

I



TEN QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMANDERS

YOU COULDN'T MISS THE KING. THE BATTLE WAS ALREADY A MUDDLE OF MEN and horses in motion and yet he was unmistakable. He was short but muscular and he sat on a huge black steed. Shining in his splendid armor, with tall white plumes fixed on either side of his helmet, Alexander the Great, king of Macedon, led the second wave of the Companion Cavalry. A blast of bugles and a roar of battle cries had sent them off, galloping across the shallow Granicus River and up onto the opposite bank, under the waiting eyes of Persia's finest horsemen. Flush with victory over the first wave of the Macedonian attack, the Persians charged the enemy with loud shouts.

Two Persian brothers zeroed in on Alexander himself. Rhoesaces and Spithridates were both aristocrats; Spithridates was governor of Ionia, a wealthy province on what is today Turkey's Aegean coast. The brothers charged and Spithridates split Alexander's helmet with his scimitar and grazed Alexander's hair. Alexander struck back and drove his wooden lance into Spithridates's chest. As Spithridates died, his brother swung his sword at Alexander's naked head and aimed a deathblow. In the split second before he made contact his arm was sliced off by the deft sword of Cleitus the Black, a Macedonian officer. Alexander was saved. It was a May day in northwestern Anatolia (Turkey) in 334 B.C.

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One hundred eighteen years later, the din of battle sounded across the rolling hills of southern Italy, where the armies of Rome and Carthage were locked in a death struggle outside the little town of Cannae. As the Roman legions marched steadily forward, the Carthaginians gritted their teeth and retreated, taking casualties as they went. Would they collapse under the Roman onslaught or would they draw the enemy into a trap?

Both sides' commanders led from the front. The Roman consul Paulus plunged into the thick of things, urging his infantry to crush the foe. His Carthaginian opponent faced him not far away, in the center of the Carthaginian infantry line, positioned where he had been since the start of the fighting hours earlier. Hannibal of Carthage commanded his troops in person.

Hannibal rode on horseback, wearing a mail breastplate and a plumed helmet, and carrying a round shield. His face was famous for its bright and fiery look. He had only one good eye, having lost the vision in his right eye to disease during a long, hard march a year earlier.

The battle had reached its deciding moment. Just a little longer and the Carthaginians could spring their trap, but they would be hard-pressed to hold on against Rome's power. Knowing this, Hannibal rode among the soldiers, heartening and cheering on his men and even trading blows with the Roman enemy. If the risk he was taking didn't kill him, Hannibal would achieve triumph. It was the afternoon of August 2, 216 B.C.

One hundred sixty-seven years later, in the spring of 49 B.C., civil war gripped Rome. The conflict raged first in Italy, Spain, and southern France. Then the central front moved eastward. The focus shifted to the coast of Epirus (today Albania), the naval gateway to the Adriatic Sea and Italy. Two great generals, Pompey and Caesar, were jockeying for position on the land outside the strategic port city of Dyrrachium (modern Durrës, Albania). Each man led a large army, camped outside of town.

They played a waiting game, punctuated by bursts of fighting. Each army tried to outflank the other and starve it out through a series of walls, moats, forts, and towers across the hilly terrain. Suddenly, in early May,

boredom gave way to a bloody engagement. Deserters from Caesar's army revealed a weak point in their lines. Pompey used the information to attack and take Caesar by surprise. But Caesar rallied and launched a counterattack that same day. It started out well, but then his men found themselves in a maze of abandoned walls and ditches. When they were assaulted in turn, they panicked.

Caesar was there, among his men, an example of courage. Tall and sinewy, he stood firm. Soldiers ran by in retreat, still holding their battle standards—long poles lined with metal disks and topped with a carved image of a human hand. Caesar grabbed the standards with his own hands and commanded the men to stop. His words were usually persuasive and his black eyes shone with vigor. Yet not a single man stopped; some looked at the ground in shame, and some even threw away their standards. Finally, one of the standard bearers, with his pole upside down, dared to thrust the sharp end of it at Caesar himself. The commander's bodyguards cut off his arm at the last moment and saved Caesar's life. If not for them, the civil war might have ended on the spot.

