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The Emperor and the Duke: A Comparative Leadership Analysis of the Battle of Waterloo

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Introduction

The morning of June 18, 1815, on the rolling fields in front of a few small farms near the village of Mont-Saint-Jean, in Belgium, the two most successful army commanders of their epoch met for the first time on the same battlefield. Finally, they would be able to measure their strategic and tactical abilities against one another. Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, master strategist of countless continental battles, had returned from his exile on the island of Elba to crush his British adversary once and for all. Sir Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, who began his military career in India and then solidified his extraordinary reputation against Napoleon’s marshals in Spain, came to lead the Allied forces against the Emperor, to stifle the French domination of Europe once and for all. Waterloo was significant historically in that it was the decisive battle that ended Napoleon’s aspirations of European hegemony; it was significant as a military conflict in that the two major players in the battle had such extraordinary reputations and abilities as generals. This thesis seeks to explore the personal contributions of these two prominent generals to the Allied victory and the French defeat at the battle of Waterloo.

Napoleon came from a humble background. Born to a Corsican lawyer in 1769, he received his education at the École Militaire in Paris. He developed a plethora of knowledge and proved himself to be extremely self-motivated and ambitious: an advantageous combination for a military officer. In 1795, he led the violent suppression of the anti-revolutionary Vendémiaire movement, the success of which hinged on his specialized skill as an artillery commander. This victory over the rebellious royalists led to his promotion to Commander of the Army of the Interior and then of the Army of Italy.
After several successful campaigns he staged a coup on the government to ensure his election to the position of First Consul. In 1804, Pope Pius VII crowned him Emperor of the French at Notre Dame, in Paris. In a matter of a few years Napoleon had transformed himself from a poor, disagreeable, foreign student to the effective ruler of France. After conquering almost every major power in continental Europe, Napoleon turned east, toward Moscow. After fighting an extremely costly campaign in Russia to no avail, he returned to continental Europe in 1812. In 1813, he faced a huge defeat against the Sixth Coalition, an alliance comprised of Austria, Prussia, Russia, and Sweden. After a series of smaller conflicts in France, he abdicated in 1814, banished to the Island of Elba.

Arthur Wellesley was born in Ireland to a family of English descent in 1769, the same year as Napoleon. Unlike Napoleon, Wellesley, the third son of Lord Mornington, came from an aristocratic background. He studied at Eton but his family removed him from the academic track before he graduated and sent to the Military Academy at Anger, in France—the unfortunate fate of a third son outshone by his older brothers’ brilliance. He quickly received promotion in the army, after alternating a political career in the Irish parliament with his military duties. Finally accepting a solely military life, he set out for India as a colonel in 1797. After defeating the Tipoo Sultan of Mysore and winning a great victory at the battle of Assaye, Wellesley returned to Britain in 1805. After a few more years of politics, he left for the Iberian Peninsula where he proved his strategic and tactical prowess against Napoleon’s marshals, working with the local armies and the Spanish guerillas to purge Spain and Portugal of the French occupiers. During the Peninsular War (1808-1814), Wellesley perfected his reverse-slope infantry technique,
utilizing his infantry to their maximum potential.¹ At the battle of Talavera, he earned the title, Viscount of Wellington. Following Napoleon’s first abdication, the crown created Wellington a Duke. He accepted an ambassadorial post in Paris and then a position as the representative for Great Britain at the Congress of Vienna. However, when the European leaders discovered that Napoleon had escaped, they sent Wellington to oppose him, leading an Allied army composed of British, Saxe-Weimar, Nassauers, Netherlands, and troops of the King’s German Legion (KGL), in conjunction with Marshal Blücher, leading the Prussian Army.²

In any battle, a general’s personal leadership has a monumental influence on the morale of his troops. Seeing a leader poised for battle, calm, collected, and in control, reduces the feelings of fear and panic among his men; unfortunately, the reverse is also true, so it is essential that a commander remain composed throughout the battle. Soldiers facing the possibility of death or mutilation want to be able to trust that their commanders will do all that is in their power to ensure that their service and sacrifice will not be in vain. A commander’s presence in the thick of battle, actively leading from the front lines comforts a soldier; he can see his commander’s confidence in the success of the mission, as well as the assurance that he is in a position to modify his tactics in response to enemy movements. It is difficult for a commander to inspire in his men the same sense of

¹ A technique in which an officer deploys his infantry on the opposite side of a slope, using the slope to defend the infantry from enemy artillery, brought forward only when their firepower would be effective. This reverse-slope technique is described later in further detail.
² The Seventh Coalition against Napoleon included Russia and Austria as well, but the Austrian army stationed in Italy and the Russians en route from Russia, were too far away to have been considered an immediate threat to Napoleon’s Armée du Nord.
confidence while leading from the periphery. At Waterloo, the personal leadership of the two generals and their involvement in the battle greatly influenced its outcome.

Aside from the political decisiveness of the battle of Waterloo, its significance lies largely in the reputations of Napoleon and Wellington for their impeccable quality of personal leadership. Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century historian who championed the “Great Man Theory” of history, stated that, “all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history…were the history of these.”

This theory, while generally viewed by modern historians as somewhat archaic, was certainly relevant in the nineteenth century, at the time of its development. The military reforms of the eighteenth century shifted the focus of the military onto the importance of the individual soldier as a part of the larger military structure. This radical new focus on the individual allowed for the invention of the Great Man Theory. Although structural elements such as technology, logistics, finance, and social organization certainly affect historical change and the outcomes of battles, for these particular battles, the Great Man Theory seems exceedingly relevant.

Napoleon was arguably one of the greatest military leaders to ever live, and yet at Waterloo he was defeated by Wellington, a commander who, doubtlessly not as well known in the modern era, had earned a similarly superior reputation. In order to fully comprehend the role that personal leadership played in the battle of Waterloo it is first necessary to place personal leadership within the context of the early nineteenth century.

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First, I will examine the elements of the late eighteenth century military reforms which created an environment in which Napoleon and Wellington could effectively cultivate their leadership skills. Second, I will analyze each commander’s personal leadership earlier in his career, Wellington at the battle of Salamanca (1812) and Napoleon at the battle of Austerlitz (1805), revealing the high level of military genius present in both men. Finally, I will examine the personal leadership contributions of each man at the battle of Waterloo to demonstrate the extent to which the two commanders remained consistent with or deviated from their previous leadership styles. The two armies were reasonably evenly matched; thus, the questions to be asked are: what was it about the two generals that helped influence the events of June 18 to unfold in the manner that they did? How did the two leaders conduct their armies? How did their personal leadership influence the tactical decisions made on June 18? This thesis will argue that, compared with their earlier careers, Wellington’s consistency and Napoleon’s inconsistency greatly influenced the Allied victory and the French defeat at the battle of Waterloo.

Late Eighteenth Century Military Reform and Personal Leadership

Before discussing the specific contributions of Napoleon and Wellington at Waterloo, it is necessary to examine the newfound significance of personal leadership and its effect on battles within the context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, coinciding with the army’s increased focus on the individual during that period. Stemming from the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution, military reformers of the late eighteenth century began to abandon the traditional practice of granting offices only to aristocrats, who reputedly embodied the all-important principle of honor, and
began to enact measures to grant offices based on merit to men of all backgrounds. At the same time “Military Romanticism”, a new overarching theory of war that military theorists began to develop at the time, emphasized the important role of the psychological and human aspects of warfare, for the first time examining the soldier as an individual. Drawing on this newfound attention on the role of the individual, Napoleon was able to create an army founded on the principle of personal honor, driven by national pride. The emphasis on the individual increased the psychological value of a commander’s personal leadership over his men and provided the structural framework in which Napoleon and Wellington could supplement their abilities as battlefield commanders with the personal elements of leadership that appealed to the individual soldier, earning his respect.

The theory of Military Romanticism contradicted previous conceptions of war. Historian, John Lynn claims that “instead of viewing war as primarily obedient to the logic of science, Military Romanticism indentified war as a human phenomenon ruled by psychology and will.” Among the champions of the new theory of Military Romanticism was the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. This newfound emphasis on the psychological aspects of war increased the importance of a commander’s personal leadership in addition to his traditionally defined role as a strategist and tactician. Rather than viewing armies as impersonal units of war, military theorists began to view them as collections of individual soldiers. Under this new theory, simple soldiers started to be considered of value, theorists began to argue that these common fighters, and not just aristocratic army officers, performed important functions for the army. As a result, officers could begin to demand more of their men in terms of dedication,

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enthusiasm, and initiative.⁵ This in turn contributed to the overall change in attitude of
the soldier; he understood that, no matter how humble his background, he had a personal
self-worth. Napoleon, in particular, capitalized on this sentiment; “he displayed an
outwardly caring attitude toward [his soldiers] that brought out their devotion. He
remembered, or pretended to remember, their names and their deeds. He made an art of
the familiar word or gesture, meant to flatter the common soldier and to bind him to
Bonaparte.”⁶ The importance of the psychological aspects of war made the role of the
commanding officer more important than ever before, as he became responsible for the
morale of the men under his command.

The French Revolution called into question the traditionally accepted view that
distinguished birth entitled the nobility to affluence and advantages, championing instead
the egalitarian principles of liberté, égalité, and fraternité. This new inclination towards
meritocracy had begun during the latter half of the eighteenth century. For the first time,
following France’s humiliating defeat in the Seven Years War, “it became possible to
regard birth and merit as opposing principles.”⁷ During the Revolution, the French
people questioned the right of the nobility to special privileges. An important noble
prerogative had been the right to serve as military officers—the vast majority of positions
in the army officer corps were filled by nobles. In addition, presentation at the court of
Versailles was necessary to be promoted to the highest military ranks. Being an army
officer was a sign of elevated status, thus many aristocrats sought high positions in the

⁵ Lynn, Battle, 188.
⁶ John A. Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor: The Moral Evolution of the French Army,
⁷ Jay M. Smith, The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of
Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan
military for the social prestige and for fear of ridicule for remaining in a lower position of command. Obviously, such motivations did not necessarily produce competent commanders. By contrast, officers selected on merit tended to perform their duties efficiently. In 1787, King Louis XVI of France moved in the direction of merit-based officer selection, when he established the *Conseil de la Guerre*. This council became responsible for the review of officer candidates based on merit; it required that officers keep a record of their credentials and to a certain extent regulated the process of officer selection, which, as just noted, consisted of the king arbitrarily granting the highest positions in the military to the nobles of his court.  

This movement towards merit-based officer selection greatly increased an army’s fighting power and placed a stronger significance on the human elements of war.

While the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution were not implemented to the same degree in Great Britain, the British military began to adopt a slightly more merit-based officer selection process around the same time. David Gates asserts that with regards to the officer selection process:

> Affluence, if only on a comparatively modest scale, remained a prerequisite, but the landed gentry could not preserve its dominance of the army’s hierarchy; men from other sectors of society, foremost among them the prosperous middle classes who had emerged in the aftermath of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, accounted for a growing proportion of the officer corps.

Although still selecting officers from the wealthier classes who could afford to buy commissions—due to the staggeringly high costs of maintaining the British colonial possessions as well as fighting the wars on the European continent—the army began to

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8 Smith, *The Culture of Merit*, 252.

require competence from their officers to a much higher degree than had previously been
enforced. Although driven more by a desperate need for order and efficiency in the
army, rather than true ideas of equality, the British nevertheless moved toward a more
merit-based officer corps.

Following the Revolution, Napoleon implemented a system of motivation
designed to feed off of an individual’s sense of pride and self-worth. Napoleon’s post-
Revolution army was motivated by honor, a self-propelled desire to work toward the
national good. This concept of honor, traditionally viewed as a relationship between the
king and the nobility, began to be viewed as an ideal to which all Frenchmen ought to
aspire. Jay Smith argues that the political culture of the late 1780s recognized “the equal
potential for honor, and…the natural nobility, enjoyed by every French citizen. The
moral unity that bound citizens, a unity rooted in national traditions of honor and in a
virtuous commitment to the well-being of the nation, implied an equality that required the
elimination, or mitigation, of legal barriers between citizens.”

Reflecting the

individualist nature of the reformed military of the time, “Napoleon encouraged the
personal interest of the soldier and strived to line it to that of the Empire by a system of
rewards and preferments.” This interweaving of the personal interests of the soldier
with the interests of the Empire bound the soldier’s loyalty to the army and to its glorious
leader. Napoleon also wed the concept of honor to the cause of the nation, thereby
inspiring his soldiers to sacrifice themselves on the battlefield as part of the nationalist

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10 The cost of war for Britain at the time consumed up to 90 percent of the government
11 Jay M. Smith, Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century
cause. He used a specific set of honors as incentive for his soldiers to perform well: promotion, arms of honor, the Legion of Honor, and the Imperial Guard. The French nation considered each of these elements a personal distinction which involved immense social capital; through these means soldiers could come closer to the Emperor, himself. The soldiers regarded these personal distinctions of honor very highly. They bound the individual’s identity to that of his military unit. To be a member of Napoleon’s elite fighting force, the Imperial Guard, or to wear the cross of the Legion of Honor was the highest possible honor. Thus, Napoleon successfully used personal honor as a means of instilling loyalty within each soldier, to his country and his Emperor.

The composition of the French army at the turn of the nineteenth century changed dramatically from what it had been just a few years previously. Following the French Revolution, the tools of war evolved from the traditional king’s army into a “popular conscript army” where men were conscripted to fight in an army of the people: war became the concern of the French people as a whole. The process of conscription allowed enormous French armies to form, and forced other major powers to increase the size of their forces in return; between 1800 and 1814, Napoleon raised two million soldiers through conscription. The procedure of conscription led to the professionalization of the French army; John Lynn explains that, “Time in service also helped to foster this sense of isolation [from the French civil community] by creating a new professionalism. The conscript of 1793, still a civilian at heart, had become a

\[14\] Lynn, Battle, 184.
\[15\] Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor,” 158.
professional soldier by 1797…”16 These professional soldiers increased the overall efficacy of Napoleon’s army.

In contrast to the French army, the British army did not have the same process of conscription; it relied on the recruitment of volunteers, seduced with promises of money, glory, and adventure. Such was the success of the French conscription process that the British had to resort to heavy recruitment in order to raise the numbers that would be necessary to oppose the French forces. Often the army tried to persuade militiamen, originally intended for home defense, to join the regular army. This provided an extra 74,000 British troops between 1807 and 1812.17 However, these numbers still needed the fortification of foreign troops; by 1813, 52,000 men, one-fifth of the total army, were foreign troops.18 The difficulties of recruitment, foot soldiers usually drawn from the lowest level of society, and the large presence of foreign troops, hindered to a certain extent the nationalist sentiments that pervaded the French army. Nevertheless, Wellington still capitalized on the principles of Military Romanticism, by taking the individual soldiers’ needs into account. According to one historian, Wellington maintained order by, “satisfying the troops’ basic needs, such as clothing, shelter, adequate medical care, and regular pay and rations.”19 He treated his soldiers as individuals, despite their humble and often despicable backgrounds, and expected their loyalty and obedience in return.

The newfound focus on the merit of army officers implied a level of general scrutiny to which officers were not subjected before the late eighteenth century military

16 Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor,” 159-160.
reforms. The focus on the individual in the army introduced the idea that an officer should possess and demonstrate the qualities he seeks to inspire in his men. For example, during Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign in 1799, disease wrought havoc on his army. In order to provide for the ill and wounded, he ordered that the horses and vehicles of transport be left behind and that everyone should march on foot. When an equerry, assuming that Napoleon had excluded himself from this order, asked the general which horse should be kept for him, “[Napoleon] struck the equerry across the face with a horse-whip, and shouted: ‘Everybody is to go on foot! I shall be the first to go on foot! What? You don’t know what an order is? Get out!’” He would not allow himself the luxury of a horse when his soldiers trudged along in misery in the sweltering desert heat. Shared discomfort created a bond between an officer and his soldiers; the men felt that they could relate to their commanding officer through such a gesture, quite a progressive step from the rigid lines of distinction between the traditional aristocratic officer and common foot soldier.

Military competence, sound judgment, and self-confidence became essential to the officer chosen based on his merit. Both Napoleon and Wellington were widely respected for their strategic and tactical competence; their men respected them because of their merit, not as a result of an archaic practice of birthright. In fact, neither man came from the top of the social elite, Napoleon being the son of a humble Corsican lawyer, and Wellington the third son of an Irish lord. Wellington’s ability to inspire his men was uncanny. In 1811, while commanding the British army in Spain before the battle of Fuentes d’Onoro, Wellington had been called to Marshal Beresford’s Corps at Badajoz.

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Rifleman Kincaid remarked that, “as a general action seemed now to be inevitable, we anxiously longed for the return of Lord Wellington... as we would rather see his long nose in the fight than a reinforcement of ten thousand men any day.”21 Merit-based officer selection produced two commanders, distinguished solely for their personal abilities to command.

The duty of a commander centered around ingenuity and creativity on the battlefield. If he did not have a thorough understanding battlefield and the relative strengths of the two armies, then he could not hope to formulate a successful battle plan. Once he carefully developed a plan of action suitable to his forces and to the specific nature of the terrain, he needed to resign himself to the possibility that his plan would likely change throughout the course of the battle, based on enemy actions. A good general should not stubbornly adhere to his original plan in the event that the enemy would do something unexpected which refuted it. S.L.A. Marshall, viewing this from a more modern perspective, claimed that, “the test of fitness to command is the ability to think clearly in the face of unexpected contingency or opportunity. Improvisation is of the essence of initiative in all combat just as initiative is the outward showing of the power of decision.”22 If a leader has the ability to improvise logical battle plans, adapting them to the movements of the enemy troops, he can efficiently control the battle and will not become bewildered when the events of the battle do not fit perfectly with his original conception. Battles usually do not follow a leader’s original plan because it is the enemy leader’s responsibility to elude him and engage in the unexpected. Thus it is the leader’s

first imperative during a battle to try to anticipate the enemy’s actions as they change continuously.

