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MASTERS *of* COMMAND



ALEXANDER,
HANNIBAL, CAESAR,
and the Genius of
LEADERSHIP

BARRY STRAUSS

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PRAISE FOR *MASTERS OF COMMAND*

“Barry Strauss has done it again: *Masters of Command* combines the timeless wisdom of the classical world with the urgent realities of modern warfare. This is a stunning handbook on leadership—both on and off the battlefield.”

—Nathaniel Fick, author of *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*

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—Karl Ro

“With *Masters of Command*, Barry Strauss further establishes himself as one of our premier historians of the classical world . . . There are lessons here not only for budding military strategists but also for ‘great captains’ of the boardroom. And, most important, there is a crackling good read for anyone who delves into this insightful and entertaining new book.”

—Max Boot, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow for National Security Studies, The Council on Foreign Relations, and author of *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History: 1500 to Today*

“Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar—this is a book on leadership like no other. A rare combination of stirring dialogue, masterful ancient scholarship, and sage advice—both lessons and warnings. Just as Asian corporate planners read Sun Tzu, Western entrepreneurs and strategic thinkers will want to read *Masters of Command*.”

—Robert L. O’Connell, author of *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*

“Barry Strauss has no superior and few counterparts as a scholar of ancient military history and student of war.”

—Dennis Showalter, former president, Society for Military History

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MASTERS *of*
COMMAND

ALEXANDER, HANNIBAL, CAESAR,
and the Genius of
LEADERSHIP



BARRY STRAUSS

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
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To Donald Kagan, Walter LaFeber, and in memory of Alvin Bernstein

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ancient names are spelled following the style of the standard reference work, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Translations from the Greek or Latin are my own, unless otherwise noted.

CHRONOLOGY

(All dates are B.C.)

- 480–479** The Persian Empire invades Greece, led by King Xerxes, and is defeated.
- 356** Birth of Alexander
- 338** Macedon defeats Greeks at Battle of Chaeronea; Alexander commands cavalry
- 336** Philip of Macedon is assassinated; Alexander becomes king.
- May–June 334** Alexander invades Persian Empire; Battle of the Granicus River
- Autumn 334** Siege of Halicarnassus
- June 333** Death of Memnon of Rhodes
- November 333** Battle of Issus
- January–August 332** Siege of Tyre
- 331** Greek revolt against Macedon
- October 1, 331** Battle of Gaugamela
- 330** Alexander burns Persepolis; death of Darius; execution of Parmenion and Philotas
- 330–327** Campaigns in Bactria and Sogdiana
- May 326** Battle of the Hydaspes
- July 326** Mutiny in India
- 325** Alexander returns to Iran
- 324–323** Alexander prepares invasion of Arabia
- Summer 324** Banquet at Opis
- Autumn 324** Death of Hephaestion
- June 10, 323** Death of Alexander
- 280–275** Pyrrhus's invasion of Italy and Sicily
- 264–241** First Punic War
- 247** Birth of Hannibal
- 237** Hamilcar Barca goes to Spain, taking Hannibal with him
- 228** Death of Hamilcar; Hasdrubal the Handsome, Hamilcar's son-in-law

- 226** Ebro treaty
- 221** Death of Hasdrubal the Handsome; Hannibal now in command in Spain
- 219** Hannibal captures Saguntum after eight-month siege; Rome issues ultimatum
- 218–201** Second Punic War
- Autumn 218** Hannibal crosses the Alps; leaves his brother, Hasdrubal, in charge of Spain
- November 218** Battle of the Ticinus River
- December 218** Battle of the Trebia River
- Spring 217** Romans defeat Carthaginian fleet off the Ebro River in Spain
- June 21, 217*** Battle of Lake Trasimene
- Summer–Fall 217** Fabius is appointed dictator and begins delaying strategy
- August 2, 216** Battle of Cannae
- Late 216** Capua joins Hannibal
- 215** Alliance between Hannibal and Macedonian king Philip V; Syracuse joins Hannibal
- 212** Hannibal takes Tarentum but Romans hold the citadel; Rome retakes Syracuse
- 211** Hannibal marches on Rome; Rome retakes Capua
- 210** Scipio takes New Carthage
- 209** Battle of Baecula; Rome retakes Tarentum
- 207** Battle of the Metaurus River; death of Hasdrubal, Hannibal's brother
- 206** Battle of Ilipa
- 205** Mago invades Italy; Hannibal places inscription in temple of Hera at Lacinia
- 203** Hannibal returns to Africa; death of Mago
- Autumn 202** Battle of Zama
- 201** Carthage agrees to treaty with Rome ending Second Punic War
- 196** Hannibal serves as chief magistrate of Carthage
- 195–183** Hannibal in the East

