



2006 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy Thomas Jefferson Talks With Napoleon Bonaparte

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (French)
NAPOLEONE BUONAPARTE (Italian)

1769-1821

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica at Ajaccio, on August 15, 1769 to Carlo Bonaparte, a lawyer, and his wife, Marie-Letizia Bonaparte. Small for his age, Napoleon would only grow to be 5 feet and three inches. In 1779 he began his military career at the military academy at Brienne, France.

Civil war on Corsica forced Napoleon's family to flee to France where, after some civil uprisings, Napoleon was finally placed in an important military position. France attacked Austria in 1796, and Napoleon was given what he had wanted for some time -- control of the army campaign in Italy. This campaign was a major triumph for Napoleon and France.

In 1796 he married Joséphine, widow of the Vicomte de Beauharnais.

Intending to break British trade by conquering Egypt, he captured Malta (1798), and entered Cairo, defeating the Turks; but after the French fleet was destroyed by Nelson at The Battle of Aboukir Bay (also known as the Battle of the Nil) in 1798, he returned to France (1799), having learned of French reverses in Europe. The *coup d'état* of 18th Brumaire followed (November 9, 1799) in which Napoleon assumed power as First Consul, instituting a military dictatorship.

He then routed the Austrians at Marengo (1800), made further gains at the Treaty of Luneville (1801), and consolidated French domination by the Concordat with Rome and the Peace of Amiens with England (1802).

Elected consul for life, he assumed the hereditary title of emperor in 1804. His administrative, military, educational, and legal reforms (notably the *Code Napoléon*) made a lasting impact on French society. War with England was renewed, and extended to Russia and Austria. Forced by England's naval supremacy at Trafalgar (1805) to abandon the notion of invasion, he attacked the Austrians and Russians, gaining victories at Ulm and Austerlitz (1805). Prussia was defeated at Jena and Auerstadt (1806), and Russia at Friedland (1807). After the Peace of Tilsit, he became the arbiter (a person with power to decide a dispute) of Europe.

Napoleon then tried to cripple England with the Continental System, ordering the European states under his control to boycott British goods. He sent armies into Portugal and Spain, which resulted in the bitter and ultimately unsuccessful Peninsular War (1808–14).

In 1809, wanting an heir, he divorced Joséphine, who was childless by him, and married the Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria, a son being born in 1811.

Believing that Russia was planning an alliance with England, he invaded (1812), defeating the Russians at Borodino, before entering Moscow, but he was forced to retreat, his army broken by hunger and the Russian winter.

In 1813 his victories over the allied armies continued at Lützen, Bautzen, and Dresden, but he was routed at Leipzig, and France was invaded. Forced to abdicate, he was given the sovereignty of Elba (1814).



The unpopularity which followed the return of the Bourbons monarchy motivated him to return to France in 1815. He regained power for a period known as the Hundred Days, but was defeated by the combination of Wellington's and Blücher's forces at Waterloo. Napoleon fled to Paris, abdicated, surrendered to the British, and was banished to St Helena, where he died on May 5, 1821. Today he rests at Les Invalides church at Paris with some of his marshals, his ashes having been returned in 1840.

Emperor Napoleon proved to be an excellent civil administrator. One of his greatest achievements was his supervision of the revision and collection of French law into codes. The new law codes—seven in number—incorporated some of the freedoms gained by the people of [France](#) during the French revolution, including religious toleration and the abolition of serfdom. The most famous of the codes, the Code Napoleon or Code Civil, still forms the basis of French civil law. Napoleon also centralized France's government by appointing prefects to administer regions called departments, into which [France](#) was divided. He established educational systems, established fire departments, water and sewer systems, and sidewalks in Paris.



Napoleon argued that he was building a federation of free peoples in a Europe united under a liberal government. In all the areas of Europe under Napoleonic rule, the Code Napoléon became law. A great number of political and social reforms resulted, including the abolition of feudalism and serfdom, freedom of religion in most occupied states, the granting of constitutions, universal male suffrage, and parliaments, the creation of efficient governments and judiciary systems, and the fostering of education based on the French model, science, [literature](#) and the arts. Higher education was made available to all qualified applicants regardless of religion or social class.

Adapted from Biography: <http://www.biography.com/search/article.do?id=9420291>

And Lucid Café Library: <http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95aug/napoleon.html>