Focusing on the individual rather than the military unit as an impartial whole did not mean that the military unit somehow lost importance; rather, the significance of the military unit increased in importance, because it was composed of individuals, holding one another accountable. Napoleon encouraged the individual soldier to embrace his primary unit identity. He established the ordinaire, or primary group to instill the group mentality in his men; each ordinaire of about fifteen men had an officer, the chef d’ordinaire, who shared in the daily lives of his men, working, eating, and sleeping together.23 This group solidarity continues to be relevant in the armed forces in modern warfare; Marshall claims that a soldier would rather go unarmed into battle with a group of his comrades than to go into battle alone but armed with the most advanced weapons.24 From a psychological standpoint, the group dynamic gives man confidence; “the pack is attacking and the problem of individual security does not arise.”25 The soldier feels that he is a part of a greater force, and becomes less intimidated facing the large enemy force than he would be with the mindset of a single soldier up against an enemy army.

A greater sense of identification of the individual soldier with his unit had also been made possible by the development of uniforms. The standardization of uniforms and weapons was a relatively recent occurrence; uniforms in the French army had only

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23 Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor,” 163.
24 Marshall, Men Against Fire, 43.
been made compulsory for officers in 1682, and for men of the ranks later on. The distinction of one unit from another through insignia and colors as Christy Pichichero observed, began to play a significant role in group identity. Having distinguishing regimental colors, “[made] the actions of a regiment visible to all others on a battlefield, evoking praise and emulation of a regiment that fought courageously and shame and condemnation for a regiment that cowered or fled from combat.” Napoleon used regimental colors to empower his soldiers with pride for their units, recording the distinguishing feats and battles of the unit on its banner. The flags, and the famous golden eagles attached to their flag poles, became a symbol that directly linked military units to their Emperor; in his speech during the presentation of these colors at a flag ceremony in 1804, Napoleon proclaimed: “Soldiers, here are your flags. These eagles will always serve as your rallying point. They will go everywhere your Emperor will judge necessary for the defense of the throne and his people. You swear to sacrifice your like to defend them and to maintain them constantly by your courage on the road to victory; swear it!” Group identification increased a soldier’s incentive to do well in battle, both to uphold his unit’s honor and for fear of disappointing his fellow soldiers. In some cases group identity became a part of each soldier’s physical person through copper legion plates attached to ones uniform or regiment numbers tattooed to each soldier’s

28 Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor,” 165.
right hand, starting with the leadership and moving down the ranks. These symbols provided a tangible means of binding soldiers to one another and to their Emperor, greatly increasing their sense of group identity. The sense of *esprit de corps* produced by training day after day with the same group of men becomes extremely important in the face of battle, when the men in one’s unit are the means by which a soldier can stay alive.

In terms of general battlefield command, a leader must have a certain organizational competence. He must be able to deploy his forces to maximize their efficiency, using their potential to the greatest advantage and reinforcing areas of weakness. A leader must avoid leaving units exposed and vulnerable by protecting them with features of the terrain, deploying into stronger formations, or reinforcing them with other types of troops. Infantry protected by cavalry or artillery will feel more confident facing the enemy than would infantry alone, without other types of troops to protect them. If there is a particularly weak position in a battlefield, due to topography or proximity to the enemy, then the deployment of veteran troops in the weak location, rather than inexperienced ones can prevent a possible panic situation; veteran troops are less likely to be scared away by the trials of battle in a difficult strategic position. Veterans are a useful asset on a battlefield because they are living proof for inexperienced soldiers that men actually survive battles, but even their strength and vitality has limits, so a leader must have a supply of fresh reserve troops waiting to relieve them. The front lines need to continue to fight effectively throughout the course of the battle, so rotating fresh troops in to relieve the exhausted men in the thick of the action is important to

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ensure maximum efficiency and to preserve the morale and emotional stability of one’s troops.

In order to guarantee that his orders are carried out efficiently, a general must have a firm command over his subordinates. He needs to possess fast, calculated decision-making skills in order to maintain control over the different aspects of a battle. A leader should be firm in his resolve, but not so much so that he follows through on a decision after it has ceased to be beneficial to the overall mission. He must follow his intuition, which if sound, will prevent cognitive dissonance, or “the inability to cope with information, knowledge, or beliefs which conflict with a decision already made and thus recognize that a situation has changed, that a plan or course of action may no longer be valid.”31 It is necessary that a leader be able to distinguish when a plan has ceased to be effectual; faulty tactics lead to defeat. Once a decision has been reached, a leader needs to take action quickly by giving his subordinates clear instructions to follow. Battles are confusing; with all of the different troop movements through the noise and the smoke, it is difficult to know what to do without clear, concise orders. A leader’s instructions must be brief, clear and to the point in order to reduce the possibility of miscommunication, which could lead to a unit’s destruction.

In battle, a leader needed to achieve the primary objective, however, in the spirit of Military Romanticism, he also had an obligation to look out for the welfare of his men. The rotation of reserve troops to the front lines helped to alleviate the strains of battle and prevent irreparable damage to morale from leaving troops in the line of fire too long. Nineteenth century battles typically concentrated forces within the space of a few miles.

Units lined up near one another and the whole battle could be surveyed by a man on horseback relatively easily. Thus, a general could send aide-de-camps anywhere on the battlefield in a matter of minutes. In this manner he could efficiently move reserves in to relieve his troops, while still overseeing the main action in the front. It is crucial that a leader be able to survey the entire battlefield to determine when replacements are necessary and where the relief is most needed. A well timed relief force can define victory and defeat. Napoleon knew better than most the powerful influence that morale has on soldiers’ performance in battle. In an 1808 report on the situation in Spain, Napoleon wrote: “In war, three quarters are the affairs of morale, the balance of tangible forces counts only for the remaining quarter.”\footnote{Napoleon Bonaparte, \textit{Napoleon on the Art of War}, ed. and trans Jay Luvaas (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 71.} If one has an enormous force which is easily intimidated and unmotivated it can easily be defeated by a smaller, more determined force. To a certain extent, the men’s morale dictates their performance in battle, thus it is crucial that a commander maintain positive morale in his troops to ensure an effective fighting force.

A commander asserts control over a battle by ensuring that his entire army can feel his influence. Napoleon himself once stated that, “in an army corps the eye of the commander must remedy everything. Captains and officers, whatever their merits might be in other respects, are constantly in a state of carelessness if the presence of the commander does not continually make itself felt.”\footnote{“A la guerre, les trois quarts sont des affaires morales ; la balance des forces réelles n’est que pour un autre part.” Napoléon Bonaparte, “Observations sur les affaires d’Espagne,” August 27, 1808, No.14276, \textit{Correspondance de Napoléon 1er} 17 (Paris : Henri Plon et J. Dumaine, 1865), 469-472, 472.} A leader’s duty within battle is to provide the structure and clarity through his orders and his diligence so that his troops do
not feel lost or isolated amid the confusion and destruction. The smoke of a battle makes it difficult for soldiers to see the other men in their own units, so a battle is sometimes heard and felt more than seen; it is “a fog for the men who fight.”

Samuel Hays asserts that, “the soldier’s confidence that his leaders are tactically proficient and combat-wise, makes it easier for him to advance toward the unknown.” Thus it is important for a leader to make his presence known to his men and to assure them that he is competent and working in their best interests. Wellington, whose mere presence on a battlefield inspired his men so much, was sorely missed when he was forced to leave his troops under the command of a lesser general. In such a situation in 1811, Wellington had been called to Badajoz. Edward Pakenham, stationed at Alamada, wrote that: “In Almaida the Enemy have left a Garrison, and they will attempt to relieve it; we shall therefore soon have some work, and I sincerely trust the intrepidity of our troops may in some small degree make up for the incalculable loss of our Leader.”

If Wellington directed a battle, his men felt more confident in its outcome, by his presence alone; without him, they felt uneasy. A commander is the great mover in battle; given the size and style of nineteenth century battles, he should direct the battle from the forefront. Napoleon, particularly in his earlier years, maintained a tight control over his battles and ensured that his presence could be felt by every man on the battlefield. Jonathon Riley attests that, “There is no doubt that his personal presence was a huge force multiplier…French troops took heart,
and their enemies despaired.”

Napoleon’s troops took comfort in his unprecedented success as a commander; they felt secure, knowing that he led them into battle, personally. A leader’s good reputation will be an advantage, but it must be reinforced on the field through clear, well-informed orders and active decision making.

For men to have faith in their commander, he must display courage, fortitude and levelheadedness in the face of danger. General Sherman defined true courage as, “a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger, and a mental willingness to incur it…”

If a commander keeps a cool head during a battle, this sense of calm and control will trickle down through the ranks; if a commander openly displays fear or panic about a situation, those emotions will also reach the men, who will assume that their commander’s panic is an indication of incompetent leadership, dangerous for the soldiers it affects. A commander must be free to move around a battlefield, willing to accept the possibility of personal danger in the line of duty. During the battle of Friedland in 1807, Napoleon exemplified the courage he desired to elicit in his men; “Napoleon personally directed the battle. When a bomb sped by his head and a soldier standing beside him ducked, the Emperor, who had remained immobile during the flight of the projectile, turned to him and said: ‘If that bomb had been predestined for you, you could have hidden a hundred feet underground and it would have still got you.’”

At the battle of Assaye in India, 1803, Wellington displayed a similar fortitude. Colin Campbell of the 78th wrote: “The General was in the thick of the action the whole time…I never saw a man so cool and collected as he was…though I can assure you, till our troops got the orders to advance the

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37 Riley, *Napoleon as a General*, 85.
fate of the day seemed doubtful…” In order to be in a position from which he can properly direct all the elements of the battle at any given time, a commander must be willing to incur a degree of personal danger. The fortification of morale achieved by a commander’s personal attention is invaluable to his men’s confidence and battle efficacy. As long as the commander can continue to conduct the battle he should encourage his men as much as possible, without taking foolish risks. Personal leadership in combat allows a commander to relate to his men and allows them to relate to him as well. They feel secure knowing that they are being led by a competent man who would not deploy them in perilous positions where he would not dare tread himself.

The military reform of the late eighteenth century paved the way for Napoleon and Wellington to develop unprecedented reputations as military commanders. The new focus on the psychological elements of battle and their implications when considering the morale of the individual soldier created a welcoming environment for the strong personal leadership of these two commanders. In their military careers before Waterloo, both generals displayed an acceptance of personal danger in order to effectively manage a battle and to inspire their troops. Their mere presence on a battlefield could induce men to face the enemy, despite their fears. Their personal leadership in battle played an important role in their victories; with the newfound emphasis on psychology and the individual brought about by the late eighteenth century military reforms, one might

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wonder if the victories of Napoleon and Wellington could have been achieved under the command of other, less diligent leaders.

Earlier Careers: Austerlitz and Salamanca

In their earlier careers, both Napoleon and Wellington proved their worth as battlefield commanders, tacticians, strategists, and effective leaders. Napoleon fought the battle of Austerlitz (1805), one of his most definitive battles, with finesse and precision; he lured the Russian army into his trap and equalized their superior numbers through a cunning use of deception and misleading terrain features. Furthermore, his victory at Austerlitz came at the opportune moment for a heavily indebted France. Wellington’s victory at Salamanca in 1812, surprised the French Armée du Portugal; its marshal, Marmont, assumed that Wellington, famous for his skill in defensive battle, would not risk an offensive attack, particularly given the strong French presence elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula. However, when the opportunity presented itself, Wellington did not hesitate to seize it and deal a harsh blow to the French forces, shifting the line of fire from the outskirts of Portugal deep into the Spanish countryside.

Comparing the combat effectiveness of these two great commanders in their earlier careers—at Austerlitz and Salamanca—illuminates central aspects of their skill as leaders and will put the later battle of Waterloo into a larger perspective.

Napoleon: The Battle of Austerlitz, December 2, 1805
The Battle of Austerlitz, was one of Napoleon’s most dramatic victories, using his small army to defeat an enemy almost twice its size. Napoleon fought Austerlitz with the artistry of an experienced master of warfare, commanding his troops efficiently and effectively. The battle was one of the most decisive victories of the Napoleonic Wars. It could not have happened at a better time, because, due to the enormous French debt from Napoleon’s earlier campaigns, only a decisive victory could save France from utter ruin. The French army was in a shabby state, in desperate need of fresh supplies, food, horses, wagons, shoes, and winter clothes if it was to go on campaign again, and his soldiers had not been paid in months. France was not in a state to bear the financial burden of another campaign. One historian claims that, “In any event, one thing was certainly clear: The French people were insistent on peace, now. If [Napoleon] was to wage war, it would have to be brief and brilliant.” With the urgency of an absolute victory ever present in his mind, Napoleon moved into the German states to oppose the Allied army of the Third Coalition, which had been formed to prevent his imperial expansion. The Allied army, comprised of 226,000 Russian and Austrian soldiers, significantly outnumbered Napoleon’s maximum force of 152,000. With such a staggering disparity in numbers, Napoleon needed to try to attack the different forces of the Allied army separately, before they had a chance to combine to outnumber him. In an address to the Grande Armée from his headquarters at Augsburg on October 23, Napoleon explained, “soldiers, we have difficult marches yet before us, fatigue and hardships of all kinds. Whatever

41 For a map of the battlefield of Austerlitz, see Map 1 in the Appendix, p.81.  
43 The Third Coalition, comprised of Russia, Austria, Britain, Sweden, and some smaller German states, was signed into being in April, 1805.  
44 Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 403.
obstacles may confront us, we shall overcome them, and we shall not rest until we have planted our eagles upon the territory of our enemies.”45 Despite the hardships of the campaign, his men still trusted their commander to lead them to victory, because they respected his reputation for excellence.

At the battle of Austerlitz, Napoleon proved his tactical genius. He realized that, with the vast numbers of Allied soldiers available to oppose him, he needed to fight a decisive battle quickly, before another 80,000 troops under the command of Archduke Charles could march up from Italy to reinforce the 86,000 already under the personal command of Tsar Alexander.46 In addition to the pressure of provoking battle before his opposition gathered reinforcements, the supplies that sustained his army were rapidly depleting. Napoleon chose to regroup his forces near the city of Brünn, 60 miles north of Vienna, in present day Czech Republic. Reconnaissance of the area revealed a terrain naturally formed for defensive battle. Although the French tended to favor offensive battles, because they believed that offensive fighting had a better effect on morale, in this case, Napoleon saw an opportunity to lure the Allied army into a trap, to end his brief campaign in one sudden, virulent blow. He chose an area between Brünn and the town of Austerlitz, twelve miles to the east. Between these two towns lies the Goldbach brook, which flows through a deep, narrow valley in a heavily wooded area surrounded by small rivulets and high, rocky hills. The main road connecting Brünn and Vienna lies to the west of the Goldbach brook, and the road connecting Brünn to Olmütz forms the northern border of the battlefield. The large plateau of Pratzen lies to the east of the hills.

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45 Schom, Napoleon Bonaparte, 402.
towns of Sokolnitz and Tellnitz and the frozen ponds of Satschan and Menitz formed the southernmost boundary of the battlefield.\textsuperscript{47} This location, while less than ideal for massive troop movement, is perfectly suited for close combat fighting. Napoleon developed his battle plan with the object of luring the Austro-Russian army into close contact battle, which would greatly reduce the advantage of their greater numbers. He began by deceiving the Allies as to the true strength and morale of the French army to urge them onto the offensive. Philippe-Paul Ségur, one of Napoleon’s aides de camp, wrote that on the night of December 1, “The Emperor…ordered Murat to ride out with some cavalry, to act anxious and hesitant, and then break away as suddenly, as if afraid, in order to further inflate the assumption of the enemy.”\textsuperscript{48} This display of “weakness” on the night before the battle lulled the Allied leadership into a false sense of security. In a display of loyalty and support for their emperor, the French soldiers lit small fires in his honor as he surveyed his lines the night before the battle. Ségur remarks that, “The Russians imagined that we were burning our shelters, they thought that we were going to retreat; their presumption was strengthened.”\textsuperscript{49} Ironically, the display of French pride and morale gave the Allies the exact opposite impression. Instead of perceiving the French soldiers as confident, enthusiastic adversaries, they assumed that they were close to capitulating.

\textsuperscript{49} « Les Russes… s’imaginèrent que nous brûlions nos abris, ils crurent que nous allions nous retirer ; leur présomption s’en augmenta ! » Ségur, \textit{Histoire et Mémoires}, 462.
Napoleon engineered this façade of the French army in order to ensure that the Allies would feel overly confident in their attack. Although the Allied army outnumbered his own, Napoleon planned to use the terrain around the Goldbach brook to his advantage. If he could ensure that the Allies would be obliged to fight in the narrow, wooded, defiles surrounding the Goldbach brook then he would have both, “economy of force and…local numerical superiority” by forcing the enemy to fight in smaller units, which his forces would be able to fight at even odds.  

On November 30, Napoleon surveyed the terrain from the heights of Pratzen. Ségur recalls that the emperor remarked, “Master of this good position [the Pratzen Plateau] …I could stop the Russians there; but then I would have nothing but an ordinary battle, whereas, by abandoning it to them and retiring my right, if they dare to descend from those heights to envelop me, they would be lost without recourse.”

The Pratzen Heights offered an enticing strategic position. Although Napoleon’s army probably could have defended the heights with ease, Napoleon knew that, by leaving them exposed, the Allies would assume that he did not have the strength for battle. They would be tempted to seize the Heights, then try to attack the French right wing or out flank them. With this in mind, Napoleon decided to deploy the majority of his forces west of the Goldbach brook, leaving only Soult’s and Murat’s corps as “bait” on his right wing, supported by Davout. Napoleon planned to wait until the enemy had committed to attacking his right wing. Then he would send in

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51 « Maître de cette belle position [le plateau de Pratzen]… j’y pourrais arrêter les Russes ; mais alors je n’aurais qu’une bataille ordinaire, tandis que, en la leur abandonnant et retirant ma droite, s’ils osent descendre de ces hauteurs pour m’envelopper, ils seront perdus sans ressources ! » Ségur, *Histoires et Mémoires*, 2:451-452.
Davout to defend his right while Lannes’ and Bernadotte’s corps attacked the Allied army from the rear, with his signature *manoeuvre sur les derrières*. The Allied plan of attack, developed by General Kutuzov’s Chief of Staff, Franz Ritter von Weyrother, proved to be exactly as Napoleon had predicted: “The Allies would cross the Goldbach in force south of the French right, turn north to envelop the French, and cut the Brünn-Vienna road. A secondary attack would hold the French left in place.”

