

WSJ Print Edition

The president grasps power dynamics but should learn from the French emperor's fall.



GLOBAL VIEW

Napoleon's Lessons for Trump

Donald Trump is having a Napoleonic presidency. Just as Napoleon Bonaparte annihilated his Jacobin opponents on the left and his royalist challengers on the right, Mr. Trump has thoroughly trounced both his leftist Democratic rivals and the old GOP establishment.

Once Napoleon had mastered France, he took his show on the road. With dazzling military techniques and unconventional (and unscrupulous) diplomacy, he defeated and dismantled coalition after coalition. After the battles of Austerlitz and Jena, he had become the most powerful European ruler since Charlemagne.

Like Napoleon, Mr. Trump instinctively understands the dynamics of power. His control over the domestic political scene allows him to concentrate more power than any of his peacetime predecessors. That concentration in turn enables him to conduct foreign policy without looking over his shoulder at Congress. That, Mr. Trump appears to believe, will ensure a string of foreign-policy triumphs that will reinforce his image and therefore his power at home.

Mr. Trump is less militaristic than the great Corsican, but he is no less ambitious. Despite the threats he's made against Greenland and Canada, the Man from Queens isn't seeking to solve his domestic problems by launching foreign wars. Mr. Trump—though like Napoleon a graduate of a military high school—would rather be known as a peacemaker than a warlord. He doesn't want to conquer the world, but he would very much like to bestride it.

Like the emperors who wanted overseas barbarians to acknowledge China's supremacy by ritualized displays of deference at the imperial court, the American president wants foreign rulers to show him respect. Wherever peace breaks out, whether in Gaza, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Congo or Kashmir, he wants the credit. On climate change, global taxation and trade, he's torn up the old rule books and substituted his own. Like Napoleon, Mr. Trump hopes that the glory of his foreign-policy triumphs will shore up his popularity at home.

Now, like Napoleon when he met Czar Alexander I at Tilsit in 1807, Mr. Trump is trying to make a big diplomatic deal with Russia without any pesky Europeans at the table. Just as Napoleon relegated European royalty like Prussia's Queen Louise to the sidelines at Tilsit, Mr. Trump has kept European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at arm's length.

Getting to yes with Russia was critical to both rulers. Mr. Trump is wooing Vladimir Putin in his customary rough style. On the one hand, Mr. Trump is offering Russia wide concessions and a revived economic relationship with the West in exchange for a compromise peace. On the other, he's showing the Kremlin how unpleasant a feud

with America could be. The president's decision to impose massive tariffs on India if it keeps importing Russian oil is a direct threat to what's left of the Russian economy. It's also intended to tell the Kremlin that America is serious. Damaging relations with an important partner like India isn't something Washington does lightly. The White House hopes Mr. Putin will see the India tariffs as evidence that Mr. Trump is truly fed up with Moscow's dissembling. Meanwhile, engineering a peace agreement between the former Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan demonstrated America's ability to shape events in Russia's backyard and poked the Kremlin in a sensitive spot.

Napoleon got a deal at Tilsit, but it didn't make him happy. If Mr. Trump is wise, he will heed the lessons of Napoleon's fall. The French emperor's relentless drive for supremacy led him into a trap. The demands he made on foreign countries were so severe, and he so frequently changed his priorities and broke old deals to strike new and better ones, that Napoleon's opponents ultimately refused to negotiate with him anymore. After Napoleon occupied Moscow, Alexander I believed compromising with Napoleon would endanger his place on the throne. He refused to make a deal. Napoleon, unable to get the victory he craved, was forced into retreat. As the French ruler scrambled to shore up his power, countries like Prussia and Austria, which he'd defeated and forced to align with him, turned on a weakened France and helped bring Napoleon's empire to an end.

This is the threat Mr. Trump faces as he reaches for the stars. While things are going well for him, his opponents will seethe inwardly as they hail his greatness and bend, or appear to bend, to his wishes. Nobel Peace Prize nominations will fly as thick as autumn leaves. Deferential foreign emissaries will bow and scrape. The anterooms at Mar-a-Lago will teem with obsequious CEOs. But if Mr. Trump suffers setbacks, the mood will swiftly change.

William McGurn is away.

By Walter Russell Mead

Copyright (c)2025 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 8/12/2025

Powered by TECNAVIA

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit djreprints.com.