Three generals, three battles, and one pattern: a life thrown into the thick of combat. But combat was only the price of admission. These weren't just commanders—they were soldier-statesmen conquering an empire. Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Julius Caesar are the big three of ancient military history. Alexander set the pattern. Hannibal came a little more than a century later, calling Alexander the greatest general of all time. Caesar appeared about 150 years later and wept, as a young man, when he saw a statue of Alexander, lamenting that he, Caesar, hadn't conquered anything yet.

Each was a master of war. They had to look far beyond the battlefield. They had to decide not only how to fight but whom to fight and why. They had to define victory and know when to end the war. They had to envision the postwar world and to design a new world order that would bring stability and lasting power. In short, they were not only field commanders but also statesmen.

Yet each would probably want to be remembered as a battle hero. Never mind the long hours of silent contemplation, the continual hashing out of

plans in conferences, the negotiations for war-winning alliances, the tedious details of stocking granaries or removing wagons stuck in the mud. The thick of bloody battle—primitive, elemental—is where they felt most at home.

In battle, they were heroic. As field commanders, leaders of the army in combat and on campaign, they were peerless. As strategists, they have a mixed record. Their war plans reached for the skies, but only Alexander and Caesar got there. As statesmen all three fell short. Neither Alexander nor Caesar, much less Hannibal, ever solved the problem of how to bring about or how to maintain the new world order that each one sought.

Alexander (356–323 B.C.) conquered the largest empire the world had yet known—Persia. But he died just short of turning thirty-three, after suffering a humiliating mutiny by his men and without having provided for his succession or a plan to administer his vast new domain. His empire immediately collapsed into civil war and chaos. Fifty years later, it consisted of half a dozen new kingdoms, all governed by Alexander's fellow Greeks, but none ruled by his family. Far from establishing a dynasty, Alexander was the last of his line to reign.

Hannibal (247–183 B.C.) took command of a colonial empire in Spain founded by his father and expanded by his brother-in-law. Then Rome challenged his control. Rome and Carthage were blood enemies, having already fought a major war over Sicily, which Rome had won. Now, with the support of his home government in Carthage, Hannibal launched a war to defang Rome once and for all. He accomplished the spectacular feat of crossing the Alps in the snow with his army and his elephants, and marched into Italy. There he handed Rome its greatest battlefield defeats, including one of the most thorough victories in the annals of warfare, Cannae (216 B.C.) Yet he lost the war. Like Alexander, he was the last member of his family to hold political power in his state.

Caesar (100–44 B.C.) followed up the epoch-making conquest of Gaul by fighting and winning a civil war against the vast wealth and manpower of the Roman republic. Caesar began a legislative program to change the republic into a monarchy, but politics bored him. He was more interested in starting a new campaign against the Parthians (an Iranian kingdom). Yet before he could leave for the front he was stabbed to death by a crowd of Roman senators, at the foot of his enemy's statue on the Ides of March. Cae-

sar did establish a dynasty, though—or rather, his great-nephew Octavian (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) did. In his will, Caesar named Octavian as his adopted son and heir, but Octavian had to fight for fifteen long and bloody years before the rest of the Roman world accepted him. Octavian is better known by the name he later chose—Augustus, Rome’s first emperor.

Each of the three generals was a military prodigy—and a gambler. They confronted empires: enemies with far larger armies than their own; enemies who enjoyed strategic command of the sea; and enemies with the home-court advantage. Yet these generals risked everything for victory.

All three led their forces in a dramatic sweep into enemy territory: Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Hannibal crossed the Alps, and Alexander crossed the Dardanelles. Alexander began a long war in the Persian empire (334–323 B.C.), Hannibal began a struggle with Rome known today as the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.), and Caesar started the civil war (49–45 B.C.). Each man next experienced a mix of success and failure, and then went on to win a smashing victory in battle. Yet in the end Hannibal lost his war and Alexander and Caesar won empty victories.

I wrote this book to explain why. The story of these three supreme commanders is as fresh today as it was two thousand years ago. It offers lessons for leaders in many walks of life, from the war room to the boardroom—lessons and warnings.

THE TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS

When Theodore Ayrault Dodge dubbed Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar as “great captains” in 1889—in a book of that name—most of his readers admired imperial ambition. Today, after the bloody twentieth century, we are less sure of it. The grandeur of these three great generals inspires but their lethality is terrifying. They are three gods of war, yet they are also three devils. We admire these men for the same reason that we fear them, because they seem to be superhuman in some ways. They stand for greatness—and for ambiguity. They were great but not good. Or, rather, the good in them was mixed with evil.