Napoleon’s exposed right wing proved irresistible to the confident Allies. Robert Goetz credits much to the success of the battle to Napoleon’s personal abilities, explaining that, “his planning from the outset was designed to allow reaction to enemy operations based on a range of possible situations. These plans evolved with each report that arrived, and Napoleon modified them several times throughout the night before the battle.” He had considered all of the possibilities of Allied movement, and devised that they would not be able to resist the opportunity to attack such a “weak” right wing.

Napoleon’s planning achieved such decisive results because he formed it based on a wealth of information, gleaned through personal reconnaissance. As was his custom, Napoleon spent the days leading up to the battle surveying the terrain around the Goldbach and leading reconnaissance missions all along the prospective combat lines. He observed the natural defenses of the terrain and determined how he could use them to his advantage. Leaders who do not take the time to reconnoiter a battlefield personally cannot possibly produce battle plans that manipulate the natural topographic elements to their fullest potential. Generals must have a thorough knowledge of the height and texture of the ground and the location of foliage and waterways in a battlefield, in order

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to plan for the inevitable complications that they produce. The Baron de Marbot recalled Napoleon’s actions on the day preceding the battle:

Napoleon left Brünn early in the morning, spent the whole day inspecting the positions, and in the evening fixed his head-quarters in rear of the French centre, at a point whence the view took in the bivouacs of both sides, as well as the ground which was to be their field of battle the next day. There was no other building in the place than a poor barn. The Emperors tables and maps were placed there, and he established himself in person by an immense fire, surrounded by his numerous staff and his guard.  

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Napoleon needed a central location from which he could direct the battle. As always, he prepared meticulously beforehand; “Every day he rides across his chosen battlefield, he reviews the Imperial Guard, the grenadiers, Suchet’s division, Nansouty’s cuirassiers and the artillery. He passes through the ranks, opens satchels and ammunition crates and engages soldiers and officers.”  

55 Preparation for the battle depended on Napoleon’s attention to detail. The events of a battle are never exactly what one expects, so one must possess a thorough knowledge of one’s resources and surroundings. If a general knows the exact condition of his troops and the terrain, then whatever unknown variables the enemy throws at him, he will at least have a strong foundation of information concerning his own abilities. Napoleon’s preparation for the battle was so detailed that General Savary remarked that, “he knew his field as well as the neighborhoods of Paris.”  

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Napoleon’s dedication to his battle preparations allowed him to develop a risky, yet effective, plan to trap the Allied army.

In addition to his meticulous battle preparation, Napoleon produced successful results by inspiring his men with passion for their country, their emperor, and their mission. The night of December 1, 1805, the eve of the battle of Austerlitz, Napoleon rode along his entire defensive line. The Baron de Marbot described the spontaneous eruption of pride and support for the Emperor:

The troops, seeing a group of horsemen thus lighted come towards them, had no difficulty in recognizing the imperial staff, and in an instant, as if by enchantment, we could see along the whole line all our bivouac fires lighted up by thousands of torches in the hands of the soldiers. The cheers with which, in their enthusiasm, they saluted Napoleon, were all the more animated for the fact that the morrow was the anniversary of his coronation, and the coincidence seemed of good omen.57

The morale all along the French line was insurmountable. The soldiers, even in their exhaustion after a day of battle preparation, respected their commander so much that they willingly burned their mattress straw to light the path along his rounds. The powerful spectacle struck Jean-Baptiste Barrés as well: “Men followed him with burning torches to light his path. As his inspection was prolonged and extended the number of torches increased; soldiers following him shouting ‘Vive l’Empereur.’ These cries of love and enthusiasm spread in all directions like an electric fire.”58 This display of wild enthusiasm is one of the aspects of the battle of Austerlitz that almost every chronicler mentions, such was its impact on the soldiers involved.

57 Marbot, The Memoirs of Baron de Marbot, 197.
In an official proclamation to his army on the eve of the battle, Napoleon offered additional words of encouragement and inspiration:

Soldiers, I will personally direct all of your battalions; I will remain far from the line of fire, if, with your customary bravery you cause disorder and confusion in the enemy ranks; but, should victory be in doubt even for a moment, you will see your Emperor expose himself to the first volleys, because victory cannot be hesitant, on this day especially when the honor of the French infantry is at stake, which matters so much to the honor of the whole nation.59

Napoleon inspired the men to work twice as hard by explaining that he intended to remain safely outside the line of fire unless he had any doubt of victory. They knew that as long as they fought their emperor would remain out of harm’s way. If they failed to do so, then they know that their emperor would be ready and willing to risk his life for the sake of his country.

The proclamation illustrates the fine line that a general must walk between directional and participatory leadership. On the one hand, he needs to remain safe so that he can continue to command the battle—losing one’s commander in the middle of a battle can cause tremendous delays and confusion that can prove to be fatal. On the other hand, a commander must do everything in his power to ensure that his army can function and fight properly—if the soldiers’ morale is low, a commander can take a more personal role in the leadership of the battle, risking possible bodily harm. During the battle, Napoleon displayed personal fortitude in precarious situations as a source of inspiration

59 « Soldats, je dirigerai moi-même tous vos bataillons ; je me tiendrai loin du feu, si, avec votre bravoure accoutumée vous portez le désordre et la confusion dans les rangs ennemis ; mais, si la victoire était un moment incertaine, vous verriez votre Empereur s’exposer aux premiers coups, car la victoire ne saurait hésiter, dans cette journée surtout où il y va de l’honneur de l’infanterie française, qui importe tant à l’honneur de toute la nation. » Napoléon Bonaparte à l’Armée, December 1, 1805, No. 9533, Correspondance, 11:440-441.
for his men. Barrès recalled a speech that Napoleon made to his battalion upon reaching the Pratzen Heights; Napoleon encouraged them, declaring, “Chasseurs, my Horse Guards have just routed the Russian Imperial Guard. Colonels flags, guns, all have been taken. Nothing could resist their intrepid valour. You will imitate them.”

Napoleon emboldened Barrès battalion to follow in the magnificent wake of the Horse Guards. He posed a challenge to the reserves and by giving them a focused task—that of matching the valiant efforts of the Horse Guards—they had less time to become nervous about the task which lay ahead. Napoleon emphasized the positive efforts of the Horse Guards, so that the Chasseurs could avoid mass fear which could escalate to panic. Although Napoleon did not expose himself to danger at Austerlitz, he played an active role in the battle and maintained high morale from a safe distance, which, given the brilliance of his tactical maneuvers and the already high morale of his army, was all that was required of him. He displayed a healthy balance between remaining safe to continue leading the battle and, having declared his intention to expose himself to danger, inspiring his men to do their duty, with the implication that this would protect their emperor.

Napoleon maintained active control over the battle of Austerlitz through his choice of the Zuran hill as a command post, after careful personal reconnaissance. From his central position atop the Zuran hill he could see the entire stretch of the battlefield, which proved essential to his battle command. When Marshal Soult appeared anxious to send his troops into the fight, “…Napoleon, calmer [than Soult], letting the enemy destroy itself, held him back still. He showed him the Pratzen: ‘How much time do you need to reach the top of that summit?—Ten Minutes, responded the marshal.—Go then,

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60 Barrès, *Memoirs of a Napoleonic Officer*, 76.
resumed the Emperor, but wait another quarter of an hour, and then the time will be right!"61 Napoleon’s calm demeanor in the face of a numerically superior army, displays a real fortitude of leadership. He could easily have panicked and ordered his forces in too soon, fearing that he might be overwhelmed if he waited too long, but his plan provided that he must wait for the Allies to fully commit themselves to his trap before his troops could advance.

Napoleon personally controlled the deployment of his troops throughout the battle. He began by ordering Vandamme’s and St Hilaire’s divisions to advance on the enemy, to force them off of the Pratzen Heights, and wedge themselves between the two wings of the Allied army. They deployed rapidly toward the plateau, “observing from his command post on the Zuran Hill, Napoleon had suddenly lost sight of Vandamme’s men as they surged over the crest of the heights…” After giving orders to many different troops, “…Napoleon and his staff and escort rode ahead of them to establish a new command post on the Stare Vinohrady from which point the entire Pratzen Heights would be visible.”62 In changing his command post to a location more suitable for managing his army on top of the Pratzen Heights, Napoleon demonstrated his will to actively construct the outcome of the battle. If he had remained on top of Zuran Hill once his army had already fought up to the Pratzen, then he would not have been able to make as informed decisions about his troop movements and the necessary employment of his reserves.

Following the French victory on the Pratzen Heights, Grand Duke Constantine’s Russian

61 «…Napoléon plus calme, laissant l’ennemi achever sa faute, le retint encore; il lui montra Pratzen: ‘Combien vous faut-il de temps, lui dit-il, pour couronner ce sommet? – Dix minutes, répondit le maréchal. –Partez donc, reprit l’Empereur; mais vous attendrez encore un quart d’heure, et alors il sera temps! ». Séguir, Histoire et Mémoires, 466.
62 Goetz, 1805, Austerlitz, 205.
Guard cavalry surprised several battalions of Vandamme’s infantry, in one of the lower areas of the terrain, invisible from Napoleon’s command post on Stare Vinohrady. Ségur remarked that, “…the combat, in the lower-lying fields, was hidden from him. The sound became so menacing, that, turning his eyes away from the decisive attack in front of him, and seeing a black mass of troops in motion behind him, he exclaimed, ‘What! Are those the Russians there?’” Even from his new vantage point on the edge of the Pratzen was difficult for Napoleon to see everything at once. However, he took precautions to avoid being caught unaware. He sent Ségur to verify that the column was French, and not Russian. Napoleon acknowledged the possibility that the small Allied victory of the Russian Guard cavalry could escalate into a larger problem, requiring a reevaluation of his plans, and ensured that such an event would not take place if he could prevent it.

Facing the unanticipated threat of the Russian Imperial Guard cavalry, Napoleon recognized the need for immediate reinforcements; Ségur wrote, “Napoleon, whose headquarters were in the center of the fighting, foiled an attempted cavalry maneuver by the Russian Imperial Guard by sending in the dependable Rapp with a couple of squadrons of chasseurs of the French Imperial Guard, as well as the Mamelukes, crushing the élite Russian cavalry.” Napoleon’s close proximity to the battle allowed him to deploy the necessary reserves quickly and effectively. After the Russian Guard cavalry broke and scattered the quatrième ligne of Vandamme’s division, Napoleon wryly declared to Rapp, the leader of his own Imperial Guard cavalry, “There is a mess there. It

63 «…le combat, dans des bas-fonds, lui était cache. Le bruit en devenait si menaçant, que, détournant les yeux de l’attaque décisive qui se préparait en face, et voyant derrière lui une masse noire de troupes en mouvement, il s’écria : ‘Hé quoi ! sont-ce donc là les Russes ?’ » Ségur, *Histoire et Mémoires*, 469.

64 Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 413.
needs to be fixed.”\textsuperscript{65} While it is important for a commander to strengthen weak positions in his line with fresh reserves, one also must be prudent in the allocation of these reserves. In his memoirs, Gouvion St Cyr remarked that Napoleon, “when the first corps had become engaged, allowed them to calmly fight on, without troubling himself about their good or bad positions, and only took good care not to yield too lightly to any requests for support on the part of their leaders.”\textsuperscript{66} In contrast to his actions at Austerlitz, Napoleon encountered this problem of expending too many reserves too early in a battle, later at Waterloo.

Ultimately, Napoleon’s active command over the battle allowed him to modify his original plans in order to benefit from every possible Allied weakness and to accurately counteract their offensive maneuvers. Despite the undisputedly decisive results of the battle, the Allied soldiers made a valiant effort. While the Allied army suffered many disadvantages, faulty leadership—Tsar Alexander having never fought a battle before—damaged morale after the Allied surrender at Ulm, and misconstrued reliance on preconceived notions of how the French army would react, these factors combined with the well-laid trap that Napoleon set for them produced disastrous effects. Despite all of their upper level structural and command problems, the Allied soldiers themselves fought well. Recalling the battle from St Helena in January 1816, Napoleon remarked that, “The Russians shewed themselves on that occasion [Austerlitz] such excellent troops as they have never appeared since; the Russian army of Austerlitz would not have lost the battle

\textsuperscript{65} « Il y a là du désordre, il faut le réparer. » Jean Rapp; quoted in Thiery, \textit{Ulm, Trafalgar, Austerlitz}, 322.
of the Moscova [Borodino].”

The overwhelming difference in the quality of leadership of the French and Allied armies was a deciding factor in the outcome of the battle. Robert Goetz explains that, “in sharp contrast to the allied army, which suffered serious problems with command cohesion from the outset, Napoleon remained in contact with his subordinate commanders throughout the battle, maintaining a firm central control and issuing clear, concise mission-oriented directives.”

Solid communication from the top down facilitates to the smooth and efficient functioning of an army.

After the Allied army began to retreat back over the frozen lakes to the south of the Goldbach brook, Napoleon ordered his Imperial Guard artillery to fire on the ice, to prevent their escape and ensure his absolute victory. The Baron de Marbot describes the horrifying scene; “[the ice] broke at countless points, and a mighty cracking was heard. The water, oozing through the fissures, soon covered the floes, and we saw thousands of Russians, with their horses, guns, and wagons, slowly settle into the depths. It was a horribly majestic spectacle which I shall never forget.”

At Austerlitz, Napoleon achieved a brilliant strategic and tactical victory, rendering the Allied army unable to continue fighting. At the end of the battle the Allies had suffered 11,000 Russian casualties and 4,000 Austrian casualties. They had lost 12,000 prisoners, 180 guns, and 45-50 colors and standards. It only cost the French 2,000 dead, 7,000 wounded, and 573 captured. A victory of such staggering proportions, particularly given how severely

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70 Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 389.
outnumbered Napoleon had been at the beginning of the battle, pays tribute to his abilities as a battlefield commander.

At Austerlitz, Napoleon achieved the decisive victory that he had so desperately needed. He ended the war against the Third Coalition in only a matter of weeks. His confidence in his own tactical abilities, active involvement in the battle, and adaptive thinking, allowed him to take advantage of every opportunity that presented itself.

Following the attack of the Russian Guard, a Russian soldier was taken prisoner. Ségur recalls his interview with Napoleon during the battle:

“In this moment…[a] young artillery officer that our chasseurs had taken prisoner, was brought before the Emperor, he struggled, he cried, he wrung his hands in despair, crying, ‘That he had lost his battery! That he was dishonored! That he would like to die!’ Napoleon, consoling him, said to him: ‘Calm yourself, young man, and know that there is never shame in being defeated by the French!’”

On that day in particular, Napoleon was right. The French army functioned as a well-oiled machine, under the vigilant gaze of its remarkable commander.

Wellington: The Battle of Salamanca, July 22, 1812

At the battle of Salamanca, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, reaffirmed his reputation as an impeccable battlefield commander. The four French armies occupying the Iberian Peninsula, outnumbered Wellington’s allied forces, approximately 230,000

71 « En ce moment…[un] jeune officier d’artillerie que nos chasseurs avaient pris, fut amené devant l’Empereur; il se débattait, il pleurait, il se tordait les mains de désespoir, s’écriant: ‘Qu’il avait perdu sa batterie! Qu’il était déshonoré! Qu’il voulait mourir!’ Napoléon en le consolant lui dit: ‘Calmez-vous, jeune homme, et sachez qu’il n’y a jamais de honte à être vaincu par des Français!’ » Ségur, Histoire et Mémoires, 471.

72 For a map of the battlefield of Salamanca, see Map 2 in the Appendix, p. 82.

73 The four French armies in the Iberian Peninsula were: Marmont’s Armée du Portugal (50,000) in northern Portugal, Soult’s Armée du Midi (60,000) covering Andalusia in the
to 70,000. Despite their superior numbers, the French armies struggled to survive in Spain, facing the ever growing threat of starvation as a result of Wellington’s scorched earth policy and fierce opposition from the Spanish people—who organized themselves into partisan resistance forces, fighting the guerrilla, or little war, using atypical tactics to resist the French intruders. Sometimes referred to as the “Spanish ulcer,” the Peninsular War (1807-1814) exerted a constant drain on French resources. Wellington, charged with the task of expelling the French from Spain, would have to provoke battle before the French had the opportunity to unite against him. Wellington needed to decide which army to fight first. Michael Glover explained that if Wellington defeated Marmont “Soult [and the Armée du Midi] would have to evacuate Andalusia or be isolated, Wellington decided to strike at the Armée d[u] Portugal. Having left 18,000 men to watch Soult from around Badajoz, he could put into the field a force of 48,000 men, including 17,000 Portuguese and 3,000 Spaniards.” However, when the two armies encountered one another around the river Duero, neither commander wanted to attack first. The two armies spent the three weeks prior to the battle marching and countermarching, each endeavoring to provoke the other to combat. Finally, on July 22, Marmont decided to attack—having seen the British baggage train moving to the rear and

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south, King Joseph’s Armée du Centre (18,000) responsible for the garrison of Madrid, and Cafarelli’s Armée du Nord (35,000) between Valladolid and Bayonne. The additional troops in the peninsula were responsible for guarding eastern Spain and provided a reserve force at Bayonne; lacking the mobility of the four main armies, they were not considered a threat to Wellington’s forces in the west. Michael Glover, Warfare in the Age of Bonaparte (London: Cassell, 1980), 132.