-
- 149–146 Third Punic War
- 146 Carthage is destroyed
- 100 Birth of Caesar
- 82–81 Sulla is dictator
- 66–62 Pompey conquers the East
- 61–60 Caesar campaigns in western Spain
- 58–50 Caesar conquers Gaul
- January 12, 49** Caesar crosses the Rubicon
- February 49** Siege of Corfinium
- March 17, 49** Pompey evacuates Brundisium
- Spring–Autumn 49** Siege of Massilia
- June–August 49** Battle of Ilerda
- January 4, 48** Caesar crosses the Adriatic Sea
- April–July 48** Dyrrachium campaign
- August 9, 48** Battle of Pharsalus
- September 28, 48** Death of Pompey
- Autumn 48** Caesar meets Cleopatra
- Winter 48–Spring 47** Caesar's war in Egypt
- August 2, 47** Battle of Zela
- December 25, 47** Caesar leaves Rome for Africa
- 46** Carthage refounded as a Roman colony
- April 6, 46** Battle of Thapsus
- Summer 46** Caesar celebrates four triumphs
- March 17, 45** Battle of Munda
- October 45** Caesar celebrates fifth triumph
- February 44** Caesar named dictator for life
- March 15, 44** Caesar assassinated

* All specific months and days in this list, from this point on, follow the Roman calendar in use at the time.

GLOSSARY OF KEY NAMES

- Alexander the Great** or Alexander III (356–323 B.C.) King of Macedon and conqueror of the Persian Empire.
- Antipater** (ca. 397–319 B.C.) Governor of Macedonia in Alexander's absence, Antipater organized the defense of the home front against a revolt by the Greek city-states.
- Bessus** (d. 329 B.C.) Satrap of Bactria, organizer of coup against Darius III and pretender to the Persian throne as Artaxerxes V, he was captured and executed by Alexander.
- Craterus** (d. 321 B.C.) Probably Alexander's best general after the death of Parmenio, he held important commands at Issus and Gaugamela and in Sogdiana and India.
- Darius III** (d. 330 B.C.) Ruled the Persian Empire beginning in 336 and organized resistance against Alexander, whom he faced in battle at Issus and Gaugamela.
- Hephaestion** (d. 324 B.C.) Alexander's closest friend and possibly his lover, Hephaestion had enormous influence with the king.
- Memnon of Rhodes** (d. 333 B.C.) Greek mercenary in the service of Persia, he commanded the Persian fleet and handed Alexander his worst defeats before his untimely death.
- Parmenio** (ca. 400–330 B.C.) Veteran general of Philip II, he played a key role as a commander in Alexander's pitched battles but was eventually executed as a rival.
- Perdiccas** (d. 321 B.C.) One of Alexander's best generals, both as an infantry and cavalry commander.
- Philip of Macedon** or Philip II, King of Macedon (382–336 B.C.) Father of Alexander, he founded the Macedonian empire and began the project of conquering Persia.
- Porus**, Indian king who fought Alexander bravely in the Macedonian's last pitched battle, at the Hydaspes (326 B.C.). He was rewarded by Alexander with additional land in spite of his defeat.
- Ptolemy, Son of Lagus**, or Ptolemy I (367–282 B.C.) One of Alexander's leading generals, he later became king of Egypt and established a dynasty; he also wrote an important history of Alexander.
- Spitamenes** (d. 328 B.C.) Warlord of Sogdiana and one of Alexander's toughest opponents for a while but he faltered and his own men eventually killed him.
- Gaius Flaminius** (d. 217 B.C.) Prominent Roman politician and general who walked into Hannibal's trap at Lake Trasimene and was cut down with most of his army.
- Gaius Terentius Varro** (fl. 218–200 B.C.) Consul and commanding Roman general at Cannae (216 B.C.), Varro, along with the other consul and second-in-command, Lucius Aemilius Paullus, carried out tactics that led to disaster.
- Hamilcar Barca** (d. 228 B.C.) Father of Hannibal and Carthage's greatest general in his day, he began the conquest of southern Spain and may have conveyed a hatred of Rome to his sons.