All the more reason to ask what accounts for the great commanders’ success—their virtues or their vices? Each had his own style. Alexander

appears in the biblical Book of Daniel as a one-horned he-goat, forceful and impetuous, but I prefer to think of him as a horse—spirited, speedy, tough, and more than able to haul a heavy load when needed. Hannibal was a great feline predator, like a leopard—cunning, strong, agile, nimble, stealthy, and opportunistic. Caesar was a wolf—fast and relentless, a skillful and murderous hunter.

But the main reason for their success was the things they held in common. They knew how to play the game of war and they brought certain qualities to it. Let's begin by describing those qualities and then we'll turn to the game.

Some of these qualities are admirable, others not. Some are admirable only in moderation. But conquerors are rarely moderate, least of all Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar.

Ten qualities underlay the wartime success of these three great commanders. The first nine are ambition, judgment, leadership, audacity, agility, infrastructure, strategy, terror, and branding. The tenth is different, as it is something that happens to a commander rather than something he has—the quality of Divine Providence.

1. Ambition

The Greeks said it best. Their word for “ambition” is *philotimia*, which literally means “love of honor.” Their word for “drive” is *horme*, which has overtones of emotion—think of our word “hormone.” And a third Greek word, *megalopsychia*, translates poorly into English but we need it to understand these great leaders. It means “greatness of soul,” referring to a passionate drive to achieve great things and to be rewarded with supreme honor.

Enter Alexander or Hannibal or Caesar.

They were members of what Abraham Lincoln once called “the tribe of the eagle.” They brimmed over with talent. Their self-assurance knew no limits. Men of towering ambition, they thirsted and burned for distinction. Nothing less than the conquest of new worlds would satisfy them.

Their aims were lofty but also egotistical and unjust. Alexander spread democracy and Greek civilization but he attacked Persia to conquer an empire, not to right a wrong. Hannibal wanted to free his country from Rome's chokehold but he rejected negotiation in order to rival Alexander's con-

quests. Caesar stood up for the interests of ordinary people but he burned to be the first man in Rome and he didn't hesitate to overturn the republic.

The great commanders were not accountants who encourage CEOs to downsize their plans. They could no more stop conquering than lions can stop hunting.

2. Judgment

Good judgment, guided by education, intuition, and experience, defines all three commanders' success in war. When it comes to politics, though, Caesar is in a class of his own, followed by Alexander and Hannibal in a distant third.

They were immensely intelligent but they each had something more—a quality known as strategic intuition. When faced with a new situation, each could draw from past experience and come up with the right answer. They knew how to operate without perfect information and they were unflappable under pressure. They were able to think creatively, rapidly, and effectively. And they could read others like a book. They knew war but they also knew people.

They did not need on-the-job training. Before they crossed the Hellespont, the Alps, or the Rubicon, our three leaders had all acquired proficiency in the art of war.

Alexander and Hannibal learned at the feet of their famous warrior fathers—Philip II, the all-conquering king of Macedon, and Hamilcar Barca, the Carthaginian general who fought Rome to a standstill. Caesar came from an aristocratic family and he practiced the traditional arts of the Roman nobility—oratory and war. By the time he crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C., at age fifty, he had gone to the greatest of all schools of war: he had conquered Gaul (that is, the equivalent of most of modern-day France as well as Belgium).

Although super-competent as soldiers, each of the three commanders had his blind spot. Alexander ignored navies, Hannibal ignored sieges, and Caesar barely knew logistics. These were significant disabilities.

Before he became a conqueror, Caesar was a politician and he mastered the power game in Rome. Before invading Persia, Alexander got the hang of Macedon's court intrigue and backstabbing, but that was a far cry from gov-

erning a huge empire. When he attacked Rome, Hannibal had not set foot in Carthage since the age of nine—nearly twenty years before—and when it came to domestic politics, he barely knew his ABCs. He would eventually pay for his ignorance.

3. Leadership

They had iron in their souls. The great commanders were decisive, forceful, and assured. They had staffs whom they consulted—and frequently overruled. They thrived on giving orders. Men obeyed, and not just because of their rank: they obeyed because their commander had earned their respect. The men had learned to trust their leader with their lives.