Wellington’s scorched earth policy ordered that nothing be left in the Spanish countryside that could sustain the French army; this included foodstuffs, water, livestock, clothing, weaponry, ammunition, and other supplies.

Glover, Warfare in the Age of Bonaparte, 132.
thinking Wellington was retreating, leaving only a strong rearguard. The battle of Salamanca proved a true test of Wellington’s personal vigilance and self-control, requiring him to wait until the opportune moment to attack or fall back.

Wellington always sought the most accurate information available before committing his army to a fight. Habitually, he did his own reconnaissance and produced his own maps. He had teams of intelligence officers and engineers, as well as the Spanish partisans, who enthusiastically passed French intelligence information to the British. Wellington’s intelligence system researched many aspects of the enemy army that other generals might consider unnecessary; for instance, “he instead on learning every detail of the location and strength of the regiments of the French, even the names of their commanding officers…he not only knew in good time when they had altered their dispositions, he was in a position to guess reasonably accurately what the changes might signify.”\(^77\) In a letter that Wellington wrote to Lord Bathurst on July 21, he revealed that his informants had determined that 10,000 to 12,000 troops from the Armée du Nord would march to Marmont’s aid and that these reinforcements were supposed to arrive within a few days.\(^78\) Wellington knew that he would have to either give battle, or retreat northward, abandoning Salamanca to the French. The battlefield—immediately south of the city of Salamanca—consists of gentle rolling slopes, ideally suited for troop movements; two isolated plateaus, the Greater and Lesser Arapiles, situated about 900 yards apart from one another mark two of the few exceptions to the generally level terrain. To the west of the two plateaus lies the village of Los Arapiles. To the north

\(^77\) Young and Lawford, Wellington’s Masterpiece, 281.

stands another hill, Teso de San Miguel. South of Los Arapiles is a long stretch of high
ground called the Monte de Azan.\textsuperscript{79} Despite the very minor slopes of the generally flat
battlefield Wellington managed to use the ground to his advantage. Glover states that,
“alone among his contemporaries, [Wellington] took care always to take advantage of the
ground to shield the tenuous line from enemy artillery and skirmishers until the last
possible moment.”\textsuperscript{80} Wellington planned meticulously for battle in preparation for the
unexpected maneuvers that the enemy would use in an attempt to fluster him.

Wellington displayed his tactical genius through a calculated control over the
battle of Salamanca. Peter Young and J.P. Lawford state that a commander’s strategic
aim, “is to bring his adversary to battle when his adversary has inferior forces and is in a
disadvantageous position. Since a competent enemy commander, by definition, will not
accept battle at a disadvantage, to achieve this aim it is normally necessary to surprise
him in a position from which retreat is militarily or politically difficult.”\textsuperscript{81} In the few
weeks leading up to the battle, both Wellington and Marmont, being competent
commanders, avoided offensive maneuvering, recognizing its disadvantage with their
nearly equal numbers. Wellington justified his decision to await a French attack:

\begin{quote}
Between the 20\textsuperscript{th} and the 22\textsuperscript{nd}, I had a favorable opportunity of
attacking the enemy, of which, however, I did not think it proper to
avail myself for the following reasons. First, …in the position which
we occupied, I considered it advantageous to be attacked....Secondly;
the operations against the forts at Salamanca took up the attention of
some of our troops; and [our] superiority was not so great as to
render an action decisive of the result of the campaign, in which we
should sustain a great loss…\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{79} Muir, Salamanca 1812, 52.
\textsuperscript{80} Glover, Warfare in the Age of Bonaparte, 141.
\textsuperscript{81} Young and Lawford, Wellington’s Masterpiece, 279.
\textsuperscript{82} Michael Glover, Wellington’s Peninsular Victories (New York: The MacMillan
Throughout his military career, Wellington maintained a reputation for being a cautious commander, preferring to allow the enemy to attack first, in order to fight a defensive battle in which he could use the terrain to its fullest advantage. Marmont knew this and, as a result, determined to attack what he thought was Wellington’s strong rear guard—in reality the bulk of Wellington’s forces in the Peninsula—never dreaming that Wellington would attack him. Such was Marmont’s confidence of success on the eve of battle, he sent instructions to his old landlord in Salamanca to have a celebratory meal prepared for him.

On July 22, south of where the city of Salamanca lies on Rio Tormes, the fighting began between French and British skirmishers around 6 a.m. By 8 a.m., the French army had occupied the Greater Arapile, just south of the Lesser Arapile, upon which Wellington had stationed his troops. He deployed his forces in an L-shape, extending to the north and west of the Lesser Arapile. He had wanted to use the Greater Arapile as an advanced post, but the French had occupied it, before he was able to perceive its true value to his defensive position, as it had appeared deceptively far away from atop the Lesser Arapile. The French deployed in a similar L-shape to the south and east of the Allies. Although he realized that he would likely be forced to retreat, leaving Salamanca to Marmont, Wellington delayed the order to retreat with the hope that an opportunity would arise of which he might take advantage. He concentrated on strengthening the area around the village of Arapiles as well as farther west, near the Zurguen River; this way he could ensure that if he did need to retreat, he would be able to protect his troops.

Marmont split his army into two wings: he deployed the right wing, led by General Foy, around Calvarrasa de Arriba, east of the Lesser Arapile, and the left wing he
placed to the south of the Greater Arapile, under the command of General Bonnet.\textsuperscript{83} Between 11:00 and 11:30 a.m., from his position on top of the Lesser Arapile, Wellington could only see a single division holding the summit of the Greater Arapile. In hopes of being able to take the hill, Wellington ordered the First Division to attack, however, once he saw the strong force concentrated behind the Greater Arapile, he was forced to call off his offensive. Rory Muir claims that the revoked attack, “reflected [Wellington’s] frustration at the thought of abandoning Salamanca without a fight, but when Beresford showed that the French behind the Greater Arapile were stronger than Wellington had realized, and hence the attack would involve more risk, he cancelled it rather than jeopardize the safety of the army.”\textsuperscript{84} Wellington chose the prudent option. Some generals make a decision and then become so committed to said action in their minds, that they become blind to all other options. In the event that the conditions that made an action advantageous in the first place cease to exist, a weak commander might be inclined to continue with a plan regardless, due to his preconceived notion of its value, even if the new information revealed that the plan could ultimately harm his overall mission.

Wellington was infamous for his calculated battlefield maneuvers, only choosing a course of action after weighing its advantages and disadvantages, and never allowing preconceived notions to cloud his judgment.

After aborting his attack on the Greater Arapile before it began, Wellington took possession of the village of Arapiles and strengthened his right wing, in the likelihood that retreat would be its only option. Marmont, seeing these movements, assumed that Wellington intended to withdraw toward the river Zurguen. In response to these

\textsuperscript{83} Young and Lawford, \textit{Wellington’s Masterpiece}, 210-212.
\textsuperscript{84} Rory Muir, \textit{Salamanca 1812} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 216.
assumptions, he ordered his left wing to extend itself westward. Maucune and
Thomière’s divisions moved in the direction of the Monte de Azan, which formed the
southern border of the L-shaped Allied position. Given that Wellington was known for
his preference of defensive battles and that he was strengthening the area that would be
his route of retreat, the last thing in the world that Marmont expected was an Allied
attack. Unfortunately, Wellington saw an opportunity to go on the offensive and did just
that. The French left had overextended itself, and Wellington seized the opportunity to
attack. Around 3:00 p.m., he ordered Pakenham’s Third Division along with Alten and
D’Urban’s cavalry—the equivalent of four infantry divisions and four cavalry brigades—
against two French infantry divisions and two weak cavalry brigades. As Pakenham’s
division attacked the French left, a British artillery shell wounded Marmont, rendering
him unserviceable for the remainder of the battle; unluckily for the French, General
Bonnet, his second in command, was also hit within minutes of taking over. It took a few
minutes for Clausel, the third in command, to be notified in order to take command, and
for those few minutes, the French army fought on, without a leader. On the British right,
Pakenham’s Third Division opposed Thomière’s division and pushed it up the heights of
Monte de Azan. At the end of this attack, both Marcune’s and Thomière’s divisions had
been shattered. Pack’s Portuguese battalion of the Fourth Division, fighting against
Bonnet’s division atop the Greater Arapile, temporarily lost order and fled, but managed
to regroup and attack again, with the support of the Sixth Division. While it would have
been advantageous for the French to retreat around 6:00 p.m., Clausel decided to gamble
everything in order to secure a French victory—in instead of withdrawing, he ordered a

85 Young and Lawford, Wellington’s Masterpiece, 224.
counterattack. This counterattack met with the full force of the British 4th, 5th and 6th divisions; Clausel advanced to a point, but his left wing got caught in the crossfire of the Allies firing from the Lesser Arapile and Teso San Miguel. Bonnet’s troops fled, exposing Clausel’s flank, to its utter ruin.

Wellington’s pursuit of the French would have been more complete, if not for two factors. First, Carlos de España had abandoned his position on the British left, the castle at Alba de Tormes, without asking for permission or even letting him know that the defense there was gone. Therefore, Wellington sent the Light Division after the French, north-east in the direction of Huerta, assuming that they would not have been able to pass by Alba de Tormes, because he presumed that España still held it. This allowed the French an advantage in their escape. Second, although he clearly won the battle, Wellington did not try to pursue the French violently. First and foremost, he needed to look out for the best interests of his army. Michael Glover asserts that, “A full-scale pursuit with his exhausted men and horses would have cost him heavy losses and he could not afford to risk his army against the Army of the North with such remnants as might be battle-worthy of Marmont’s force. Nor could he leave his communications open to the Armies of the Centre and the South.” Wellington had surprised his enemy; the master of defensive battle had gone against his normal inclinations and attacked the exposed French position. Young and Lawford praise Wellington’s tactical efforts during the battle of Salamanca, explaining that, from the beginning, he ensured that, “he could not be surprised, while by his own dispositions he ensured that his own movements would be largely concealed. He avoided that besetting sin of commanders in defense,

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86 Glover, *Wellington’s Peninsular Victories*, 89.
trying to hold too much ground. At no time was more than a third of his army tied to defending specific features.\footnote{Young and Lawford, \textit{Wellington’s Masterpiece}, 285.} Wellington did not try to overextend his army but rather he matched his orders to his army’s capabilities.

Wellington’s tactical genius lay in the malleability of his plans. He tended to react to enemy action, rather than focus on a set of predetermined objectives. In this manner he could wait until an opportunity presented itself, at which point he would pursue whatever action would ensure the greatest British gain. He fought a deliberate, methodical battle. Around midday, a force of 10,000 French troops appeared to be collecting to attack General Leith’s Fifth Division, which was deployed north of the Lesser Arapile. Sir Andrew Leith Hay wrote:

When he arrived at the ground of the 5\textsuperscript{th} division, now under arms, and perfectly prepared to receive the attack, his Lordship found the enemy in the same formation as when he first appeared opposite, but not displaying any intention of trying his fortune by crossing the ravine at that point. The commander of the forces soon became satisfied that no operation of consequence was intended against this part of the line; and he again galloped towards the right, which at that time had become the most interesting and important scene of action.\footnote{Andrew Leith Hay \textit{A Narrative of the Peninsular War} (London: John Hearne, 1850), 254-255.}

This small test of enemy intentions allowed Wellington to use reserves to strengthen other areas of his line where the attack might actually occur, instead of wasting them on an area which was unlikely to be attacked. When Marmont overextended his left wing, Wellington was able to exploit this information to his advantage:

Once Wellington decided to attack, his plan was simple, but only because his troops were already in position. Another general might have committed the army to retreat hours earlier, or been so mentally committed himself that he would have seen in Thomières’s move only a threat to his lines of communication, not an opportunity to attack. But
Wellington had his army completely in hand, ready for whatever course he might need to take: whether to resist a direct French attack, or withdraw in the evening, or suddenly assume the offensive.\textsuperscript{89}

Wellington’s flexibility of action was a major deciding factor in the victory of Salamanca. Choosing the last course of action that Clausel would have expected, enabled Wellington to turn a reluctant, embarrassing withdrawal into an overwhelming victory.

Wellington’s ability to plan according to French movements relied on his active involvement in the battle and overall awareness of the events as they took place. The information he gathered before the battle contributed to this, however, his dedication to personally ordering each of his troops movements increased efficiency and reduced the possibility of confusion or error. When he had decided to attack the French at the Greater Arapile around 11:00 a.m., he did so quickly and efficiently. Henry Campbell, commander of the First Division, explains that Wellington, “told me to move forward in two Columns up a Hill in front of our Right, where this Division then was, and attack their left, while the 4\textsuperscript{th} Division was to attack them in front, but I had hardly put the Columns in motion, before I received a Counter Order and moved back to the Ground I had before quitted.”\textsuperscript{90} The speed with which Wellington relayed both the order to attack and its revocation exhibit how personally involved he was in the battle. Without such efficient lines of communication, the First Division might have attacked regardless, ignorant of the superior number of French troops hidden by the slope of the Greater Arapile. Wellington did not allow his divisional commanders to persuade him to attack

\textsuperscript{89} Muir, \textit{Salamanca 1812}, 68.
\textsuperscript{90} ‘H.C.’ to Colonel Taylor, July 25, 1812, Hope of Luffness Papers, National Archives of Scotland GD 364/I/1224; quoted in Muir, \textit{Salamanca 1812}, 58.
prematurely. Private Wheeler recalls that Wellington waited patiently to send his troops forward, avoiding expending forces unnecessarily before they would be most effective:

Lord Wellington rode up to use, and entered into conversation with Colonel Mitchell. He waited some time anxiously looking towards the hill, as the enemy’s fire was very brisk. Colonel M—said to Lord W—that he should like to advance and drive them from the hill, but his Lordship looked as serious as a Judge going to pass sentence of death, shook his head and said it is not time yet. At length he called out ‘7th. Division, Advance’; spurred his horse, rode to our left and in a few minutes was lost in dust and smoke.91

Wellington displayed a level of control over the battle of Salamanca unrivaled by all except perhaps Napoleon himself. In a letter dated July 27, 1812, an unidentified British officer wrote that, “the great novelty of the day was the keeping of the troops so well in hand, and stopping their headlong impetuosity after each succeeding attack—The 3 divisions wheel’d round as a single company would, & the long lines were preserved most beautifully—…”92 Such a level of control over troops is remarkable, given the undeniable possibility of panic and overzealous pursuit beyond the point of constructive fighting.93 Wellington’s personal command of his troop movements allowed him to remain in control of the battle as a whole, responding to enemy actions in an efficient manner.

Wellington can be regarded as a cautious commander; he always maintained a supply of reserves and a viable escape route, in the event that he was forced to retire.

While Leith’s Fifth Division moved left to attack Maucune’s French division deployed on

93 Wellington would discover the real consequences of overzealous troops during Uxbridge’s cavalry charge at the battle of Waterloo.
the heights of Monte de Azan to oppose, Wellington deployed the Seventh Division to occupy the position that the Fifth division had vacated in order to ensure that he had reserves available in case the troops on Monte de Azan proved to be stronger than he had thought.\textsuperscript{94} In contrast to Wellington’s effective deployment of reserves, Marmont did not consider the possibility of a British attack on his left. Sir Thomas Picton states that, “Marmont, by extending his left, was in hopes of being enabled to turn the right of the allies; but as this was done without a corresponding movement of the remainder of the French army, but by the extension of the line, it was a necessary consequence that the whole was comparatively weakened.”\textsuperscript{95} This fatal mistake on Marmont’s part proved to be his undoing. Wellington broke the French left with a concentrated force, reinforced with reserves ready to follow their comrades to crush the weakened French left. Wellington kept a strong reserve force in order to be able to strike at the opportune moment. Napier described that,

\begin{quote}
The crisis of the battle had now arrived, and the victory was for the general who had the strongest reserves in hand. Wellington, who was seen that day at every point of the field exactly when his presence was most required, immediately brought up from the second line the sixth division, and its charge was rough, strong, and successful.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Wellington’s close watch over his army allowed him to move in reserves to add enough pressure to finish his successful attack.

In addition to his overall effectiveness as a tactical battlefield commander, Wellington served as a constant source of inspiration for his troops. His calm, collected

\textsuperscript{94} Muir, \textit{Salamanca 1812}, 110.
\textsuperscript{96} W.F.P. Napier, \textit{History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France from A.D. 1807 to A.D. 1814} (New York: W.J. Widdleton, 1863), 4:60-61.
demeanor instilled confidence in his soldiers, giving them the will to fight well to please their commander and uphold the honor of their unit and their country. William Grattan, remarks that, on the day of the battle,

…every eye was turned towards him [Wellington]. He looked paler than usual, but notwithstanding the sudden change he had just made in the disposition of his army, he was quite unruffled in his manner, and as calm as if the battle about to be fought was nothing more than an ordinary assemblage of the troops for a field-day. His words were few and his orders brief…  

Wellington always displayed an unparalleled confidence in his actions and decisions. While never taking the decisions of war lightly, Wellington never allowed himself to appear concerned about a battle. His self-assurance commanded respect from all who served or opposed him. While visiting the battlefield in October of 1812, William Morris recounts:

I was told an Anecdote of Lord Wellington that during the engagement as he passed by his wounded men he exclaimed [“]now do my brave fellows those that can hold up your heads & see what a precious beating we are giving them[.”] this I had from [a] Soldier who was wounded in the battle, his [Lord]ship is spoke of by the Soldier in Terms of the greates[t] admiration for his ability as a commander and cool determined bravery.

After offering their lives and limbs to the British Army, Wellington wanted his soldiers to know that they did not fight in vain. He offered hope and encouragement, even to the wounded, who would not be able to serve him further in the present conflict. Wellington embraced both the tactical and human aspects of a leader; Rory Muir attests that, “throughout the battle he was almost invariably at the vital point, personally giving his subordinates clear, concise orders which left no room for misunderstanding. Every

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98 Letter from William Morris, October 5, 1815; quoted in Ufindell, *The National Army Museum Book of Wellington’s Armies*, 133.
Anglo-Portuguese division saw him in turn during the battle, and his presence and alertness strengthened the confidence of the troops.”  A commander who embodies a strong presence on a battlefield will spread self-assurance to his troops; if the soldiers see him actively involved in the battle, they feel more secure; they can believe that their commander would only send them in to fight for a specific strategic objective, with a reasonably strong assurance that they would survive the ordeal.

