery but military thought and study that allowed him to accomplish so much. Once war was decided on, he prosecuted it with a zeal his foes could not match. Now is also the time to thoroughly read and review JPs 3-0 and 5-0. These documents exist for a reason: to provide direction for successful military action. They clearly direct joint activities and efforts by all the Services. Additionally, and equally important, much in these publications is essentially 21st-century Napoleonic thinking. Bonaparte would have clearly recognized in today's art and design much of how he thought about warfare.

Today, the Department of Defense should establish a formal institute of operational art and design that would encourage deeper thinking on key defense matters, with particular emphasis on operational plans. Establishing an institute, staffed by all Services and key allies, would further focus U.S. efforts to become and remain the absolute best at art and design. It could demonstrate value by offering annual symposiums or sponsoring wargames.

Undoubtedly, the emperor's countless followers will continue to seek out his secrets. He was an incredibly talented commander and conqueror. He did well when he observed the brutal laws of war—although he strayed somewhat in later years and ultimately succumbed to his foes.[40] He may or may not have been a genius, but he was definitely a thinker, planner, and hard worker, which may have been his biggest secrets.

Napoleon at his best exercised precise planning and lightning execution, performing at a level his contemporaries did not. His work teaches today's military leaders to engage in a continuous study of operational art and design because returning to the roots of skill and professionalism is always warranted. The United States must also engineer unmatched war-winning readiness in all warfighting domains. The effort must be joint and fully integrated through operational art and design. This approach will either deter conflict or win it if deterrence fails. **JFQ**

Notes

[1] Frank McLynn, *Napoleon: A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 138.

[2] Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 196.

[3] David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 138–139; McLynn, *Napoleon*, 166; Napoleon Bonaparte, *Military Maxims of Napoleon*, trans. J. Ackerly (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 67–69.

[4] McLynn, *Napoleon*, 145.

[5] Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, 126–128, 136.

[6] Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 197.

[7] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 104.

[8] Claus Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740–1813: From Frederick the Great to Napoleon* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 63–64, 67–70.

[9] Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 61, 79.

[10] McLynn, *Napoleon*, 144.

[11] Roberts, *Napoleon*, xxxiv–xxxv.

[12] Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, 598.

[13] Roberts, *Napoleon*, 134–137.

[14] Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 17, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018), II-3, available at <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3_0.pdf>.

[15] Ibid.

[16] JP 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, December 1, 2020), IV-1, available at <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf>.

[17] JP 3-0, II-4.

[18] Ibid.

[19] JP 5-0, IV-1.

[20] Bonaparte, *Military Maxims of Napoleon*, 2.

[21] Ibid., 9, 11–12.

[22] Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 54.

[23] JP 3-0, II-1.

[24] JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, July 12, 2017), I-3, available at <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp1.pdf>.

[25] Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, 1056–1057.

[26] Ibid., 129–130.

[27] JP 5-0, IV-1.

[28] Todd Fisher, *The Napoleonic Wars: The Rise of the Emperor 1805–1807* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2001), 27–28.

[29] Robert Goetz, *1805: Austerlitz, Napoleon, and the Destruction of the Third Coalition* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Greenhill Books, 2005), 282–284; David G. Chandler, *Austerlitz 1805: Battle of the Three Emperors* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1990), 18–20.

[30] Chandler, *Austerlitz 1805*, 20.

[31] Michel Franceschi and Ben Weider, *The Wars Against Napoleon: Debunking the Myth of the Napoleonic Wars* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2008), 112.

[32] Roberts, *Napoleon*, 383.

[33] Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 64.

[34] Ibid., 52.

[35] Ibid., 72.

[36] McLynn, *Napoleon*, 138, 145.

[37] Fisher, *The Napoleonic Wars*, 15–17, 22–23.

[38] Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 13.

[39] Eric Schimdt, "Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld Over Lack of Armor," *New York Times*, December 8, 2004, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/international/middleeast/iraqbound-troops-confront-rumsfeld-over-lack-of.html>.

[40] Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, 1003–1004.