They breathed dignity. Only Alexander was a king but Hannibal and Caesar were lordly. Yet they all had the common touch, especially that politician Caesar.

“I didn’t follow the cause. I followed the man—and he was my friend.”

With these simple words, a lieutenant of Caesar summed up a secret of the great commanders’ success. They appealed to their followers not just as conquerors or chiefs but also as men. They had those special personal qualities that inspired others on a deep, emotional level. More than oratorical skill, although that mattered, there was the simple but eloquent gesture. The sight of Hannibal in his army cloak, sleeping on the ground with his men, or Alexander in the desert, refusing a helmet full of water while his soldiers went thirsty, or Caesar sleeping on the porch of a requisitioned hut so his frail friend Oppius could rest inside—these scenes did more to inspire the soldiers’ confidence than a hundred speeches.

Not that the commanders relied on friendship to manage their armies—far from it. Skilled actors, they could fire up an army or douse its passion. Caesar once stopped a mutiny with a single word: “citizens.” By addressing his men with a civilian title he brought them back to their senses—and reminded them how much they craved their chief’s approval.

They were masters of reward and punishment. They used honors and cash prizes to foster bravery. They paid the troops well—or faced mutinies. They were big-hearted and wanted everyone to know it—they kept relatively little loot for themselves but doled it out to their friends.

When it came to their best troops, such as Alexander’s Macedonians or

Hannibal's Africans, they did everything they could to keep casualties to a minimum. Meanwhile, they left no soldier in doubt that, if worst came to worst, widows and orphans would receive lavish benefits.

They stoked the fear factor by punishing anyone who crossed them, men and officers alike. Beatings, executions, and even crucifixions—these too were tools of leadership.

4. Audacity

Honor was at the heart of their character. Courage was the red blood of their veins. But the warrior virtue that best embodies Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar alike is audacity.

Each of them was, in his own way, scaling Mount Everest. The king of little Macedon was not meant to conquer Persia's vast empire. The governor of Gaul was not supposed to topple the Roman senate and its armies. And it was unimaginable that the Carthaginian commander of southern Spain should cross both river and mountain and invade Italy. But they dared to do what couldn't be done.

"Because he loved honor, he loved danger"—what Plutarch said of Caesar in battle applies to Alexander and Hannibal as well. They fought in the thick of things. It was dangerous: during his invasion of the Persian empire, Alexander had seven recorded wounds, at least three of them serious, as well as one serious illness from which he recovered. It was also effective, because a general who shared his men's risks won his men's hearts.

They were bold in the military campaigns they designed. Although most generals are risk-averse most of the time, these three were risk takers. They always tried to seize the initiative. Each one gambled that he could destroy the enemy's center of gravity before the enemy could destroy his. Like all successful leaders, the three also knew when *not* to be audacious.

Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar each occasionally took a wild risk, but usually they calculated the odds. They raced out in front but rarely without first securing their base. Still, they each believed in their invincible destiny and good fortune, which led them to gamble and sometimes fail. Few men bounced back as quickly from failure as they did.

5. Agility

They were soldiers for all seasons. Or at least for most seasons: change on the battlefield was their friend, but even their agility had its limits. And once off the battlefield and into politics, they faced more difficult challenges.

When the conditions of combat changed, they retooled. Having excelled at conventional warfare in western Asia, Alexander switched to counterinsurgency when faced with a guerrilla war in Central Asia. Hannibal shifted effortlessly between set battles and ambushes. Caesar was at home on the battlefield, but he threw himself into urban warfare in Alexandria and managed to pull off a victory.

Speed was their watchword, mobility their hallmark. Alexander's thundering heavy cavalry, Hannibal's agile light horsemen, and Caesar's lightning infantry thrusts—these were the agents of success. In their hands, even elephants could be made to move with grace, as when Hannibal's elephants were cajoled onto rafts across the Rhône.

They traveled light, with little in the way of a supply train. Their men lived off the land—Alexander's less precariously than either Hannibal's or Caesar's, since the Macedonians paid more attention to logistics and did the advance work necessary to secure supplies.

They were masters of multitasking. Caesar dictated letters on horseback, with a secretary mounted on either side, each taking down a different piece. They were Herculean workaholics who managed time with the deftness of a prizefighter. Only the need for sleep and sex, said Alexander, reminded him that he was human.