Compared with the French army, suffering from constant supply shortages, Wellington supplied his army well and maintained high morale. After three weeks of marching and countermarching, Wellington’s army was itching to prove itself. Captain John Kincaid of the Light Division exclaimed that:

> There was assuredly never an army so anxious as ours was to be brought into action on this occasion. They were a magnificent body of well-tried soldiers, highly equipped and in the highest health and spirits, with the most devoted confidence in their leader and an invincible confidence in themselves. The retreat of the four preceding days had annoyed us beyond measure, for we believed that we were nearly equal to the enemy in point of numbers and the idea of retiring before an equal number of any troops in the world was not to be endured with common patience.

Such morale is invaluable in the successful fighting of a battle. The soldiers’ will to fight propels them forward in battle, producing a more effective fighting force overall. Some of the reserve soldiers who saw less action in the battle were disappointed that they did not have more of a chance to prove themselves against the French. Edward Costello remarks that, “When the ‘glad sounds of victory’ reached us, a general feeling of pleasure pervaded in our ranks, mixed perhaps with some regret that we had not take a more active share in the battle. But all we could do we did, which was to pepper the French

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well in their hurried retreat from the field.”101 Wellington’s abilities as a commander greatly influenced the high morale of his army, to the point that soldiers were disappointed to be assigned as reserve troops, despite possible death or mangling.

Throughout the course of the battle Wellington constantly exposed himself to enemy fire. He took the risk willingly, as one of the implied dangers of performing his duty to its fullest capacity. In a letter from July 23, 1812, Edward Pakenham wrote, “Our chief was everywhere and sadly exposed himself;—in his preservation our little prayers were heard most surely.”102 Luckily Wellington managed to avoid the enemy bullets until the end of the battle. During the Light Division’s pursuit of Foy’s division as it retreated, Napier recounts that,

After dusk the Duke rode up alone behind my regiment and I joined him; he was giving some orders when a ball passed through his left holster and struck his thigh. He put his hand to the place and his countenance changed for an instant, but only for an instant; and to my eager inquiry if he was hurt, he replied, sharply, ‘No’ and went on with his orders.103

This incident reflects Wellington’s general attitude towards battle. He never exposed his men to enemy fire while he sat back, allowing a battle to continue without him. His attentiveness in the field came at a price, which he was willing to risk for the brilliant execution of the battle. He was often criticized for exposing himself too much to enemy fire, but miraculously he always emerged unscathed.

At battle of Salamanca, Wellington proved his skill as a battlefield commander of the highest caliber. At the end of the battle, his Allied army had lost about 5,000 men,

103 Young and Lawford, *Wellington’s Masterpiece*, 270.
while the French army lost approximately 14,000 men and 20 guns. Although Wellington had successfully driven off Marmont’s Armée du Portugal, he still had three other armies in the Iberian Peninsula with which to contend—a force outnumbering his army 230,000 to 70,000; however, in fighting at Salamanca, Wellington had pushed the line of battle from the Portuguese borders into the heart of Spain. As a result of Wellington’s small army, the Emperor himself overlooked the significance of this British victory; “Napoleon…underestimated the effect of this unexpected defeat on his own troops. Already they detested service in Spain; after July 1812 they came to believe that they would be beaten by Wellington wherever and whenever he brought them to battle.” As was his usual custom, Wellington took his victory in stride. Lieutenant-General Napier remarks that,

I saw him [Wellington] late in the evening of that great day, when the advancing flashes of cannon and musketry stretching as far as the eye could command showed in the darkness how well the field was won; he was alone, the flush of victory was on his brow, and eyes were eager and watchful, but his voice was calm and even gentle. More than the rival of Marlborough, since he had defeated greater generals than Marlborough ever encountered, with a prescient pride he seemed only to accept this glory as an earnest of greater things.

Wellington’s confidence, tactical skill, and battlefield leadership produced a singular, unexpected victory. The traditionally defensive commander outwitted the overconfident Marshal Marmont, to the utter ruin of his army. Wellington engineered his victory at Salamanca with patience, strategy, and poise.

104 Young and Lawford, Wellington’s Masterpiece, 272.
105 Young and Lawford, Wellington’s Masterpiece, 278.
106 Glover, Warfare in the Age of Bonaparte, 141.
107 Napier, History of the War in the Peninsula, 83.
At the battles of Austerlitz and Salamanca, as well as many other battles throughout their earlier careers, Napoleon and Wellington displayed their irrefutable talents as battlefield commanders. While each led his army effectively and efficiently, their methods of execution differed slightly. In these two battles in particular, Wellington employed a more reactionary leadership style, focusing his movements in response to the actions of the enemy, while Napoleon actively engineered his victory, laying a trap for his enemy to fall into. These two victories each were undeniably complete; both Napoleon and Wellington had to fight craftily to compensate for their disadvantages at the beginning of the battles. Having examined the active interest and thought that Napoleon and Wellington put into the battles of Austerlitz and Salamanca, it will be easier to elucidate their similarities and differences in leadership at the battle of Waterloo, placing the two leaders in comparison with one another as well as with their own earlier battlefield command styles.

The Battle of Waterloo, June 18, 1815

Following Napoleon’s escape from the Island of Elba in the spring of 1815, the European powers feared that he would attempt to take over Europe, again. They formed a coalition to oppose Napoleon’s French army—The Seventh Coalition consisted of Great Britain and the Netherlands, Austria, Russia, and Prussia, although the Allied Anglo-Dutch army and the Prussian army were the only ones near enough to Brussels to play a part in the combat. In order to fully appreciate the roles of Napoleon and Wellington as battlefield commanders on June 18, it is first necessary to describe the events of the battle.
On June 16, 1815, two days before the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon’s army fought the Prussians at the village of Ligny. At the same time, Wellington’s Allied forces fought Marshal Ney, commanding Reille’s Second Corps, at Quatre-Bras, the junction of the Charleroi-Brussels and Nivelles-Namur roads, a few miles west of the battle of Ligny. On that day, Napoleon defeated the Prussian forces, but allowed them to retreat instead of immediately pursuing them to ensure a complete victory. Wellington and the Allies claimed victory at Quatre-Bras, but discreetly withdrew to a more advantageous position on the morning of June 17, evading a costly pursuit.

The battle of Waterloo began in front of the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge around 11:30 a.m., on Sunday, June 18, after a long, rainy night. Napoleon began the battle by ordering General Reille’s Second Corps to attack the farm of Hougoumont on the British right. Then, the French infantry of the First Corps, under the command of Count d’Erlon attacked the Allied lines from left to right in echelon as troops from both the First and Second Corps attacked the farm of La Haye Sainte, a strong defensive position in front of the Allied center. During this attack, Napoleon observed the Prussian advanced guard on his right, near Plancenoit. Wellington ordered his cavalry commander, Lord Uxbridge, to launch a massive cavalry charge, which crushed most of d’Erlon’s First Corps, rendering the survivors at least temporarily ineffective. Unfortunately for the Allies, Uxbridge’s heavy cavalry became overzealous in their attack and rode too far into French territory. The French slaughtered many of them, and without the British light
cavalry units under Vivian and Vandeleur coming to their rescue, Uxbridge’s overenthusiastic cavalry could have been completely destroyed.

Around 4:30 p.m., Marshal Ney ordered a massive French cavalry attack on the Allied infantry squares. Then, around 5:30 p.m., the first Prussian troops attacked the village of Plancenoit on the French right. These two events drained the French supply of reserves. Napoleon was forced to send most of his reserves of the Imperial Guard to fight the Prussians at Plancenoit, while Ney’s cavalry charges caused many French casualties and exhausted the energy of those who survived, without any significant gains. The French then launched two final attempts to capture Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. Hougoumont held firm, as it had throughout the day, never once being captured by the French. The French increased the pressure on La Haye Sainte and Hougoumont. While the garrison at Hougoumont held firm, the KGL riflemen fighting at La Haye Sainte, under Major Baring, defended the farm until they were reluctantly forced to surrender the position after expending their last available ammunition.

Having secured one of the two Allied strongholds, Napoleon organized his troops for a final attack; Wellington used the short pause in the fighting to strengthen his infantry lines and to reinforce his center by moving in fresh reserves. Around 7:30 p.m., Napoleon ordered his Imperial Guard to advance. As they moved towards the Allied infantry for the final attack, they struck fear into the hearts of the younger, inexperienced Allied soldiers with their discipline and untarnished reputation for victory. The infantry held firm, however, and after several half-company volleys the infamous Imperial Guard broke precedent and began to withdraw. The retreat of this previously undefeated elite

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110 Undefeated elite troops favored over others. Usually Napoleon held the Imperial Guard in reserve for his final decisive attack in a battle.
force caused a mass flight all along the French lines. With the order to advance on the Imperial Guard, Wellington eliminated Napoleon’s threat to the sovereignty of the nations of Europe.

The battle of Waterloo was the first instance in which Wellington and Napoleon met on the same battlefield. Their reputations, being the most accomplished army commanders of the time, ensured that Waterloo would be a personal battle; each leader put his skills to the test against the other. Despite their impeccable reputations, only one of them could emerge the victor.

**Napoleon: The Battle of Waterloo, June 18, 1815**

On the morning of June 18, Napoleon’s forces around Mont-Saint-Jean numbered around 74,500 men, comprised of 104 infantry battalions and 113.5 cavalry squadrons compared to Wellington’s 74,326 men, comprised of 84.5 infantry battalions and 93 cavalry squadrons.¹¹¹ The troops faced one another along the Mont-Saint-Jean Ridge. During this battle, Napoleon’s leadership style changed dramatically from what it had been at the battle of Austerlitz, and throughout his earlier career. Historians have attributed Napoleon’s loss at the battle of Waterloo to tactical problems, miscommunication, premature use of reserves, overconfidence, and an underestimation of the abilities of the enemy army. All of these elements, while independently significant to the loss of the battle, also point to a certain degree of negligence in Napoleon’s leadership. The Napoleon of Austerlitz would never have let his army operate in such a

chaotic and ineffective manner for such a long period of time; one possible explanation for this change in Napoleon’s leadership style could be his deteriorating health.

Napoleon displayed an overly confident attitude towards the battle from the start. This was foolish, considering that Wellington had a reputation for greatness, comparable to his own. At 9:00a.m. Napoleon had breakfast at the farmhouse of Caillou, with his marshals and select other officers. While discussing the forthcoming battle, Napoleon remarked that, “Out of one hundred chances, we have ninety-nine for us.”112 Such confidence was remarkable, given the unrivaled reputation of his opposing commander. General Reille, who had fought against Wellington in Spain, during the Peninsular War, gave his opinion that, “Their cavalry is not as worthy as ours; but their infantry is more formidable than one would normally think. Entrenched behind fortifications, it is dangerous by its skill of firing accurately; in the open, it remains steady, and if one overruns it, it rallies one hundred paces back and returns to the charge.”113 Napoleon dismissed this comment, regardless of its merit, stating, “because you have been beaten by Wellington, you consider him a great general. And now I tell you that Wellington is a bad general, that the English are bad troops, and that this affair is nothing more serious than eating one’s breakfast.”114 His confidence was such that he remarked, “If my orders

113 « Leur cavalerie…ne vaut point la nôtre ; mais leur infanterie est plus redoutable qu’on ne le pense généralement. Retranchée derrière les murailles, elle est dangereuse par son adresse à tirer juste ; en plaine, elle tient ferme, et si on la culbute, elle se rallie cent pas plus loin et revient à la charge. » Pontécoult, Souvenirs militaires, 253.
are executed properly, we will sleep in Brussels this evening.”¹¹⁵ The French troops reflected the confidence of their Emperor. Gustave Comte de Pontécoulant, a French artillery colonel, looking over the troops deployed for inspection, remarked: “The Army presented, at this moment, a magnificent sight; the enthusiasm and ardor of the soldiers were extreme; the hope of finally measuring themselves with the best troops of England seemed to enflame their pride again.”¹¹⁶ This splendid display of morale ensured that the French could fight to their fullest potential, unencumbered by doubts or pessimism.

Historians have debated the degree of Napoleon’s personal reconnaissance of the battlefield. Some sources claim that he rode over the terrain himself, ensuring that he had the highest quality of information.¹¹⁷ Others claim that he let his subordinates reconnoiter for him, displaying a personal change from the general he had been at Austerlitz.¹¹⁸ Regardless of who did the reconnaissance, Napoleon underestimated the strength of the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge as a position of defense. He sent General Haxo to determine if Wellington constructed fortifications, and he had found none, however, the terrain surrounding the ridge provides natural protection with its slopes. The slope of Mont-Saint-Jean is difficult to perceive from the ground, and Napoleon likely did not view it as a threat to his armies. Later, during his exile on Sainte Helena, Napoleon

¹¹⁶ « L’armée présentait, en ce moment, un magnifique coup d’œil ; l’enthousiasme et l’ardeur du soldat étaient extrêmes ; l’espoir de se mesurer enfin avec les meilleures troupe de l’Angleterre semblait enflammer encore son orgueil. » Pontécoulant, Souvenirs militaires, 261.
complained of a lack of visibility at Waterloo, perhaps to avoid criticism for not having considered the potential threat of the terrain. Wellington, however, used the slope to his great advantage, both for protecting his own troops, stationed on the reverse slope, from French artillery fire, and forcing the French infantry and cavalry to expend more energy to climb the hill to reduce their effectiveness upon reaching its summit.

The actual fighting on June 18 did not commence until 11:30 a.m. A number of factors contributed to this delayed beginning—the inclement weather of the night before, the deployment of parts of his forces too far from the battlefield, Napoleon’s overconfidence, or perhaps his diminished health. The rainfall of the previous night had left the ground around Mont-Saint-Jean extremely soft. Concerned about the difficulties that the soft ground would produce for cavalry and artillery movement, General Drouot suggested that the battle be delayed, in order to give the ground time to dry and become firmer.\(^{119}\) Waterloo scholars are uncertain whether or not a few hours would have made any significant difference in the state of the ground. However, this could not have been the only reason for delay. Many of Napoleon’s troops had bivouacked quite far from the battlefield, and took their time arriving at the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge. Colonel Trefcon of Reille’s Corps described their march from Genappe at 5:00 a.m. on the morning of the 18\(^{th}\): “En route, we received an order from the general to stop to wash ourselves and eat something. This news was welcomed with joy, because many of the soldiers were dying of hunger and because often, they do not like to fight when they are dirty. At eight o’clock we resumed our march forwards.”\(^{120}\) This account does not imply that the

\(^{119}\) Pontécoulant, *Souvenirs militaires*, 254.
\(^{120}\) « En route, nous reçûmes un ordre du major général de nous arrêter pour nous nettoyer et faire à manger. Cette nouvelle fut accueillie avec joie, car beaucoup de soldats
troops deployed farther away were overly concerned about arriving promptly to the battlefield. Judging by his pattern of delays from the previous days of the 1815 campaign, many scholars blame Napoleon, personally, for the delayed beginning of the battle of Waterloo. The battle of Ligny began late in the day on the 16\textsuperscript{th}, so that by the end of the battle, even though the Prussians had been beaten, it was too dark for the French to launch the effective, immediate pursuit which would have crushed the Prussian army entirely. Napoleon did not send Marshal Grouchy after the Prussians until the morning of the 17\textsuperscript{th}. A.F. Becke claims that this was due to Napoleon’s extreme state of fatigue as a result of his failing health; he retired to bed without giving the order for the Prussian pursuit, leaving word for Marshal Grouchy, who had come to head-quarters for orders, not to expect them until the morning.\textsuperscript{121} Napoleon earned serious criticism for the delayed Prussian pursuit, because it meant that the Prussians had the opportunity to reassemble themselves enough to fight at Waterloo two days later. The pursuit of the British on the 17\textsuperscript{th}, after the battle of Quatre-Bras was delayed as well, according to John Ropes, “the Emperor yielded to his sense of fatigue. He put off the execution of the next part of his plan. He moreover neglected to ascertain the facts of the situation, and hence was unaware, until too late, of the great opportunity then presented to him.” \textsuperscript{122} This delay was all the more remarkable, for the French did not begin their pursuit until the afternoon. Lieutenant Martin, of d’Erlon’s Corps, first to be sent towards Quatre-Bras on

mouraient de faim et parce que bien souvent, il[s] sic n’aient pas se battre quand ils sont sales. » Toussaint-Jean Trefcon, Carnet de Campagne du Colonel Trefcon 1793-1815 (Paris : André Lévi, 1914), 185.
\textsuperscript{121} A. F. Becke, Napoleon and Waterloo: The Emperor’s Campaign with the Armée du Nord 1815 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1939), 117-118.
the 17th remarked that, “having arrived in front of the position, we waited a long time for
the order to attack, which was finally given to us by Napoleon, himself. But it was still
not our turn to prove what we could do, because we found the position vacated…”123
Napoleon did not pursue the English or the Prussians as vigorously as he might have
done in his earlier career. On the 18th, Lieutenant Martin remarked that his corps, still
thirsty for battle, found itself waiting on Napoleon’s orders yet again: “Thus restored, and
the weapons cleaned, we waited with impatience for the signal to depart that we imagined
should be very soon; but, to our great surprise, the hours passed without anyone making
us change position…”124 Whether the delay of the morning of the 18th occurred as a
result of the wet terrain or to Napoleon’s overconfidence or personal health problems, it
cost him dearly later in the day. Many scholars argue that, had Napoleon been more
proactive earlier in the day, he might have been able to beat the Allied army before the
arrival of the Prussians.125

