Support for PBS.org provided by: What's this?

Youth and Family Life
Tyrant or Hero
Self-Made Myth
Perspectives on Napoleon

# Tyrant or Hero

On December 18, 1793, cannons of the Revolutionary army under the command of twenty-four year-old Major Napoleon Bonaparte destroyed ten English ships anchored in Toulon's harbor. He bravely led his men in the assault on the fort guarding the city, suffering a wound in the thigh from an enemy bayonet. Bonaparte's first victory made him the hero of the day throughout France.

Hungry for greater advancement, Brigadier General Bonaparte headed for Paris. Political turmoil in the city's street soon gave him his chance. On October 5, 1795, mobs of Parisians joined national guardsmen bent on toppling the Republic, and the government called on Bonaparte to repel the attack.

"They put the matter in my hands," Napoleon recalled, "and then set to discussing whether or not I had the right to repel force by force. 'Do you intent to wait,' said I, 'until the people give you permission to fire at them? You have appointed me, and I am compromised. It is only fair that I should do the business my own way.' On that I left the lawyers to drown themselves in their own flood of words, and got the troops on the move."

> CONNELLY: *Napoleon was not one to pussy—foot around. He would use all his weapons. Nobody had really used cannon on the Paris mobs before. He was gonna shoot. He waited 'til he could see the whites of their eyes. Almost in one blast the whole thing was over. He probably killed a hundred people. He was not a very popular man with the rank and file, the man on the street in Paris after that.*

"The enemy attacked us," Bonaparte wrote his brother. "We killed a great many of them. Now all is quiet... I could not be happier." Three weeks later he was made a full general, commander of the Army of the

Interior. He was twenty-six.

At the end of 1797, twenty-eight year-old Napoleon Bonaparte returned to Paris, and handed the government a treaty signed by the Austrians which brought a fragile peace to the continent of Europe. In just one and one-half years, he had taken his dispirited, tattered solders, marched them hundreds of miles, and defeated the army of the Empire of Austria without ever losing a battle.

Bonaparte built upon his image as an enlightened military leader with each increase in his power. Twenty days after returning from Italy, he was elected to the prestigious Institut de France. After conquering Egypt, he founded the Institut d'Égypte, through which mathematicians, mapmakers, and engineers studied mummies, surveyed temples and discovered the Rosetta Stone, which proved to be the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"The true conquests," Bonaparte wrote, "the only ones that leave no regret, are those that have been wrested from ignorance." But it was Bonaparte alone who would later dictate what knowledge was permissible. "Education," he said, "must impart the same knowledge and the same principals to all individuals living in the same society, in order to create a single, uniform body, informed with one and the same understanding, and working for the common good on the basis of uniformity of views."