But agility had its limits. Alexander was nearly stymied by the Persian fleet. Hannibal paid dearly for his inability to conduct sieges in Italy. Caesar nearly starved his army during the poorly conceived siege of Dyrrachium.

Nor do agile warriors necessarily make good politicians. War is clarity; politics is frustration. Alexander conquered the Persian empire with gusto but he quickly lost interest in managing its affairs. Hannibal discovered that winning allies in Italy was easier than bending them to his will. Caesar found the battlefield less challenging than the Forum; his downfall came not from senatorial armies but from daggers in the Senate Chamber.

6. Infrastructure

To win a war takes certain material things: arms and armor, ships, food, money, money, and more money. With enough money, you can buy the rest. You can even acquire manpower—even disciplined and veteran manpower—that is, mercenaries.

The one thing that money can't buy is synergy. It can't buy a combined-arms force (light and heavy infantry and cavalry as well as engineers) that is trained to fight together as a coherent whole—and welded to its leader. You have to build that on your own.

And build it our three generals did. They each inherited a dazzling instrument and then honed it into something even sharper and more deadly.

Philip II built the Macedonian army and Alexander added the crowning touch by leading the cavalry to victory in Philip's greatest battle—Chaeronea. Then, after Philip's death, Alexander rode at the army's head in its years of glory in Asia. Hannibal inherited the men who had carved out a new Carthaginian empire in Spain for his father, Hamilcar. Caesar took the Roman legions and made them his own. Fired in the crucible of the Gallic wars, they were the finest army in the Roman world.

7. Strategy

In its original, ancient Greek sense, strategy refers to generalship overall, from battle tactics to the art of operations (weaving battles together in pursuit of a larger goal) to war strategy (how to win a war). Add to these what we now call grand strategy—the broader political goal that a war serves. Great commanders must master them all.

Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar all had an instinctive grasp of operations. However, Caesar's mastery of tactics did not match Alexander's or Hannibal's.

Hannibal, in particular, was the master of surprise. His march over the Alps left the enemy breathless. He ran circles around the Romans with an array of unheard-of tricks, managed to pry open the gates of a strong city, unleashed a cavalry charge from a hiding place in the enemy's rear, and shuttled his army to freedom one night right under the Romans' noses.

Neither Alexander nor Caesar was in Hannibal's league but they had a few cons of their own. When the Persians blocked a mountain pass into the heart of Iran, Alexander successfully rode through the hills and surprised them from the rear. When Caesar faced Pompey in a do-or-die battle, Caesar hid his best troops until the enemy cavalry charged—then he pulled out his men and broke the cavalry's momentum.

But when it came to war strategy, Alexander and Caesar turned the tables on Hannibal. They thought ahead and they were dogged. Knowing that he could not beat Persia at sea, Alexander stooped to conquer Persia's Mediterranean seaports—while putting off the big battle that he craved. Thinking ahead to a showdown with Pompey, Caesar shipped the loot he won in Gaul back home to the ordinary people of Italy—in effect, he bought their votes. Hannibal was less painstaking. He loved speed and sorcery but he had no interest in grinding down Rome's allies one by one.

For all his success, Hannibal failed at long-term thinking. His battlefield triumphs stunned but did not slay Rome. When the enemy bounced back, Hannibal had no Plan B. We don't know who was more to blame, Hannibal or his home government, but we do know who had the last laugh—Rome.

All three commanders had a grand strategy. Alexander wanted to conquer the Persian empire, Hannibal to break Rome's power for good, and Caesar to achieve political supremacy. But those goals left many, many details to work out.

8. Terror

They were willing to kill innocents and everyone knew it. That too was a secret of their success.

Scene from a civil war: when a young public official tried to stop Caesar from breaking into the treasury in Rome, Caesar raised his voice and threatened to kill him if he didn't get out of the way. "And young man," he said, "you have to know that it was harder for me to say this than it would be to do it." The terrified official left.

But threatening a government official's life was nothing compared to massacring entire cities, as the great commanders did. Caesar sacked the small Greek city of Gomphi as punishment for its betraying him. Alexander destroyed the great Greek metropolis of Thebes just to show what he did to

rebels. Even worse would come later in Central and South Asia, where the angry Macedonians massacred town after town.