Napoleon’s mental disposition and personal health have been the subject of much
scholarly debate over the years. Some scholars argue that his health should have nothing
to do with the outcome of the battle of Waterloo. However, the number of personal
accounts of drastic changes in his demeanor and engagement in battle is too high to

123 « Arrivés devant la position, nous attendîmes longtemps l’ordre d’attaquer, qui nous
fut enfin donné par Napoléon lui-même. Mais notre tour n’était pas encore venu de
montrer ce que nous savions faire, car nous trouvâmes la position évacuée… » Jacques-
François Martin, Souvenirs de guerre du lieutenant Martin : 1812-1815 (Paris:
Tallandier, 2007) 279.
124 « Ainsi restaurés, et les armes nettoyées, nous attendions avec impatience le signal du
départ que nous imaginons devoir être très-prochain ; mais, à notre grand étonnement, les
heures s’écoulaient sans qu’on nous fit seulement changer de position…. » Martin,
Souvenirs de guerre, 283.
125 Andrew Roberts, Napoleon and Wellington (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001),
156-160; Jac, Weller, Wellington at Waterloo (New York: Thomas Y, Crowell Company,
1967), 162.
ignore completely. Napoleon, being the genius behind his army’s operations, needed to be in top shape for the campaign. Unfortunately, both mental determination and health failed him in the 1815 campaign. Alan Schom confirms, “Usually one to sum up a military situation quickly and accurately and to act on it with decision and alacrity, Napoleon had, during this campaign, been ill during the night, late in rising in the morning, and equally lax in making decisions, and…later still in putting them into effect.”¹²⁶ The people surrounding him during the 1815 campaign noted a distinct difference in his appearance. Pétrie wrote that,

His portliness, his dull white face, his heavy gait, made for quite a different general Bonaparte that I had seen, at the beginning of my career, during the campaign in year 8 in Italy, in the state of gauntness so frightening that there was not a single soldier of his army who failed to understand how a body so frail and seemingly so sick could resist so much fatigue.¹²⁷

Napoleon had never been a particularly healthy individual, but in his youth he had been able to function with only a few hours of sleep. His energy, despite his sickly exterior, had been unlimited. In his old age, his poor health finally caught up with him. Even in 1812, Napoleon suffered from bad digestion, piles, and duodenal-pyloric cancer.¹²⁸ These ailments had progressed in the 1815 campaign and hindered his physical abilities. Napoleon’s poor health influenced his mental disposition as well. Marshal Marmont remarked that, “…his will was no longer the same, the man was worn down, and the two

¹²⁷ « Son embonpoint, son visage d’un blanc mat, sa démarche lourde, le rendaient bien différent du général Bonaparte que j’avais vu, au commencement de ma carrière, pendant la campagne de l’an 8 en Italie, dans un état de maigreur si effrayant qu’aucun soldat de son armée ne pouvait comprendre qu’un corps si frêle et d’une apparence si maladive put résister à tant de fatigues…» Pétrie, Souvenirs militaires, 214.
¹²⁸ Riley, Napoleon as a General, 199.
final campaigns only emphasized this more. Uplifted with brilliance for a moment, soon
to fall down again.” 129 Napoleon’s overall persona had changed drastically from the
leader he had been in his earlier career. The officers who had worked with him on the
continental campaigns noted a significant difference in his activity and appearance during
the Campaign of 1815.

Although his personal health and mobility was not what it once had been, his
ability to inspire his men had not diminished at all. Before the battle, he passed one final
review of his troops; Trefcon described:

I can never recall that last review without great emotion and I cannot
better compare the sentiment that I felt then, than to that which I had when
I crossed the Niémen in 1812. The enthusiasm of the soldiers was great,
the musicians played, the drummers drummed and a shudder shook all
these men for whom it was their last day. They cheered the Emperor with
all their might. 130

The men carried this passion and high morale into battle with them. They fought
valiantly for their emperor. Silvain Larreguy de Civrieux remarked that, “Not a wounded
man abandoned the battlefield, nor a dying soldier rendered his dying breath without a
thought of devotion to the Emperor. My captain, pierced by two bullets and losing all his
blood, had not ceased to rally us with his failing voice, until he fell in the middle of this

129 «…sa volonté n’était plus la même, l’homme était usé, et les deux dernière campagnes
ne l’avaient que trop montré. Relevé avec éclat pour un moment, bientôt il était
retombé.» Auguste Frédéric Louis Viesse de Marmont, Mémoires du duc de Raguse de
130 «Je ne puis me rappeler sans une grande émotion cette dernière revue et je ne puis
mieux comparer le sentiment que j’éprouvai alors, qu’à celui que j’eus lorsque je
traversai le Niémen en 1812. L’enthousiasme des soldats était grand, les musiques
jouaient, les tambours battaient et un frisson agitait tous ces hommes dont c’était pour
beaucoup le dernier jour. Ils acclamaient de toutes leurs forces l’Empereur.» Trefcon,
Carnet de campagne, 186.
That level of devotion to one’s leader is remarkable. Regardless of his failing health and diminished control over the battlefield, Napoleon could still inspire his men to greatness. Jonathon Riley remarked that, “Not for nothing did Wellington remark that ‘his presence on the battlefield was worth 40,000 men’; and the dreaded cries of ‘Vive l’Empereur!’ which heralded his appearance on many a European battlefield came to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies, and courage into the hearts of his own men.” Unfortunately for Napoleon, inspiration on its own could not win the battle; his army needed tangible leadership in order to face the British general.

When the battle finally began, Napoleon elected to attack Wellington straight in the center, instead of trying to maneuver around him. However, the French army was famously more mobile than the Allied army, which was more cumbersome, so this decision contradicted the natural advantages of the French army. Wellington had prepared for battle by strengthening his right wing far more than his left, for two reasons. Topographically, the right side would be more vulnerable to an attack, and was closer to Brussels, the capital of the French government-in-exile. In order to protect against Napoleon’s famously successful flanking maneuvers, Wellington deployed 17,000 troops eight miles to the west of Hougoumont, at Hal. Wellington had assumed that Napoleon would try to maneuver, instead of using such a simple frontal attack, the kind that his Allied infantry were best equipped to handle. When Wellington discovered that Napoleon intended to attack his center, he exclaimed, “Damn the fellow, he is a mere

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131 « Pas un blessé ne quittait le champ de bataille ; pas un mourant ne rendait le dernier soupir sans donner une pensée de dévouement à l’Empereur. Mon capitaine, traversé de deux balles et perdant tout son sang, ne cessa de nous exciter de sa voix défaillante, jusqu’à ce qu’il tomba au milieu de cette hécate immortelle. » Silvain Larreguy de Civrieux, Souvenirs d’un Cadet (1812-1823) (Paris: Hachette, 1912), 169.
pounder after all.”  Defensive warfare was Wellington’s strength; in attacking in such a manner, Napoleon abandoned his tactical advantage in favor of Wellington’s.

Pontécoulant asserted that, “Napoleon, in wanting to make his victory more brilliant and more decisive, made it at the same time more difficult, more murderous, and more uncertain.”  Napoleon’s decision to attack Wellington straight on was indicative of his later career—during his last campaigns Napoleon had a tendency to rely on mere intimidation and strength of numbers instead of the skillful tactical maneuvers that established his earlier career.  John Naylor blames Napoleon’s dual role as a military and political leader for the change in his tactical style, claiming that,

> The Marshals were left more and more to their own devices, and lacking their master’s genius, they made mistakes which had to be redeemed at the cost of fresh losses. Unable to devote himself as he once had to the battles on which his power depended, Napoleon came to count on mere numbers to compensate for his preoccupation and his subordinate’s shortcomings.

This tendency for Napoleon’s marshals to act independently could have been residual from the Peninsular Campaign, which he left for his marshals to fight; he only offered advice from abroad while he fought the Austrians, Prussians, and Russians on the Continent.  Napoleon’s decision to use a frontal attack reduced the effectiveness of his troops, who were best suited for flanking maneuvers.  Wellington had chosen a sturdy, defensive position, which he would not relinquish easily.

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Napoleon had many problems of miscommunication throughout the Waterloo campaign, which caused tactical problems. The first major one at the battle of Waterloo specifically was the attack on the chateau of Hougoumont, on the French left. Napoleon had intended this attack to be a simple diversion to direct Wellington’s attention and resources away from his center, where he intended to focus his main attack. Unfortunately for the French, the attack on Hougoumont continued throughout the day, wasting French ammunition and troops as they continually assaulted the chateau, to no avail. This displays negligence of leadership; if Napoleon saw that the attack continued even though he had intended it to be a preliminary diversion, then he should have immediately sent orders to recall those troops, instead of allowing to continue, senselessly wasting their lives and ammunition. While the grounds surrounding Hougoumont changed hands through the day, the French never succeeded in seizing the structure from its Allied defenders. Sergeant Wheeler explained that, “Hougoumont with its small garrison of 500, eventually reinforced to 2,000, absorbed the whole effort of Reille’s corps of 13,000 throughout the battle.”\textsuperscript{136} These numbers illustrate the wasteful nature of the struggle at Hougoumont—Napoleon’s army fought without gaining any ground for their efforts. Lieutenant Martin, deployed in the center in d’Erlon’s Corps, wrote, “While waiting [to attack], a furious combat raged on our left, at the chateau of Hougoumont. We lost many men there, very unnecessarily, they say, because, from the onset its sole purpose was to distract the enemy from the real one, reserved for the 1st Corps.”\textsuperscript{137} The fact that Napoleon allowed this attack to continue in such a fierce and

\textsuperscript{137} « En attendant [d’attaquer], un furieux combat se livrait à notre gauche, au château d’Hougoumont. Nous y perdîmes beaucoup de monde, fort inutilement, dit-on, car ce ne
fruitless manner implies a degree of carelessness on his part. It is possible that he could not see what was happening at Hougoumont, or that he was preoccupied elsewhere, but he seemed to have forgotten about his left side. He may have been distracted by the sudden appearance of the Prussians on his right, but their apparition would suggest that he try to conserve as many troops as possible, to ensure that he could keep them at bay, instead of wasting them unnecessarily on a fight that continued without results.

Pontécoulant attests that:

> It is without doubt it was Napoleon’s intention to turn the attention of the enemy away from the attack in the center, which was the true core of the battle. However, frustrated to see this episode prolonged for such a long time, as much by the energy of the defense as by the false measures employed originally to remove this post, and which had already cost us many good soldiers, he told General Reille to form a battery of twelve howitzers and to set fire to the farm and chateau.¹³⁸

However, even the burning of Hougoumont was not enough to expel its valiant defenders. Hougoumont did not fall into French possession a single time, throughout the entire course of the battle. Wellington’s troops fought effectively, and the struggle for the chateau did not have the effect that Napoleon had originally desired. The question remains, why, when he saw that Hougoumont was becoming a taxing drain of his resources, did he not immediately send orders to abandon the attack so that he could use those troops more effectively somewhere else? Whether it was inattention to the events

¹³⁸ « C’est sans doute dans cette intention que Napoléon détourn[a]… l’attention de l’ennemi de l’attaque du centre, qui était le véritable nœud de la bataille. Cependant, contrarié de voir cet épisode se prolonger si longtemps, autant par l’énergie de la défense que par les fausses mesures employées à l’origine pour enlever ce poste, et qui nous avaient déjà coûté beaucoup de bons soldats, il avait fait dire au général Reille de former une batterie de douze obusiers et de mettre le feu à la ferme et au château. » Pontécoulant, *Souvenirs militaires*, 302.
of his battle, or stubbornly attacking Hougoumont despite its drain on his resources, both
display poor judgment and weak leadership.

The infantry attack made by d’Erlon’s Corps between 1:00 and 2:00p.m. and
Ney’s subsequent series of cavalry assaults against the Allied infantry squares both failed
due to a lack of varied troop support. D’Erlon’s infantry attacks would have been
much more effective if they had been supported by cavalry; the cavalry would have
forced the Allied infantry into square formation, which provides an easier target for
infantry. The British cavalry attack ended up destroying d’Erlon’s infantry, rendering
them at least temporarily ineffective, as they tried to reassemble. Naylor explains that,
“D’Erlon’s defeat had strengthened the delicate morale of some of the allied troops and
thousands of French had been sacrificed without gaining a single foothold for the next
assault.” Such a setback so early in the battle did not bode well for the French.

Napoleon should have supported his infantry with cavalry, and not just artillery fire, from
which the Allied troops were well protected by their positions on the reverse slope of the
Mont-Saint-Jean ridge. A similar problem occurred later, when Marshal Ney launched
the French cavalry attacks against the Allied infantry squares without the support of the
French infantry to help them break the massed Allied troops.

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139 An infantry battalion fires most effectively when deployed in line formation, in which
every soldier can fire his musket, offering dangerous firepower against any group of
infantry opposing them, particularly if they are deployed in square or in column, which
group the troops close together. Lines are extremely vulnerable to cavalry attacks,
however, because the cavalry can ride around the infantry and kill them one by one.
Therefore, the most effective deployment to fight cavalry is the infantry square, soldiers
deployed in four lines, three or four ranks deep each line facing outward bayonets raised,
offering protection on all sides so that cavalry cannot surprise them from behind. By this
logic, the most effective way to fight infantry is to catch them by surprise in the wrong
formation.

140 Naylor, Waterloo, 137.
Following the battle, Napoleon blamed Marshal Ney for the failure of the French cavalry attacks, claiming that he had begun the attacks too soon. Margerit defends Marshal Ney however, claiming that, “Under a leader occupied exclusively with the guard [Imperial Guard], his light cavalry would not have left thus.”\textsuperscript{141} Particularly given the position of Napoleon’s command post at the farm of La Belle-Alliance; he had deliberately deployed his reserve troops of the Imperial Guard right behind him. In that proximity to Napoleon, Marshal Ney could not have led the cavalry attack without his direct order, so if the attack was too early, it could only have been Napoleon’s own fault. The Imperial Guard cavalry under Guyot’s command, which was supposed to have remained in reserve, followed Kellerman’s cavalry in the charge instead, causing the additional problem of committing Napoleon’s cavalry reserve too early in the battle. According to Lieutenant Chevalier, “The Emperor perceived and ran after General Bertrand to recall them, but there was not time, they were already engaged.”\textsuperscript{142} This happened as a result either of miscommunication between Napoleon and General Guyot or blatant insubordination. Either way, it displays a laxity in leadership, Napoleon not having control over his own reserve troops. This became a problem later in the day, when Napoleon could not support his final infantry attacks with anything but a few cavalrymen. The cavalry attacks became an even greater problem because they fought without infantry support. The cavalry enthusiastically charged the Allied infantry squares, but throughout the whole day they never succeeded in breaking one. As a result

\textsuperscript{141} “Sous un chef occupé exclusivement de la garde, sa cavalerie légère ne serait pas partie ainsi.” Margerit, \textit{Waterloo}, 375.

\textsuperscript{142} “L’Empereur s’en aperçoit et fait courir après le général Bertrand pour les rappeler, mais il n’était plus temps, ils étaient déjà engagés.” Chevalier, \textit{Souveniers de guerre}, 324.
of d’Erlon’s failed infantry attack, most of Napoleon’s First Corps had been destroyed, and Napoleon and Marshal Ney had forgotten about Bachelu’s division and Jamin’s brigade of Foy’s division, both fresh troops, which were stationed on the outskirts of the Hougoumont woods and which could have provided 6,000 muskets to support Ney’s cavalry attacks. These troops waited to be sent forward, but never were. Colonel Trefcon complained that, “Our division [Bachelu] and a brigade of General Foy’s division found ourselves still in the same position at six o’clock in the evening. We had witnessed the battle hitherto without participating in it. Some pretended we had been forgotten.” To overlook such a large and useful force on a battlefield is absurd, particularly ones deployed near the frontlines, which had not yet engaged in combat as of 6:00p.m. Napoleon, understandably needed to retain his battalions of Imperial Guard infantry as reserves for his final crushing blow, but to neglect to use regular troops stationed near the field of battle which could have greatly aided in the cavalry attacks, is inexcusable.

Napoleon blamed his subordinates for most of the problems that he believed caused the French defeat at Waterloo. In addition to Marshal Ney, he blamed Marshal Grouchy, whom he had sent in pursuit of Blücher’s Prussian army the day before the battle. Napoleon had ordered him to follow the Prussians and prevent them from uniting with the Allied army; he knew that Grouchy intended to pursue them in the direction of Wavre. When he arrived at Waterloo on the evening of the 17th, his reconnaissance

143 Houssaye, 1815, Waterloo, 290.
144 « Notre division et une brigade de la division du général Foy se trouvaient encore à six heures du soir dans la même position. Nous avions assisté jusqu’alors à la bataille sans y participer. On a prétendu que nous avions été oubliés. » Trefcon, Carnet de Campagne, 189.
should have indicated that the Allies intended to make a stand the following day and give battle. With this knowledge, Napoleon should have immediately recalled Grouchy in preparation for battle. Grouchy’s pursuit of the Prussians had already been delayed—Napoleon having waited to send them off until the day following the battle of Ligny—so Grouchy’s chances of reaching the Prussians before they reached the Allies were not good. Whether or not Marshal Grouchy is to blame for the arrival of the Prussians at Waterloo is one of the most highly contested points about the entire battle. Whatever miscommunications occurred on the day of the battle, Marshal Grouchy was not solely to blame. Napoleon did not recall Grouchy, even at dawn on the day of battle, when there could have been no question as to whether the battle would occur or not. Given the large head start that the Prussians had, Napoleon would have been better to order Grouchy’s 30,000 troops to join him at Waterloo, and use them as a strong reserve in the event that the Prussians were able to make an appearance. This would also have saved his Imperial Guard troops to be used later, in a stronger final attack. When he finally decided to send for Marshal Grouchy, not even dispatching the order until 11:00a.m. on the morning of the battle, he did so in a vague manner, requesting that Grouchy continue to Wavre, but keep communications open. It was not until Napoleon’s second dispatch to Grouchy, sent at 1:00p.m., that he actually requested Grouchy join him immediately at Waterloo.\footnote{Pontéculant, \textit{Souvenirs militaires}, 275-280.}

In sending these orders, Napoleon underestimated the amount of time they would take to reach Grouchy, as well as the amount of time it would take him to reach the battlefield following his receiving them; he had thought the orders would reach Grouchy by a fast courier at Walhain in one hour, but in reality, the orders Napoleon dictated at 1:00p.m.
did not arrive until 7:00p.m. Napoleon blames Grouchy for not arriving at Waterloo in time for the fight; however, he did not order him to do so until it was too late. Some scholars have argued that Grouchy should have moved toward the sound of the cannons at Waterloo as soon as he heard them, however in doing so, he would have been directly contradicting his last orders from the Emperor. As General Thiébault explains:

The said Gérard bragged to have urged the said Grouchy to take himself to the battlefield of Waterloo and accused him of having resisted his advice, whereas the Marquis de Grouchy argued on this point, that having received from the Emperor the order to follow the Prussian army, and not any contrary or different order had reached him, there did not exist any human consideration of nature to justify his disobedience or even to render it excusable, the Emperor not being one of those leaders whose orders could or should be transgressed, commented upon, or modified.