Hannibal (247–183 B.C.) Carthage's greatest general, he was the driving force for war with Rome and the strategist behind the invasion of Italy.

Hasdrubal (d. 207 B.C.) Hannibal's younger brother, he was left in charge of Spain but lost it to the Romans. He marched his surviving troops overland to Italy, where he was defeated and killed at the Metaurus.

Mago (d. 203 B.C.) Hannibal's youngest brother, he invaded northwestern Italy by sea in 205, in support of Hannibal, but he was defeated and wounded and died at sea on the way home.

Maharbal, Son of Himilco (fl. 217–216 B.C.) One of Hannibal's main cavalry officers, he defeated a large Roman cavalry force after Trasimene and urged Hannibal to send his cavalry to Rome right after the victory at Cannae.

Masinissa (238–148 B.C.) King of Numidia whose defection from Carthage to Rome, with his excellent cavalry, sealed Hannibal's fate at Zama.

Polybius (ca. 200–ca. 118 B.C.) Historian who wrote the best surviving account of the Second Punic War, Polybius was a Greek statesman who was sent to Italy as a Roman hostage, and rose to a position of influence with the Scipio family.

Pyrrhus of Epirus (319–272 B.C.) He invaded Italy to support Greek cities against Rome and won every battle but lost the war. He was both a role model and a warning to Hannibal.

Quintus Fabius Maximus Verucosus (d. 203 B.C.) Dictator in 217 and a prominent general and politician during most of the rest of the Second Punic War, he led the Roman policy of delay and attrition that stymied Hannibal in Italy.

Scipio Africanus or Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus (236–183 B.C.) Rome's greatest general of the Second Punic War, he conquered Spain and North Africa and defeated Hannibal at Zama.

Cato, Marcus Porcius or Cato the Younger (95–46 B.C.) Caesar's most bitter and most principled enemy, his suicide made him a symbol of republican liberty.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius (106–43 B.C.) Rome's greatest orator, Cicero hesitated during the civil war before supporting Pompey; eventually, he received a pardon from Caesar. He is most important to us for the light his letters and speeches throw on Roman public life.

Cleopatra or Cleopatra VII (69–30 B.C.) Queen of Egypt and mistress of Julius Caesar and, later, Mark Antony, she was a brilliant stateswoman who skillfully maneuvered for political power and tried to try to preserve her kingdom's independence.

Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.) The greatest general of the later Roman republic and perhaps all Roman history, he was also a shrewd politician and an excellent writer.

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (d. 48 B.C.) Roman politician and enemy of Caesar, whom he fought at Corfinium, Massilia, and Pharsalus.

Mark Antony or Marcus Antonius (83–30 B.C.) One of Caesar's leading commanders, he proved a better general than politician.

Metellus Scipio or Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio (d. 46 B.C.) Governor of Syria,

commanded the center of Pompey's lines at Pharsalus and fled to North Africa, where he led the opposition to Caesar and was defeated at Thapsus. He killed himself afterward.

