

History

Leadership Lessons in The Rise and Fall of Napoleon III

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 10 min read

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In the age of the Second Empire of France (1852–1870), Napoleon III went from the peak of his popularity in 1859 to blunders that eventually cost him his Empire in 1870. In considering the impact Napoleon III's life had on history, we can reflect and find lessons learned that are applicable to "Leadership" even to this day. This is an historical analysis of the Rise and Fall of Napoleon III for the purpose of discovering such applications, and we will start by asking two particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. What sort of progress did Napoleon make during these years?

2. What sort of “mistakes” did he make?

Now, these two questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask five entirely new questions:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. What lessons can we learn that apply to our advancement of “Leadership”?
3. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
4. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
5. What are the effects?

Napoleon’s historic popularity and decline started long before the infamous Coup d’Etat of December 1851. No, it began with mere reference to his name and the events leading up to that period of time. A man who thrived on politics, he demanded political power, and has been described as one willing to use any force necessary to achieve it. However, this may be an inaccurate train of thought concerning his motivations and aspirations. While his methodical methods have been well documented, it is of no doubt that his concerns for the nation and its people were at the forefront of his actions. And while his methods to gain the power he craved were condemnable in ethical standards at best, it is clear that his popularity from the people is what rocketed him to greater power after the fact. To understand the rise and fall of his popularity, it is thus important to understand just how that popularity gave him power in the first place.

By 1848, the legend of the Napoleonic namesake alone played the greatest strength in his election by the people to the position of President of the French Republic. However, reputation aside, Napoleon himself used his appearance as a façade to his advantage. By 1849, French expeditionary forces led by General Oudinot were sent to Italy for the purpose of reconciliation between the pope and his people. It only ended in more fighting. Napoleon ordered an offensive against the rebels, and in doing so, invoked immediate accusation by France’s Assembly of exceeding his authority as stipulated in the 1848 constitution. Demonstrations and riots broke out in Paris, Toulouse, Perpignan, Strasbourg, and Lyon. These actions allowed the French right to begin taking actions against republicanism.

The Assembly began by arresting 33 republican deputies, they drew up laws forcing the closure of political clubs and silencing of the press. In the following months, they effectively removed 3 million people from the voting ballots by forcing property and residence requirements, and returned educational standards back to the church, with control remaining to the state. Yet, this did not bother Napoleon. Instead, he turned his attention to the very people of France. He became a skilled spokesman at dedications, festivals, and openings. He told the people what they wanted to hear, and soon the masses were shouting his name across the countryside. However, it did not end there. Napoleon’s office allowed him to place key, loyal personnel into the upper echelons of commanding positions, and to top it off, he also gained the trust and admiration of young officers at the same time.

By 1851, reelection time was drawing nearer, and Napoleon – unwilling to give up his seat – drawn into argument over Article 45 of the constitution, maintained the position that the people themselves wanted him to stay. By this time, his popularity had surged high enough, he knew it was possible to take over the government and get away with it. Now, in December of 1851, in the quiet of the night, did his loyal troops and police agents silently occupy Paris. They arrested 78, including most of the Assembly. That morning, the city awoke to posted signs asking the people themselves to vote for a new constitution, whereby the people maintained full sovereignty as the first rule of law.

Of course, not all were in favor of these actions, as several republican factions did succeed in organizing rebellious actions. During one such event, General Canrobert and his troops, under the command of General Magnan, commander of the troops stationed in Paris, opened small arms fire indiscriminately against an angry mob. About 200 fleeing people lost their lives at the massacre of December 4th, and Napoleon, it seemed, would find in the future he was never forgiven for the event. Despite this, however, Napoleon’s support across the countryside strengthened. On the 21st of December 1851, the people took a vote for the



new constitution, and an overwhelming majority – 7.5 million – voted “yes”. Almost an entire year later, in November of 1852, the people of France were asked to vote again, and with 7.8 million votes for “yes”... Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor of the French by that December.

Napoleon’s ambitions were launched as a campaign for the material betterment of his nation. He believed all of society, as well as all its resources, should work for the benefit of all its members. He worked to consolidate power under his control, and once he had it, he then turned his attention to his plans for such a society. He started with finance and economics.