If Grouchy had not obeyed Napoleon’s orders as well as he could, he would have been reprimanded for disobedience. It is unfair for historians and for Napoleon himself to expect Grouchy to comprehend where exactly he was most needed without a direct order. It is also uncertain, in the event that Grouchy had decided to move toward the cannon fire when he first heard it, whether or not his corps would even have arrived in time to be of use. Napoleon’s anger should have been directed at himself, for having underestimated the resilience of the Prussian army, even after their defeat at Ligny on the 16th.

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When, around 6:00 p.m., the French succeeded in capturing the farm of La Haye Sainte, in the center of the British line, Napoleon delayed his final attack, in a fit of indecisiveness. This delay which lasted almost an hour, provided ample time for Wellington to regroup his army and strengthen its weakened positions with reserves, of which he still had ample supply. Following the fall of La Haye Sainte, Marshal Ney had sent a request for more reserves to Napoleon, in order that he might give the final crushing blow that would destroy the British center. Napoleon, nervous about the struggle which had begun to develop on the French left at Plancenoit against Bülow’s Prussian corps, occupying most of his reserves, did not want to commit the rest of the reserves to the fight to early. However, by delaying the final blow, he allowed Wellington to reinforce his center. Naylor argues that, “If he had been prepared to accept this last small raise in the stakes, he must have pierced Wellington’s front and defeated his army.” Napoleon had changed drastically from the general he had been in his earlier career; he was less daring and afraid that because, having relied on brute force instead of skillful maneuvering, he could not afford for his final attack to fail. However, this very anxiety caused a delay which allowed the Allied army to strengthen, making the success of his attack even more unlikely. Pontécoulant explains that:

In other times, more confident in his fortune, he would not have hesitated; but misfortune had made him timid; for the first time, perhaps, he lacked resolution. He should have according to a famous demagogue: audacity! again audacity! always audacity! He did not listen to anything by

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148 The French only managed to capture La Haye Sainte because its Hanoverian defenders had been fighting with rifles, and when their ammunition ran out, they could not borrow ammunition from the surrounding British infantry troops, supplied only with musket ammunition. These troops fought until the bitter end, however, and the capture of the farm was not necessarily a demonstration of French skill but rather of an unfortunate Allied supply difficulty.
149 Naylor, *Waterloo*, 162.
prudence, and one could say, truthfully, that if victory was unfaithful to
him, it is because he, himself, had been unfaithful to his character. 150

Napoleon lost his nerve in the end, because the fight against the Prussians on his right
had left him with only eight battalions of Imperial Guard infantry with which he could
mount his final attack. Whether he hoped that Grouchy would appear or whether he was
just overwhelmed with the events of the battlefield in general, he took his time in
ordering his final attack, thus granting Wellington the opportunity to regroup.

Napoleon attributes this delay to the battle against Bülow’s Prussian corps at
Plancenoit on the French right which held his entire attention. He had sent in the
majority of his Imperial Guard reserves to keep the Prussians at bay, leaving only eleven
battalions in reserve for his final attack. Although the Prussians at Pancenoit fought
enthusiastically, the troops of the French Imperial Guard checked their advance, and
while its possession changed hands frequently, the French continually drove the Prussians
out of the village. They displayed an enormous resilience and determination in the face
of the elite French troops. Unfortunately for Napoleon, the worst had happened with the
arrival of the Prussians. His plan to fight Wellington and Blücher separately had failed.

He told Labédoyère, one of his aides-de-camp, to spread the word that the troops on the
horizon were Grouchy’s troops, come to support them, so as to uphold the morale of his
men. This tactic worked for a while, however, when eventually, around the time of the

150 « Dans d’autres temps, plus confiant dans sa fortune, il n’eût pas hésité ; mais le
malheur l’avait rendu timide; pour la première fois, peut-être, il manqua de résolution. Il
fallait, selon l’expression d’un célèbre démagogue: de l’audace ! encore de l’audace !
toujours de l’audace ! il n’écoula que la prudence, et l’on a pu dire, avec raison, que si la
victoire lui fut infidèle, c’est que lui-même il avait été infidèle à son caractère.»
Pontécoulant, Souvenirs militaires, 312.
final Imperial Guard attack on the allied infantry, the troops discovered that “Grouchy”
was actually “Blücher,” mass chaos and panic spread all across the French lines.

Napoleon displayed a limited degree of personal leadership and control over the
battle. The miscommunication, the premature employment of reserves, and the
inefficient attacks on Hougoumont and the British center were all signs of his loose
control over his army. During the battle, he established himself on a small hill just
behind the farm of La Belle Alliance. He remained in this position from shortly after the
battle began until the French capture of La Haye Sainte near the very end of the battle.151
While this position afforded him a reasonable view of the battlefield, the nature of the
gently rolling terrain made it difficult to fully appreciate the strength of the Allied forces,
particularly when they were lying down or deployed on the reverse slope of the ridge to
avoid the French artillery fire. It also kept Napoleon out of harm’s reach. Colonel Pétiet
of Soult’s division remarked on the overall drop in energy displayed by the Emperor in
the 1815 Campaign. He remarked that, “When he set foot on the ground, be it to examine
his maps, or to send or receive information, the men of his staff placed a little white wood
table in front of him, and a crude seat of the same material, on which he would remain for
long periods of time.”152 From such a position it would be extremely difficult to see
everything that was happening on a battlefield. Andrew Roberts illustrates Napoleon’s
actions at Waterloo; “Napoleon…ceded operational control to Ney, partly so as to deal
with the oncoming Prussian threat himself, and kept in one place too much, acting on

151 Becke, *Napoleon and Waterloo*, 181.
152 «Quand il mettait pied à terre, soit pour examiner ses cartes, soit pour envoyer ou
recevoir des renseignements, les gens de sa suite plaçaient devant lui une petite table en
bois blanc et un siège [siège] grossier de la même nature, sur lequel il restait longtemps. »
others’ information rather than riding out to see the situation for himself.” This secondhand approach to the battle was extremely uncharacteristic of the general of Austerlitz. He had become less mobile and less eager to be in the thick of the fighting. General Thiébault was convinced that the loss of Waterloo:

...was due first of all to Napoleon, who by his additional instructions reduced his forces and froze the zeal of many men, and who, not having gotten the best out of his troops; having already proven at Quatre-Bras that his orders could be violated without punishment, he had to keep the whole of his forces under his direct control and, during the night of the 17 to the 18, infiltrate Grouchy’s corps between the English and Prussian armies.  

Napoleon seems to have lost control over his army. No one would have ever dared to disobey the once vigorous, active general of Austerlitz; however, the slower, ill Emperor did not command the same unquestionable authority. Finally, during his final attack of the Imperial Guard, Napoleon became desperate. In an attempt to rally his troops he cried, “Tout le monde en arrière! which suggested that he intended to place himself in front. For a time he did, indeed, march at the head of his troops; but as they reached La Haye Sainte he relinquished his place to Marshal Ney and took shelter in the gravel-pit…” Unfortunately Napoleon’s last, desperate attempt to regain control over the battle failed. The Imperial Guard halted on the slope of the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge, and

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154 « a été due d’abord à Napoléon, qui par ses articles additionnels diminua ses forces et glaça de zèle de beaucoup d’hommes, et qui, n’ayant pas à tirer de ses forces tout le parti possible ; ayant eu déjà aux Quatre-Bras la preuve que ses ordres pouvaient être transgressés impunément, il devait garder sous sa main la totalité de ses troupes et se borner à porter, dans la nuit du 17 au 18, le corps de Grouchy entre les armées anglaise et prussienne. » Thiébault, *Mémoires*, 354. Here Thiébault refers to how Marshal Ney ordered d’Erlon’s corps, contrary to Napoleon’s orders, to come and support Marshal Ney’s fight against Wellington at Quatre-Bras. These contradictory orders caused d’Erlons corps to remain in transit, spending the entire day marching between the two battles, being of no use to either of them.
then all along the line the French troops began to cry, *La Garde recule!* The Guard is retreating!

The French retreat was a shambles of men horses and wagons, desperately trying to escape with their lives. The Imperial Guard maintained calm formation and traveled in square, retreating with dignity. On June 18, 1815, the great Napoleon had been defeated forever. His personal contribution to the battle lacked the finesse of his earlier battlefield command; instead of being actively involved and fluid, he commanded his troops from afar, relying on brute strength rather than skillful maneuver. Henry Houssaye attests that due to the “great number of mistakes perpetrated at Waterloo, Charras, York of Wartenbourg, and Marshal Wolseley, have all concluded that the Emperor, broken down by misfortune, collapsed under the strain, that he remained inert and blinded far from the battlefield, and allowed the contest to proceed without any guidance.”

Napoleon had changed drastically from the general he had been at the battle of Austerlitz, just ten years earlier. A.F. Becke states that Napoleon’s “reckless confidence, coupled with his waning powers, induced him to make a fatal miscalculation. He showed no hesitation in asking the utmost from his soldiers, though he failed to give them the assistance they required in their desperate fight; assistance, which his former glorious campaigns had taught them to expect from him.” At Waterloo, Napoleon proved that a commander’s reputation can carry him only so far; his personal command of a battle must be impeccable, particularly when fighting against one of an equitably astounding reputation. Unfortunately for Napoleon, Wellington had remained consistent in his leadership style, and proved such on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June.

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156 Houssaye, *1815 Waterloo*, 292.
157 Becke, *Napoleon and Waterloo*, 238.
The battle of Waterloo proved to be the ultimate test of Wellington’s abilities as a battlefield commander. Wellington’s hodgepodge Allied army was insufficiently trained, particularly compared to his previous Peninsular army or to Napoleon’s veteran troops. Wellington’s army had been disbanded after Napoleon’s exile to Elba the year prior; he had only 23,990 British troops at Waterloo, along with another 5,800 troops of the King’s German Legion, who were equally reliable. The remainder of his troops were a mixture of Dutch-Belgians and other smaller German nations, whose training and loyalty to the Allied cause were infinitely less reliable. Wellington needed to be as resourceful as possible. However, he was, “acutely conscious of the personal nature of the clash between himself and France’s greatest commander.” The two generals had long been compared, but had never had the opportunity to test their skills on the same battlefield. The importance of preventing Napoleon from attempting to regain his control over continental Europe was great. The two armies, evenly matched, would reveal once and for all, which general had superior battlefield command.

Wellington had chosen the position at the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge for its strengths as a defensive position; he knew that his army, less mobile than the adeptly maneuverable French army, would have a greater chance to prove themselves in defensive battle than by attempting to maneuver on the offensive. Wellington had surveyed the position around the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge nearly a year prior, and determined its value in

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158 Basil Jackson, *Notes and Reminiscences of a Staff Officer: Chiefly Relating to the Waterloo Campaign and to St Helena Matters During the Captivity of Napoleon*, ed. R.C. Seaton (London: John Murray, 1903), 46.

159 Roberts, *Napoleon and Wellington*, 181.
defensive battle in the Netherlands. In a letter to Lord Bathurst dated September 22, 1814, he included a memorandum of his reconnaissance in the Netherlands, which said: “…about Nivelle, and between that and Binch, there are many advantageous positions; and the entrance of the forêt de Soignes, by the high road which leads to Brussels from Binch, Charleroi and Namur, would, if worked upon, afford others.”\(^{160}\) The position consisted of a long, shallow ridge in the ground, difficult to perceive unless one walks over the terrain. Wellington used this to offer protection for his infantry and cavalry from enemy artillery fire by stationing them on the reverse slope.\(^ {161}\) Jac Weller explains that, “The genius of Wellington’s system of defense was its articulation. There were no earthworks and no positions which could not be temporarily lost…The Duke’s infantrymen did not hold any position firmly, save for the buildings at Hougoumont.”\(^ {162}\) This avoided the unnecessary expenditure of forces to maintain a specific position, a problem that the French encountered during Joseph Bonaparte’s fruitless struggle to capture Hougoumont. Wellington had a substantial knowledge of the battlefield before the battle, and he prepared his troops to fight at daybreak. Robert Margerit remarks that, “Like Napoleon, Wellington had passed his army in review on the positions. But as of nine o’clock in the morning, it was in place and ready to fight.”\(^ {163}\) Wellington prepared


\(^{161}\) A further analysis of the reverse slope tactics is offered later in this section.

\(^{162}\) Weller, *Wellington at Waterloo*, 166. The reason for Wellington’s instance on maintaining the position at Hougoumont was that he feared that Napoleon would take advantage of the French army’s maneuverability and attempt to turn his right flank, something that Napoleon never did for fear of driving the Allied army towards the Prussians.

for battle to ensure that his troops would have every advantage with which to fight the French army. He also ensured that he kept his lines of communication open, to always have accurate information within his army as well as with their Prussian allies. Sergeant-Major Cotton remarked that, “The duke of Wellington was in constant communication throughout the day with the Prussians, by means of general Müffling, who was attached to our headquarters’ staff, and by colonel Freemantle, aid-de-camp, colonel Stavely, and captain…Basil Jackson of the Royal staff corps…”¹⁶⁴ The tactical decisions that Wellington made at Waterloo reflected this meticulous preparation.

Wellington designed his general orders for the battle to maximize the utility of his troops and to preserve ammunition and resources. During d’Erlon’s infantry attacks around 1:30p.m., Wellington tried to ensure that his defensive line would be preserved. Rifleman Kincaid, of the 95th Rifle Brigade wrote that, “Lord Wellington had given orders that the troops were on no account to leave the position to follow up any temporary advantage, so that we now resumed our post…”¹⁶⁵ If soldiers became overly enthusiastic about pursuing the enemy while it retired, the enemy cavalry could attempt to force their way through the Allied lines that they had weakened by leaving their positions. Wellington encountered this problem of overenthusiastic troops immediately following d’Erlon’s infantry attack, during Uxbridge’s cavalry attacks.

Wellington’s reverse slope technique was a revolutionary concept which used the slopes of the terrain to the advantage of its defending force; his use of this tactic greatly aided his victory at Waterloo. Wellington’s reverse slope tactics, while uncommon to

¹⁶⁵ John Kincaid, Adventures in the Rifle Brigade, 162.
continental soldiers, proved quite effective against artillery fire. The basic concept is that one deploys one’s soldiers on the slope of the crest farthest from the enemy. This protects the soldiers twofold, because it prevents the enemy artillerymen from aiming directly at the infantry, their view impeded by the crest of the ridge, and it also requires that any enemy cavalry or infantry sent to attack them must to so uphill, blindly. This tires the troops and the cavalry horses and has a terrible effect on morale when, upon reaching the summit, the British force is stronger than the enemy had originally foreseen. Wellington increased the effectiveness of this reverse slope concept by ordering that, when not actually firing on enemy troops, infantry soldiers were to lie down, in order to further reduce the range of the artillery trajectories; the troops would then stand up for actual combat. After the battle, Captain Gronow wrote: “I should not forget to state that when the enemy’s artillery began to play on us, we had orders to lie down; we could hear the shot and shell whistling around us, killing and wounding great numbers; then again we were ordered on our knees to receive cavalry.”166 Whether due to Wellington’s reverse slope tactics or to French ineffectiveness, A.F. Becke explains that, “In no other battle of this era did artillery, so numerically superior, fail to produce a far greater effect than the French guns obtained in the battle against Wellington.”167

In order to preserve ammunition supplies, Wellington ordered his infantry not to fire on single soldiers, but to wait until a large mass of enemy troops presented itself. This way, the Allied infantry would not waste an entire volley on a few scattered troops,

167 Becke, *Napoleon and Waterloo*, 168.
but ensure that it only expended ammunition to a useful objective. In order to maintain pressure on enemy troops during the French cavalry attack in the afternoon, Wellington ordered his artillerymen to remain at their guns until the last possible moment, and then abandon them to take cover in the infantry squares, deployed behind their batteries, to wait until the cavalry had passed by. This order was extremely effective in that the French cavalry continually attempted to capture the Allied cannon, but in pausing to do so, they provided an easy target for the Allied riflemen and sharpshooters deployed in and around the squares.

Wellington artfully responded to problematic situations that arose throughout the battle and worked within the limitations of his own resources. His own army was not in the best condition; its multi-national dynamic created many problems of loyalty and caused a regional inconsistency in the level of training. Kincaid remarked that:

We were, take us all in all, a very bad army. Our foreign auxiliaries, who constituted more than half of our numerical strength, with some exceptions, were little better than raw militia- a body without a soul, or like an inflated pillow that gives to the touch and resumes its shape again when the pressure ceases- not to mention the many who went clear out of the field, and were only seen while plundering our baggage in their retreat.