Caesar did the same in Gaul, where the ancient biographer Plutarch says he killed a million people and enslaved a million more. Exaggerations—but close enough to the truth that most Italians were quick to surrender when he crossed the Rubicon. Caesar then cleverly played against type and pardoned his enemies, which won the applause of a relieved public.

The first thing Hannibal did when he reached Italy in 218 was to massacre the people of Turin—a small place in those days—in order to break resistance in the surrounding area. When he finally left Italy fifteen years later, in 203, Hannibal slaughtered those Italians who refused to go with him—and he didn't hesitate to follow them into the grounds of a temple to do so. Or so the Romans claimed.

9. Branding

Men with imperial ambitions don't go to war over little things like border disputes. They need grand causes and clear symbols.

All three were chameleons. None was a man of the people but all played the populist.

Alexander began as an avenger and a liberator and he ended up as a demigod. He promised payback for Persia's invasion of Greece 150 years earlier, proclaimed the liberation of the Greek cities that he conquered, and made them democracies, whether they liked it or not. Once he reached Iran, he put on selected items of Persian dress and insisted that his men now salaam in his presence, Persian style, in a nod to his new, Eastern subjects. Meanwhile, he told his Greek allies to worship him as the son of the god Zeus.

Hannibal too stood for vengeance and liberation and he walked his own pathway to the gods. To Carthage, he promised vengeance for its earlier defeat by Rome; to Italians, he promised freedom from Roman domination. He claimed the support of the Carthaginian god Melqart—or Hercules. And he encouraged his Celtic followers to consider him a hero out of their myths.

Caesar went to great pains to show that he was no mere provincial governor in revolt against the lawful government of Rome. He said that he was fighting for the rights of the Roman people and for his own good name—

the latter a principle dear to Roman hearts. Caesar also drew a bright line between himself and earlier generals who had marched on Rome. They had sealed their wars with reigns of terror, but his policy was mercy.

As far as the gods, Caesar's family traced its ancestry back to Venus. Caesar received divine honors from the Senate while still alive and was deified after his death. But Caesar acquired something else that was worth still more—celebrity. His *Commentaries on the Gallic War* made him a symbol of military prowess. By the time he crossed the Rubicon two years later, Caesar's reputation served as a force multiplier.

10. Divine Providence

Napoleon asked for generals who were not only good but also lucky. He would have had many occasions to be pleased with Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar. But only Divine Providence, and not mere luck, can explain the guidance and protection needed to reach the heights they did. Although the previous nine factors were necessary, Divine Providence was essential.

Divine Providence guided the steps of young men born to be conquerors, like Alexander and Hannibal, and also the steps of a middle-aged politician who went to war and turned out to be the greatest general of all—Caesar. Only Divine Providence can lead a man's foes off the cliff. Without having to lift a finger, for example, Alexander saw his worst enemy die suddenly.

The Romans played into Hannibal's hands by launching their biggest army against him. He was waiting at Cannae. There, Hannibal achieved one of the world's greatest battlefield victories, but he failed to follow up Cannae with a march on Rome—and that cost him the war.

As the saying goes, man plans, God laughs.

THE FIVE STAGES OF WAR

A great leader knows the rhythm of war. That is critical because in war, as in most things, timing is everything. Success is not only a matter of the ten qualities just discussed, but of knowing when to deploy them. That goes especially for the kind of war that Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar all had in mind.

Their three wars all followed a similar pattern. Each began with a combination of attack and defense, in keeping with a basic rule of combat: every time you throw a punch, you create an opening for your opponent to attack, so you need to protect yourself. Accordingly, our generals invaded the enemy's country while anticipating an enemy counterattack. Each ran into trouble early on, because in war things never go as planned, but then quickly regrouped. Next came a great victory in a pitched battle that shattered the enemy's offensive capability. Then the three each tried to finish the job by depriving the enemy of his money and manpower—two of them succeeded. The last step was to reap the fruits of victory in a peace agreement for the postwar world, but none of the captains achieved this.

Their three wars followed a similar pattern but then, most wars do. In spite of many changes in technology, since ancient times the principles of war have changed as little as human nature has.

Each of these wars consisted of five phases. I call them the five stages of warfare: (1) attack, (2) resistance, (3) clash, (4) closing the net, and (5) knowing when to stop.