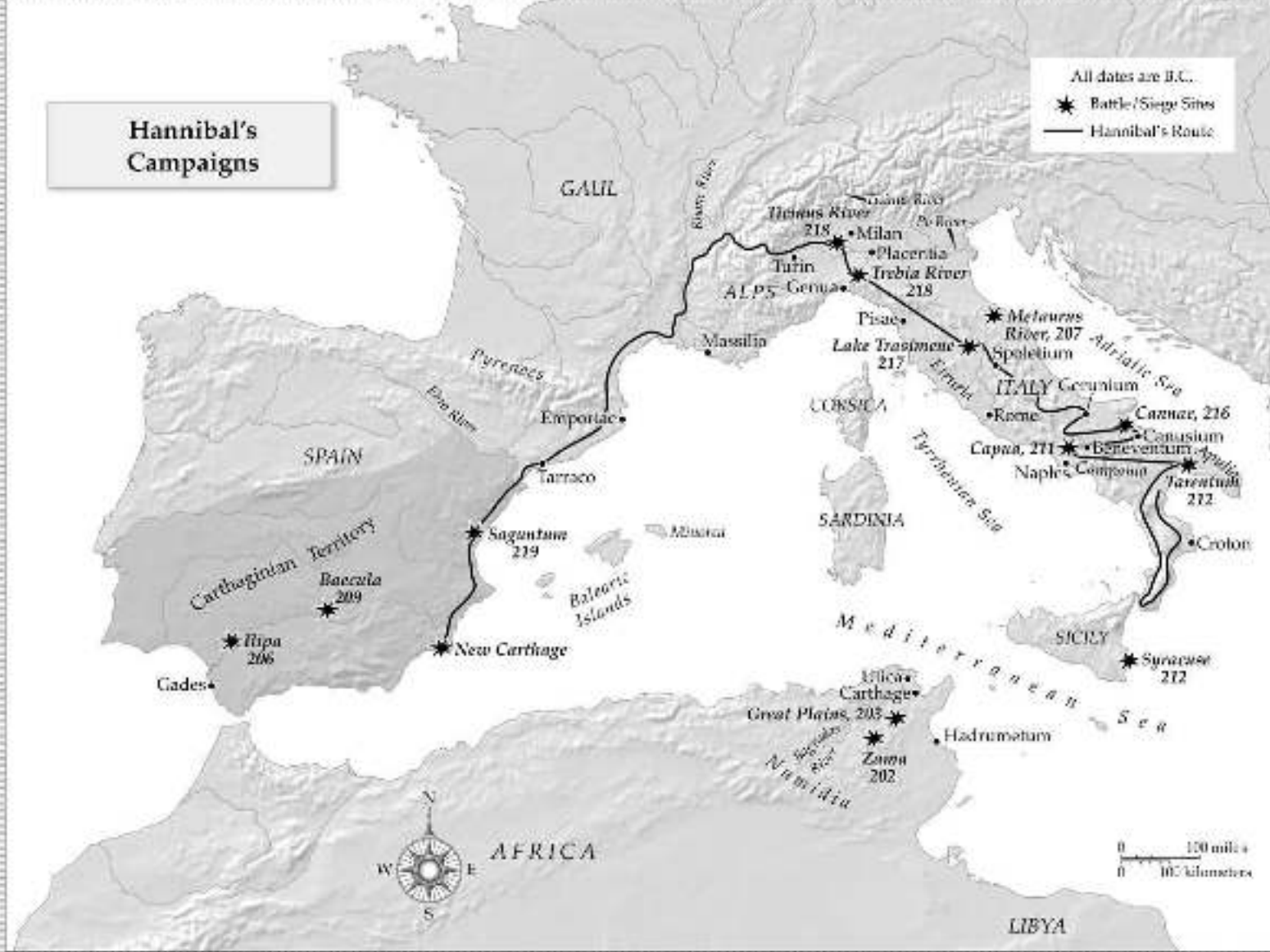
Pharnaces II (63–47 B.C.) King of Bosphorus (in modern Turkey) and son of Mithradates, a famous enemy of Rome, Pharnaces suffered a crushing defeat against Caesar at Zela and was killed soon after by a domestic enemy.