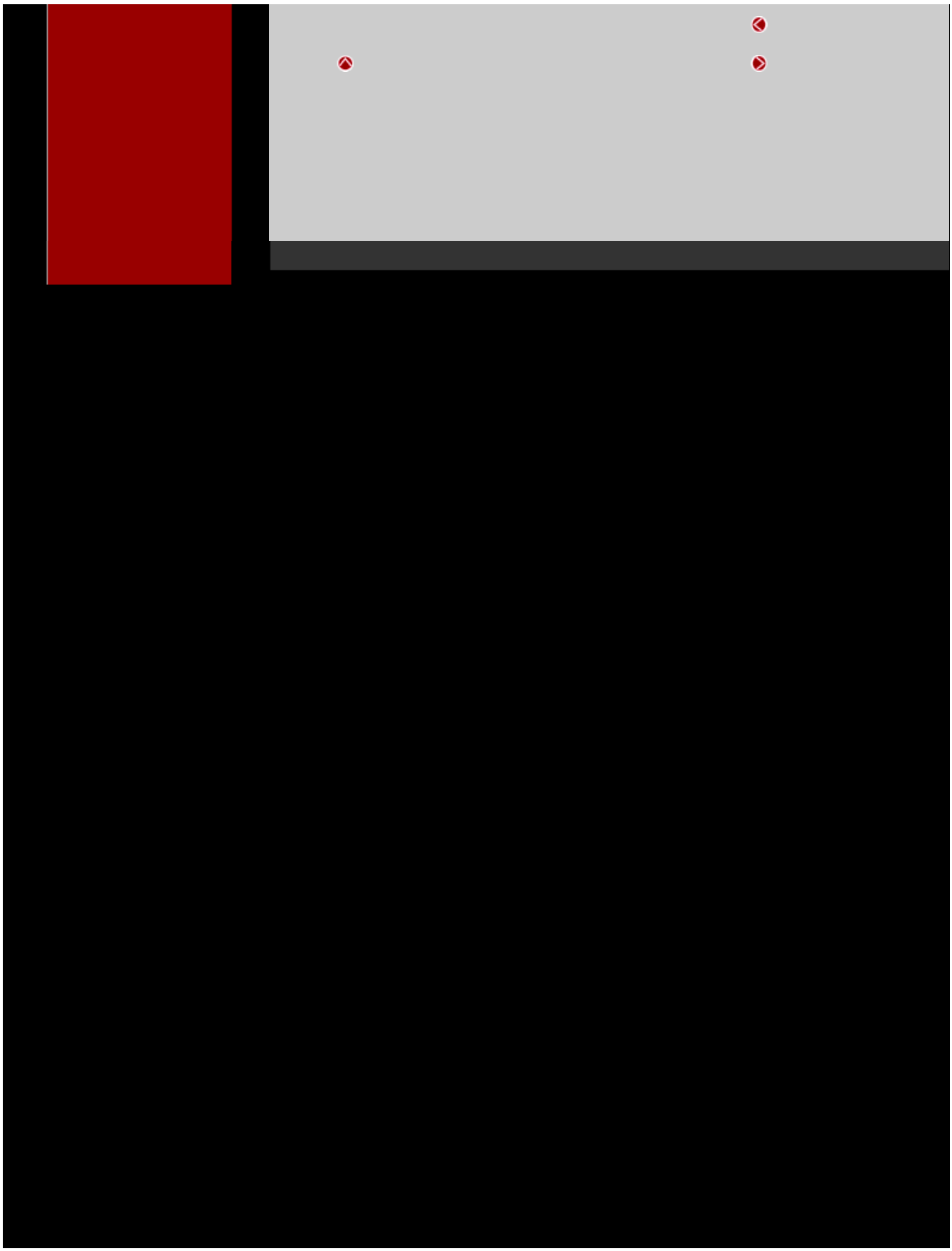
Those who personified the ideals expressed by Bonaparte were generously rewarded. He created a special mark of esteem, the Legion of Honor. He believed in equality: a man should have the chance to rise on the basis of his ability — just as he had done.

"My motto has always been," he said, "a career open to all talents, without distinctions of birth."

But those who deified him were crushed under his iron hand. Joseph Fouche, the head of the secret police, extending Emperor Napoleon's reach into every aspect of French society through a vast network of spies.

> BERTAUD: *You go to a salon, there's a spy. You go a brothel, there is a spy. You go to a restaurant, there is a spy. Everywhere there are spies of the police. Everyone listens to what you say. It's impossible to express yourself unless Napoleon wants you to.*

Napoleon personally oversaw the productions of plays in the theaters of France. If Napoleon disapproved of a playwright's work, his career was over. Napoleon also controlled the press, dropping the number of newspapers in Paris from over sixty in 1799 to four by 1814.

As Napoleon's power waned, his censorship was no longer able to hide his failures. He needed victories on the battlefield in order to maintain control of his empire. After his eventual defeat, his soldiers still considered him their true leader and helped him regain control of France. Under Napoleon's command, he promised to raise them and make them all heroes once again.

"Soldiers! In my exile I have heard your voice," Napoleon said upon his return to France in 1815. "Your general, called to the throne by the voice of the people and raised by your shields, is back among you. Put on the tricolor cockade; you wore it in our great days. Rally around the standard of your chief! Then will you be able to claim the credit for your deeds, as the liberators of your country."