In the **attack** stage, the decision to go to war leads to the outbreak of fighting guided by a plan. The war plan is crucial—as the saying goes, failing to plan is planning to fail. But every plan runs into obstacles—call them **resistance**. In that stage, the attacker has to overcome those obstacles or fail. Our generals succeeded and forced their opponents to engage in a **clash**—the battle or battles that left the invading army supreme. But winning a battle is not enough. A successful general has to bring the enemy to his knees by using whatever it takes—pursuit, siege, blockade, counterinsurgency, or other tactics. He has to bring to bear political and financial as well as military resources. He needs to be ready for second-guessing at home and insurgency abroad. **Closing the net** is the most complex and challenging stage of all. Finally, a soldier-statesman has the advantage of **knowing when to stop**. He ends the fighting at a time and in a manner that does more than cease hostilities—it lays the groundwork for the postwar world.

Most people probably think of war as a three-stage process: attack, fight, win or lose. But that model is wrong because it simplifies and distorts the nature of war. We cannot understand war without allowing for its unpredictability and its fundamentally political nature.

The great commanders knew this. They didn't just plan to win. They an-

ticipated failure and they knew how to rebound from it. They put battlefield success into context. They knew that you could win a battle and still lose the war. They also understood that military victory does not equal political success.

War is unpredictable. Many ancient soldiers worshiped Fortune or Luck, and not without reason. Their commanders made careful plans, but no planner knows every hill or what lies behind it; no forecaster can control the weather or predict what Providence has in store. And then, there is the enemy. War is not shadowboxing; war is a match against a moving target. The enemy has a way of doing fancy dancing and tripping up the best-laid plans.

For example, the Persians unleashed a counterattack by sea against Alexander's base in Greece, and the Romans launched a strike against Hannibal's stronghold in Spain. Both Alexander and Hannibal flubbed their responses, but Alexander was lucky. Hannibal took a hard hit. Pompey might have attacked Caesar's base in Italy from Spain, but Caesar beat him to the punch by invading Spain first.

Politics constrains war in two ways. No general can carry out military acts unless he commands the support of his men on the battlefield and his backers at home. No military victory can bear fruit unless it forces the enemy to do your will. It is no use winning a battle if the enemy is able to fight on to victory. Peace negotiations can prove treacherous, and many a general has won the war but lost the peace. For example, the general Lysander (d. 395 B.C.) led Sparta to victory against Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.), but his postwar policies were so heavy-handed that his allies turned on him and Sparta threw him out of office. That gave Athens an opening to rise again as a military threat. In modern times, the French army defeated the rebels militarily in the Algerian War (1954–1962), but at so high a cost that the French government, with popular support, decided to give up. Algeria, after more than a century as a French colony, became an independent state.

When we look closely at the nature of war—its unpredictability and political nature—we understand why this five-stage model is so useful. The five-stage model fits not just the wars of Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar but war generally, including more recent wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan. It describes conventional warfare best, but it also fits guerrilla wars

and wars of attrition, where the clash is not a set battle but a battle nonetheless, however long or amorphous.

Although Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar are known as masters of conventional warfare, they offer lessons for unconventional warfare as well, from Alexander's retooling his army into a force flexible enough to defeat Afghanistan's nomads and mountain fighters, to Hannibal's tactical cunning in the Italian hills, to Caesar's street-fighting in Alexandria, to the hearts-and-minds initiatives that all three generals used on enemy populations.

GREATNESS ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

We historians are supposed to be objective but the three subjects of this book make that hard. They excite the passions from love to hate and often a little of each. Maybe the world still loves heroes. Biographers certainly do. They run the risk of falling in love with their subjects, and these subjects—especially Alexander and Caesar—have had many biographers. But ancient heroes serve many and various modern agendas.

Take Alexander. He was a conqueror but history records him as an icon. To liberals, he was a visionary; to conservatives, he was a champion of Western civilization; and to more than one religious tradition, he was nearly a saint. Jewish tradition records that Alexander visited the Temple in Jerusalem and showed it respect. Ever since, "Alexander" has been a common Jewish name—and remains so today, even among Orthodox Jews. Christians believe that Alexander was preparing the way of the Lord by bringing Greek civilization to the East and by laying the groundwork for the unification of humanity. Because he was the "son of a god," because he claimed to make men free, and because he died young, Alexander appears to some to prefigure Christ. Islam too remembers Alexander, and possibly in its holiest text: many scholars believe that Dhul-Qarnain, a figure mentioned in the Quran, and considered by many to be a prophet, actually refers to Alexander.