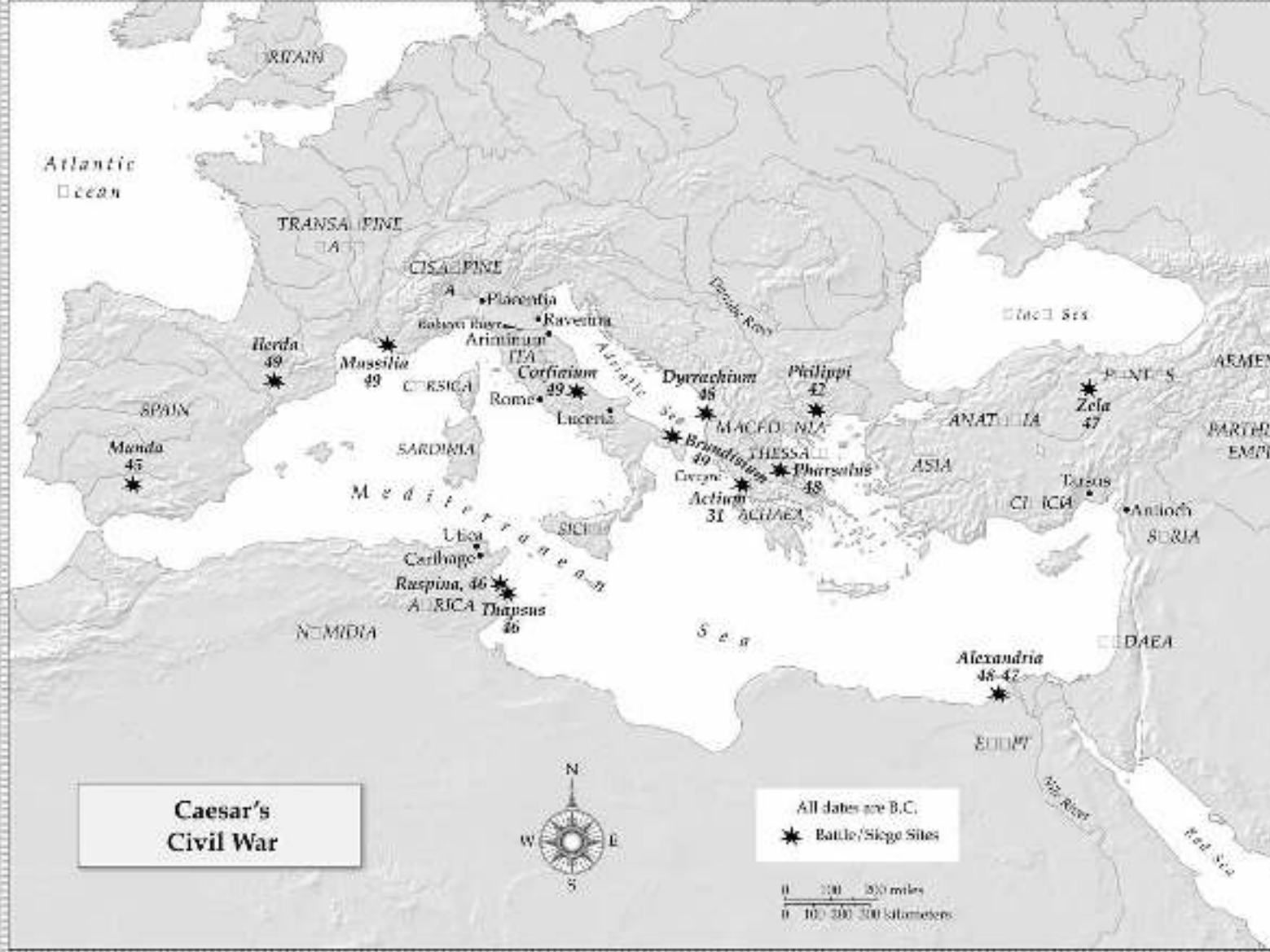
Pompey or Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (106–48 B.C.) Second only to Caesar as a Roman commander and statesman in the late republic, he went from being Caesar's ally to his leading opponent—and the result was civil war.

Titus Labienus (ca. 100–45 B.C.) Caesar's second-in-command in Gaul, he defected to Pompey and fought to the bitter end against his former chief.

Hannibal's Campaigns

All dates are B.C.
★ Battle/Siege Sites
— Hannibal's Route





Caesar's Civil War



All dates are B.C.
 ★ Battle/Siege Sites

0 100 200 miles
 0 100 200 kilometers

TEN QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMANDERS



YOU COULDN'T MISS THE KING. The Battle was already a muddle of men and horses in motion and you 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.

• • •

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 Paullus 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 that 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-eight years later, in the spring of 48 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 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. Caesar 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 empire 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 with 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 1881—in a book of that name—most of his readers admired imperial ambition. Today, after the blood

twentieth century, we are less sure of it. The grandeur of these three great generals inspires but the 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 and 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 the 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 conquests. 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 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 through 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 spots. 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 governing 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 commander's 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

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