Up to this point, only a few bankers monopolized the nations credit resources, for which they profited greatly. Napoleon used public bonds issued to the people that aided in the expansion of businesses. This encouraged private investments that lead towards advancing the growth of industry, building railroads, expanding commerce, and supporting the unemployed. The government established a number of semi-public banking corporations, which aided in the successful financing of rail and harbor construction, public utilities, and the startup of shipping companies. Although many soon failed, many more – such as the Crédit Foncier, founded in 1852, which was a national mortgage bank that helped peasants and town dwellers secure property by advancing funds – survive to this day.

Napoleon strongly advocated for free trade and attacked protective tariffs left over from the previous monarchy. He hoped that free trade would bring in cheaper food, textiles, rails, and widen the markets of

wines, silks, etc. Between 1853 and 1855, he reduced duties on iron, steel, coal, and other raw materials and food stuffs. He formed treaties with England, Belgium, Turkey, the Zollverein, Italy, Sweden, the Low Countries, and Austria. Industry as a result soared, and those that still suffered were helped by the state. Napoleon then turned to agriculture, encouraging scientific farming, selective breeding, organizing societies, fairs, and model farms. He oversaw projects to recover wastelands, drained swamps, preserved forests, and aided rural districts. This not only improved the land, it further supported the unemployed. It also reaffirmed his claim to socialism while separating him distinctly from being a Bonapartist.

Indeed, throughout much of the 1850’s and ‘60’s do we see France enter into an age of advancement in economics, culture, industry, and overall prosperity. Napoleon’s popularity – while dwindling in advancement over the decades – was yet still reaffirmed right up to the final elections of May 1870. 7.336 million Frenchmen casted votes in favor of Napoleon remaining at the throne, so it would yet still be safe to say whatever unpopularity he may have had lay elsewhere. And to find it, one only had to look at foreign boarders.

Napoleon’s downfall began and ended when his measures on foreign policy combined with his visions of expansion. From his first orders for intervention by expeditionary forces in Italy, to his betrayal of Italy to Austria, from the campaign to Mexico, to the war against Germany, the scheming foreign policies of Napoleon’s grand design for France – and the rest of Europe – generated a disdain that would eventually lead to his downfall. In July of 1858, Count Camillo di Cavour and Napoleon met at Plombières les Bains to

secretly discuss an aligned war with Austria. The ambitions of war Cavour begged for had their attentions shifted to Plombières, whereby the actions of Buol-Schauenstein's ultimatum, encouraged Victor Emmanuel to choose war against the Hapsburg monarch in 1859.

But the war Napoleon now led his forces into was a lost cause of popularity among the French. Napoleon soon realized this, and after the conduct of secret meetings with the Emperor of Austria, another interesting fact caught Napoleon's attention... both sides were eager to leave the war. He was able to draw a new conclusion with the armistice at Villafranca on July 11th. Papal leadership returned, the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Duke of Modena were restored to their thrones, and Cavour was furious. These returns were not to last as Cavour returned to power shortly thereafter, and from 1860 through 1871, worked feverishly for a unified Italy.

Back in France, Napoleon's actions against the Italians increased unsettlement amongst French liberals who already hated him. Despite a decade of French prosperity throughout the '50's, the '60's saw French forces encounter overseas military campaigns one after another as Napoleon's ambitions for an expanded empire grew. The conquest of Mexico in 1862 ended in disaster as both the British and the Spanish withdrew from the campaign. With the conclusion of the United States Civil War in 1865, and the dispatch of its union troops to the Mexican boarder, the French withdrew, and the Hapsburg Prince, Maximilian, was left behind and shot. This further increased Napoleon's unpopularity back on French soil.



The 1860's also saw the decline of the '50's French prosperity as markets became flooded with cheap goods due to the lowering of tariffs from before. Local businesses could not compete, several industries suffered because of both this and international trade complications, and economic over-expansion and erroneous market speculation began to take their tolls. Liberal discontent with Napoleon's policies grew as a result. By 1870, Napoleon, already having exhausted both his army's resources and capabilities through several wars and unsuccessful foreign campaigns, entered into yet another war against Germany. He was greatly unprepared for the campaign, and since by this time he had reduced his imperial standing to that of Constitutional Monarchy over a decade of political concessions, liberalist's seized the opportunity of his defeat at war and overthrew his reign.

Questions to Ponder:

Napoleon III's rise to power was driven by his personal ambition for power, and it was that same ambition for power alone that eventually led to his fall. While we do see his efforts as initially helping France, in the end, it only hurt France in the long-run. Thus, the rise and fall of Napoleon III could only be properly attributed to his ambitions alone, which were self-serving at best.

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Post YOUR replies in the **comments section below** so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

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