With such soldiers, Wellington appreciated the necessity of their strategic deployment. John Keegan explains that Wellington reinforced the weaker troops with stronger, more experienced British or KGL troops; he deployed “most of the Dutch-Belgians into Braine l’Alleud at one end of his line and La Haye and Papelotte at the other. The irreducible minimum needed to thicken out his line in the centre he sandwiched between British or

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168 Gronow, The Reminiscences, 70.
169 Kincaid, Adventures in the Rifle Brigade, 166.
German regiments of dependable quality.” Working with these imperfectly trained troops, who once had loyalties to Napoleon, was difficult, however, ensuring that the weaker troops were reinforced on both sides by veteran troops reduced the probability of desertion. Wellington tried to infuse British or German soldiers within the foreign battalions to maintain discipline and morale, hoping the others would follow their example. However, even with this additional support, according to General Müffling, the number of deserters at the battle of Waterloo was as high as 10,000. Out of a total force of around 70,000, this was a significant number.

Wellington also encountered a huge problem during Uxbridge’s heavy cavalry charge, which suppressed d’Erlon’s infantry attacks early in the battle. While the cavalry charge rendered the majority of the French infantry temporarily unable to fight, their success was short lived; the cavalrymen, known for being overly zealous, continued to charge well past the line of conflict, into enemy territory. The French cavalry seized this opportunity to demolish the Allied heavy cavalry, a small part of which Vivian and Vandaleur’s light cavalry brigades managed to save from utter destruction. A couple of days after arriving in Paris after the battle of Waterloo, Wellington remarked that, “…the cavalry of other European armies have won victories for their generals, but mine have invariably got me into scrapes. It is true that they have always fought gallantly and bravely, and have generally got themselves out of their difficulties by sheer pluck.”

Marshal Excelmann, who led the Second Cavalry Corps at Waterloo, remarked that,

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171 General Müffling, Wellington’s Prussian Staff Officer, acted as his liaison with the Prussian army. Jackson, *Notes and Reminiscences*, 47.
“Your [British] horses are the finest in the world, and your men ride better than any continental soldiers… [However] the greatest deficiency is in your officers, who have nothing to recommend them but their dash and sitting well in their saddles.”

Wellington could not prevent his cavalry officers from acting without considering the consequences. Many of the officers’ families had bought their commissions; they were young and inexperienced, focused more on the glory and romanticism of battle than the actual tactical advantages. This was a dangerous liability for Wellington, who, as a result of Uxbridge’s foolhardy cavalry charge, was left without the support of heavy cavalry for the rest of the battle, forced to improvise with only light cavalry and the few heavy cavalry remaining from the butchery following their first and only charge. Captain Gronow observed that, “The Duke of Wellington was perfectly furious that this arm [the household brigade] had been engaged without his orders, and lost not a moment in sending them to the rear, where they remained during the rest of the day.”

Wellington did not tolerate insubordination in so much as he could prevent it, and was quick to reprimand those officers who stepped out of line.

Wellington fought flexibly at Waterloo. His plan involved the defense of a position, but he made most of his decisions during the battle in response to enemy actions. His diligent command over the specific movements of his troops in battle allowed him to respond to enemy movements in a timely, efficient manner. Sergeant-Major Cotton described such an instance, immediately following the KGL troops’ capitulation of the farm of La Haye Sainte, as they were attempting to escape the French pursuit:

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173 Marshal Excelmann; quoted in Gronow, The Reminiscences, 75.
Some of our light cavalry attempted to rescue the Germans; and our 95th, who had previously pointed their rifles at the cuirassiers, but had suspended their fire through fear of destroying our own infantry, now let fly and entirely cleared the whole front. Their skirmishers then moved to the left, towards Halkett’s brigade and the 1st guards; the eagle eye of the Duke saw it, and he ordered the guards to form line and drive the enemy off, which they did, when some cuirassiers moved off, receiving the fire from the squares of the guards, as well as from those of the 52d and 95th.\footnote{Cotton, A Voice from Waterloo, 97.}

Wellington had an uncanny ability to observe those events in a battle which would prove to be significant. This allowed him to distinguish the less threatening enemy movements and focus only on the important ones.

One of the most striking differences between Napoleon’s and Wellington’s actions on the 18th was that Wellington maintained a fresh reserve force throughout the entire battle. The Prussians forced Napoleon to deploy the majority of his reserve force on his left wing. Wellington understood the importance of keeping a fresh reserve force for the final attack; although Napoleon understood this as well, the Prussians’ arrival did not permit him to reserve the large force he had wanted. Wellington did not deploy his reserves unnecessarily; he had to distinguish in which situations relief was essential and which could continue fighting despite dwindling forces. Following a particularly destructive attack from the French cuirassiers, Wellington rode up to General Halkett’s Brigade and asked, “‘Well Halket[t], how do you get on?’ The general replied, ‘My Lord, we are dreadfully cut up; can you not relieve us for a little while?’ ‘Impossible,’ said the Duke. ‘Very well, my Lord’, said the general; ‘we’ll stand till the last man falls!’”\footnote{Thomas Morris, Military Memoirs: The Napoleonic Wars, ed. John Selby (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968), 79.} It was so important to ensure that reserves were not wasted at the battle of Waterloo, given...
how numerically even the Allied and French armies were. However, when reserves proved necessary, Wellington deployed them skillfully. Rifleman Kincaid describes the vacancies left by the foreign troops that had been deployed in the Allied line following the counterattack of the French cavalry, following the British cavalry attacks on d’Erlon’s infantry columns: “Our division got considerably reduced in numbers during the last attack; but Lord Wellington’s fostering hand sent Sir John Lambert to our support with the sixth division and we now stood prepared for another and a more desperate struggle.”

Having the option of sending in reserves is essential, particularly in a battle when the battalions in one’s army are not as dependable as one might hope. The soldiers had a great amount of confidence in their leader; they knew if Wellington believed that they could continue fighting without reserves, that it would be possible. His reputation as an extremely competent battlefield commander comforted his troops to a great extent.

On the battlefield of Waterloo, Wellington ensured that he could always be at the scene of the action where he would be most needed; he had an impeccable personal command over the battle. His active role in the battle was facilitated by his mobility on horseback and his group of staff officers, numbering at least forty; this group of personal staff, the Adjutant and Quartermaster Generals, the commanding officers of the artillery and engineers and all of their aides-de-camp ensured that his orders would reach even the farthest corners of the battlefield without delay. This prevented most errors in communication and kept all units on the battlefield informed as to their role in the combat. Captain Basil Jackson of the Royal Staff Corps was one of these officers, who

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178 Jackson, *Notes and Reminiscences*, 41.
was able to observe the Duke’s movements throughout the battle. He remarked on the calm, collected nature of Wellington:

...nothing that occurred seemed to produce any effect on the Duke, whom I had frequent opportunities of observing, as he would often turn and countermarch, thereby closely passing all who followed. His countenance and demeanour were at all times quite calm, rarely speaking to anyone, save to give an order, or send a message; indeed, he generally rode quite alone… whilst his eye kept scanning intently those of his great opponent.  

Wellington embodied confidence at the battle of Waterloo; most soldiers had the opportunity to observe him at some point during the battle and most of these sources took note of his quiet, calculated manner of commanding the battle. He made sure that he could see all enemy movements in order to determine how best to respond to them; this required that he not remain stationary for the duration of the battle, but ride along his lines, seizing control of his troop movements. His presence proved to be the most critical when troops were on the point of fleeing. When, in the early evening, the French forced Lord Alten’s division back beyond the crest of the ridge after a fierce attack, they desperately needed additional support; Cotton recalled that, “At this critical moment Wellington galloped to the spot, and addressing himself to the Brunswickers, succeeded, by the electrifying influence of his voice and presence, in rallying the discomfited columns…” Wellington ensured that his troops felt his presence constantly, whether it be through seeing him rally troops or receiving orders from him. He never allowed any unit to feel forgotten or alone. For the final attack he rode along the British line, ordering a general advance which inspired his exhausted men who had been fighting for so long. Cotton explained that during the final attack of the French Imperial Guard, “The enemy

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179 Jackson, *Notes and Reminiscences*, 43.
pressed on until within about fifty yards of Halkett’s brigade, and the British foot-guards, who were lying down, quietly awaiting the band of veteran heroes. Wellington then gave the words, ‘Up guards, make ready!’ and ordered general Maitland to attack.”

This personal involvement in the final attack added the additional boost of morale that sent his soldiers into an excited and determined charge. Jac Weller explains that the culmination of the battle had been produced through Wellington’s personal involvement; “the counter-attack which swept Napoleon’s Grand Army from the crest of the Waterloo position into oblivion was largely the result of the professional military ability of the Allied Commander-in-Chief at battalion and brigade level and his intuitive grasp of where he was most needed throughout eight long hours of combat.” Wellington’s vigilance allowed him to remain in constant control of his forces, responding to enemy movements in an efficient and effective manner.

As in the battle of Salamanca, Wellington went where his army needed him most, disregarding any resulting personal danger, incurred as a part of his duty. Even the French observed his courage in the face of dangerous situations; Pontécoulant explained that,

…”they say that at the hottest moment of the action, his chief of Staff, who had seen him expose himself to bullets and cannon balls like a common soldier, went and asked him which instructions he had for his successor, should he die before the end of the battle: ‘Hold here, he responded, until the last man and until the last cartridge; there are no other orders to give him.’

Cotton, A Voice from Waterloo, 113-114.
Weller, Wellington at Waterloo, 168.
“…dit-on qu’au moment le plus chaud de l’action, son chef d’état-major, qui le voyait s’exposer au milieu des balles et des boulets comme le plus simple soldat, étant venu lui demander quelles instructions il laisserait pour son successeur, s’il venait à succomber avant la fin de la bataille: ‘Tenir ici, répondit-il, jusqu’au dernier homme et jusqu’à la
Wellington understood that some things were worth risking everything; he committed himself wholeheartedly to his obligations as a military commander. Basil Jackson related a particularly striking memory of the Duke during an attack of the left of La Haye Sainte between 3:00 and 4:00pm:

All the staff, except a single aide-de-camp, had received a signal to keep back, in order not to attract the enemy’s fire; we remained, therefore, under the brow of the elevated ground, and, the better to keep out of observation, dismounted. As I looked over my saddle, I could just trace the outlines of the Duke and his horse amidst the smoke, standing very near the Highlanders of Picton’s division, bearing a resemblance to the statue in Hyde Park when particularly shrouded by fog, while the balls—and they came thickly—hissed harmlessly over our heads. It was a time of intense anxiety, for had the Duke fallen, heaven only knows what might have been the result of the fight!  

Wellington, in exposing himself to the dangers faced by his men, inspired an unparalleled confidence in him. While the risk was great, each man in his army could be proud of his personal fortitude and commitment to his army.

Wellington had an unsurpassable ability to inspire his troops. His cool, confident demeanor eased the fears of the Allied soldiers; they could see that he did not panic, even with such huge responsibilities, so they could feel reassured that they could also remain calm and perform their tasks to the utmost. During the French cavalry attacks on the Allied infantry squares, Sergeant-Major Cotton claimed that,

Whenever the Duke came, which at this momentous period was often, there was a low whisper in the ranks, ‘Here’s the Duke!’ and all was steady as on parade. No matter what the havock and destruction might be, the Duke was always the coolest man there; in the words of an eyewitness of this bloody scene, the Duke was coolness personified.  

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184 Jackson, Notes and Reminiscences, 42-43.
185 Cotton, A Voice from Waterloo, 102.
Wellington’s confidence inspired his men throughout the battle, but particularly during the final pursuit of the retreating Imperial Guard. Rifleman Kincaid described that,

Presently a cheer, which we knew to be British, commenced far to the right, and made everyone prick up his ears—it was Lord Wellington’s long-wished-for orders to advance; it gradually approached, growing louder as it grew near—we took it up by instinct, charged through the hedge down upon the old knoll, sending our adversaries flying a the point of the bayonet. Lord Wellington galloped up to us at the instant, and our men began to cheer him; but he called out, ‘No cheering, my lads, but forward, and complete your victory!’

Such enthusiasm was overwhelming, as the remains of Wellington’s battered army drove off the elite Imperial Guard of France. Wellington’s inspiring final ride along his battle line provided the extra boost of morale and energy necessary to pursue the French troops, at least until Marshal Blücher and the Prussians took over the pursuit beyond La Belle Alliance. Christopher Hibbert claims that, “Everywhere he infected men, near the limit of endurance, with courage and confidence.”

Wellington’s personal leadership at the battle of Waterloo is undeniably one of the finest demonstrations of active battlefield command of its time. His calm countenance and personal involvement in troop movements inspired his soldiers with confidence, increasing their potential. Risking his life for the proper leadership of his army displays the kind of dedication that is essential to successful battlefield command. Jac Weller observes that, “If any other man had directed the Anglo-Dutch Army, Napoleon would

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186 Kincaid, Adventures in the Rifle Brigade, 165.
probably have ended his days as Emperor of the French.”188 Wellington’s abilities as a battlefield commander motivated the British to victory at the battle of Waterloo.

The personal involvement of Napoleon and Wellington at the battle of Waterloo helped to determine the Allied victory and the French defeat. Their actions at the battle of Waterloo differ greatly. The two commanders began the battle with similar resources, each with similar numbers of troops; if anything, Wellington had a disadvantage, because many of his foreign troops were insufficiently trained, had questionable loyalties, and an inclination for desertion. The two commanders fought in the style that suited each of them best: Wellington fighting a defensive battle and Napoleon attacking on the offensive; however, instead of exploiting the advantages of his extremely mobile forces, Napoleon elected for a head-on collision with Wellington’s infantry, the strongest defensive force of the era. Wellington determinedly rode along his battle lines, ensuring that he could be of use wherever he went, while Napoleon remained essentially stationary, observing his battle from afar and allowing Marshal Ney to take care of the majority of the functional command of the battle.

Napoleon’s fatal mistakes at Waterloo can be attributed to miscommunication, laxity of command, poor health, and overconfidence. Customarily, Napoleon saved a large reserve force for his final attacks. At Waterloo, however, his misjudgment of the ability of the Prussian army to regroup and join the battle, two days after their defeat at Ligny, required him to deploy a large part of his reserve force to a part of the battlefield that he had not anticipated being a dangerous area. As a result, when the time came to deal his final blow, he had to do so with a severely diminished force, against an already

188 Weller, Wellington at Waterloo, 168.
sturdy Allied defense which Wellington had strengthened during the time that Napoleon had been indecisive. Wellington had plenty of reserves, even at the end of the battle, because he had planned strategically for every possible scenario; he even had a fresh force of 17,000 men deployed at Hal that never fought in the battle. While some scholars criticize Wellington for this, he left this strong force at Hal as a final line of defense between Waterloo and Brussels, should Napoleon defeat him. Napoleon did not seem to have considered the possibility of defeat; his army retired in a mass of wild, rampant confusion and congestion, the only troops remaining in orderly formation being the troops of the Imperial Guard.

Napoleon’s *laissez-faire* attitude which led to his poor performance at the battle of Waterloo can perhaps be explained by his declining health. Wellington displayed a consistency with his earlier career in his dedication to the active command of the battle of Waterloo. Napoleon’s officers, however, noticed a distinct change from the active, sharp-eyed general who had led them to their unexpected victory at Austerlitz. This inconsistency in leadership cost the French army dearly on June 18.

**Conclusions**

Napoleon and Wellington fought the battle of Waterloo with staggeringly different styles of command. Wellington maintained his active involvement with all aspects of the battle, as he had done at Salamanca and countless other battles prior to Waterloo. Napoleon’s command style, on the other hand, changed dramatically from what it had been at Austerlitz and many of his other, earlier battles. These two individuals had a profound influence on the outcome of the battle at Waterloo; their
personal leadership, or lack thereof, directly influenced the victory or defeat of their armies.

Napoleon’s lethargic actions on June 18, whether a result of his strained health, mental exhaustion, or simply a coincidental unfortunate series of events, caused rampant miscommunication within the French army and allowed him to make many detrimental tactical decisions. Napoleon blamed his officers for his loss at Waterloo while he was in exile on St Helena; however, only the feeble craftsman blames his tools. Placing the blame on his subordinates undermined his supreme command, or at least the illusion of it that he wished to convey. The Napoleon of Austerlitz fought with ingenuity and tactical prowess, ensuring that his inferior numbers crushed the numerous enemy forces, despite all odds. At Waterloo, he exchanged this adept, innovative command style for a basic, brute force, frontal attack. In doing so, he betrayed his earlier ideal; he did not behave as the able-bodied sharp-eyed leader of the French nation. Instead he took a huge risk, thrusting his weakened forces against the strong Allied defenses for one last shot at glory and European domination.

Wellington remained consistent with his traditional command technique, as he had demonstrated at the battle of Salamanca; he did as much as he could himself, always being on the spot to move troops personally, oversee the deployment of reserves, and ensure that his troops carried out his orders to the last detail. He fought a carefully planned battle, where he prepared for the inevitable surprises that occur in such battles. As a result, he was prepared for anything that Napoleon could throw at him. He even planned his battlefield deployments, so that the weaker, foreign troops would not ever be
isolated from the stronger British and German veterans. Wellington worked within the confines of his own resources, never underestimating the abilities of the French Emperor.

Waterloo, fought by any other two men, would have yielded quite different results. The contributions of Napoleon and Wellington dramatically altered the fates of the two, reasonably evenly matched armies on June 18, 1815. These two men are proof of the importance of Great Men within a historical event. Had lesser men commanded either army, the battle could have had a drastically different outcome. While structural elements are undeniably important, one cannot oversimplify the effects of individual agency on historical events. Wellington’s talents and Napoleon’s unfortunate shortcomings played an extremely significant role in the outcome of the battle of Waterloo; they are evidence that individuals matter, that Great Men can shape the course of history.
Appendix

Map 1: The Battle of Austerlitz, December 2, 1805—Troop Dispositions at 10a.m. and 2p.m.

Map 2: The Battle of Salamanca, July 22, 1812—location of the troops between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

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