But you don't have to be religious to revere Alexander. Nationalists from Greece to India all claim him. Gay-rights activists see him as a protogay because he loved men as well as women. A female scholar, however, told me she looks down on Alexander as a male fantasy figure who represents the

struggle between adventure and responsibility. Some brand Alexander as a butcher and a brute. Most historians, though, sing Alexander's praises.

Caesar is no one's idea of a saint, but he casts a shadow over every scholar even so. Caesar is the gatekeeper of his own reputation, because his brilliant books *The Gallic War* and *The Civil War* dominate the ancient historical record. For a modern advocate, Caesar has the best—Shakespeare, who endowed the man with tragic dignity. Still, Caesar's deeds speak for themselves and they don't always win admirers. He invaded Gaul without just cause and made rivers of blood run there. Then he started a civil war in Rome, less for any principle than for his own selfish good. He ended up as a dictator who destroyed the freedom of the Roman republic. Caesarism still stands today for military or imperial dictatorship and for political absolutism.

With Hannibal we have the opposite problem. Because he failed to defeat Rome, Hannibal might appear a loser rather than the champion that he was. Hannibal wins the hearts of underdogs, which sometimes leads to strange bedfellows. As a boy Sigmund Freud idolized Hannibal as a "Semite" who took on Rome the way Freud resisted anti-Semitism in Catholic Vienna. African Americans have traditionally considered Hannibal a black hero. He was probably not dark-skinned, although many thousands of troops in his army were.

Still, Hannibal's underdog appeal rests on solid ground. After taking on an arrogant empire and shaking it to its core, he lost everything. But he maintained his dignity. Hannibal in defeat reinvented himself as an administrator, restarted the struggle against Rome in the East, and refused to let the enemy humiliate him by marching in triumph. He died beaten but unbowed.

Great generals must be ready to die young, and many conquerors throughout history have. They also must face the ever-present possibility of failure. Conquest is not an easy job. Success requires a combination of military greatness and supreme political skill. Very few people excel at both.

Our generals today do not try to excel at both, and that is a good thing. They bow to civilian authority. They do not decide whether to go to war, only how to fight a war, and even on that point they must yield to the politi-

cians. They do not decide political strategy, only military strategy. It is a good thing not to put political and military power in the hands of one man.

They do lose sleep over killing people. They don't fight wars of aggression, only of defense. To be sure, sometimes defense requires attacking another state that is plotting against us or oppressing its own people or occupying land that is rightfully ours, but all that is a far cry from declaring someone else's soil to be "spear-won" land, as Alexander did.

The great commanders of the ancient world lacked the humility called for in great statesmen. They were great men but not benefactors of the human race; they came to destroy more than to fulfill. In many ways, their examples are to be honored in the breach. And yet, they do have something to teach us.

No man has ever outdone Alexander's feat of conquering such a large empire in such a short time at such a young age. No strategist has ever pulled off a more daring invasion than Hannibal's march from Spain over the Pyrenees, the Rhône, and the Alps into Italy. No battlefield commander has ever won a more complete tactical victory than Hannibal's at Cannae. No general has ever thrown the dice as boldly as Caesar did when he crossed the Adriatic Sea on the eve of winter without warships or supplies—and won the war.

No one ever understood better than these three that war is politics. No conqueror has ever dared to co-opt the conquered as brilliantly as Alexander did when he declared himself to be the king of Asia—and acted the part. No invader has ever rallied the invaded as smoothly as Hannibal did when he entered Italy to the cry of "Italy for the Italians." No soldier-statesman has ever combined the carrot—pardons—with the stick—military force—as deftly as Caesar.

And then, at the moment of triumph, no one ever forgot the rule that war is politics as completely—or as disastrously—as they. Flush with victory and drunk with success, each man did the one thing that no successful general can ever dare do: he succumbed to his own vanity. Modern generals are not immune to excessive pride. But, in democracies, at any rate, laws prevent any one individual from doing too much damage. History tells a cautionary tale.