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A Critical Assessment of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory and its Explanatory Paradox for Political Leadership Performance in Nigeria.

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[0229] Abstract
Despite decades of democratic transitions, constitutional revisions, and economic reform initiatives, Nigeria continues to suffer from persistent governance deficits, institutional decay, systemic corruption, and political instability. This development which can be termed a colossal mishap has continued to generate serious philosophical questions. Central to this argument is whether the responsibility of good governance rests squarely on the leader or a collective responsibility involving the leaders and the led. The paper examined the explanatory strengths and limitations of Carlyle's Great Man theory in understanding leadership performance in Nigeria. In particulars, the paper evaluated the strength of Carlyle's traits of great leaders in understanding the challenges of leadership performance in Nigeria; the interface between Thomas Carlyle's need for great leader and leadership in Nigeria; and the limitation of Carlyle's traits of great leaders in understanding the challenges of leadership performance in Nigeria. While relying on the Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theoretical framework, the paper utilizes the Historical-Comparative (HC) approach of qualitative design. It relied on secondary method of data collection, and qualitative content analysis for data analysis. The paper concluded that the strength of Great Man Theory should be adopted as a guiding principle in electing political leaders who will help build and stabilize institutions and structures that will guarantee good governance and accountability in Nigeria.
Keywords: Great Man Theory, Leadership, Nigerian leadership.

1. Introduction

Across the globe and Nigeria in particular, political leadership in has remained central to every national discuss from independence till date, as the country struggle to find effective pathway to national development. Mohammad (2025) reckons that leadership is universally acknowledged as the cornerstone of organizational success. It is the catalyst that transforms vision into reality, mobilizes resources, and inspires human capital toward the achievement of collective goals (Northouse, 2021). Yet, strong enduring debate exist as to what philosophy truly inspires political developments. At the heart of this enduring leadership debate is what constitute the primary driver of political outcomes: whether historical progress and governance performance are dictated by the agency, vision, and character of individual leaders, or by underlying institutional, socio-economic, and structural forces. One of the earliest formal formulations of individual-centric leadership is Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory, articulated in his 1840 lectures On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. Carlyle posited that the history of the world is at bottom the biography of "Great Men" exceptional figures endowed with rare charisma, intellect, moral courage, and willpower who single-handedly shape national trajectories and bend historical events to their resolve. Within this paradigm, national progress or failure is directly attributed to the personal attributes and decisive actions of key political figures. In the context of Nigerian political history, Carlyle's framework offers compelling analytical resonance.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's socio-political landscape has been heavily defined by personalistic rule, military strongmen, messianic political rhetoric, and hyper-centralized executive power (Onyemachi, 2024). From foundational nationalist figures like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello, to transformative military rulers such as General Murtala Muhammed, political dynamics in Nigeria have frequently revolved around the "big man" phenomenon. In a state characterized by weak formal institutions, public expectation often gravitated toward individual leaders as the primary catalysts for anti-corruption, administrative reform, and national unity. However, relying solely on Carlyle's heroism presents serious contextual dialectics as the Nigerian state

operates within complex structural realities such as deep-seated ethnic and religious cleavages and institutional fragility amongst many others. Thus, Carlyle's framework risks oversimplifying governance performance in multi-ethnic developing nation like Nigeria. Hence, understanding leadership in Nigeria necessitates a critical examination of both the explanatory utility and the conceptual boundaries of the Great Man Theory.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of democratic transitions, constitutional revisions, and economic reform initiatives, Nigeria continues to suffer from persistent governance deficits, institutional decay, systemic corruption, and political instability. In interrogating this ugly phenomenon, a popular narrative within the political leadership discourse and commentary attributes these perennial leadership challenges primarily to a leadership deficit, as articulated by Chinua Achebe's classic assertion that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (Achebe, 1983:1). This leader-centric worldview suggests that Nigeria's developmental stagnation stems not from structural flaws, but from a failure of individual executive character and willpower. While Carlyle's Great Man Theory accurately captures the hyper-personalized nature of Nigerian politics, explaining how individual agency can produce decisive policy shifts, the Nigeria sociopolitical structures and institutional realities present a serious paradox. The core problem this paper addresses is the conceptual inadequacy of relying solely on Carlyle's Great Man Theory to diagnose leadership performance in Nigeria. While the theory provides a lens to analyze executive agency and personalistic power, its failure to integrate institutional, socio-economic, and structural variables limits its capacity to offer a holistic explanation of leadership outcomes. This paper systematically investigates the explanatory strengths and limitations of Thomas Carlyle's framework in understanding the interface between individual leadership agency and structural cum institutional constraints in shaping outcomes of political leadership in Nigeria.

Objective of the study

This paper examines the explanatory strength and limitations of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory in understanding the challenges of political leadership performance in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (a) evaluate the strength of Carlyle's traits of great leaders in understanding the challenges of leadership performance in Nigeria (b) the interface between Thomas Carlyle's need for great leader and leadership in Nigeria (c) the limitation of Carlyle's traits of great leaders in understanding the challenges of leadership performance in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

Leadership

Leadership is as old as the hills, but the actual etymology of the word is modern – the first dates back to 1821 when leader was combined with the suffix "ship" denoting position. The word leader has an older pedigree – from the Old English lædere - one who leads, agent noun from lædan - to guide, bring forth (Kelly, 2014). Lead or leader does not have a Latin or Greek derivation. The closest word in antiquity relating to leadership is the Latin word Ducere "to lead, consider, regard" and interestingly in modern Romanian language the word for leading and leadership is conducere. Interestingly, when one studies the etymology of the word lead, leader and leadership and its ancient relative Ducere, one can begin to appreciate why there is so much complexity and variance in our modern understanding of what leaders do and what leadership is. The term has so many meanings: direction, guidance, transformation, facilitation, orchestration, servitude and more; and each of these separate definitions has developed into `distinctive behavioural brands of leadership (directive, transformative, facilitative, leader as steward, servant leader and so on).

There have also been written philosophical evidences revealed over 5000 years ago through the Egyptian hieroglyphics that indicate that there has been a constant quest in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of leadership. In Egypt as at that time, the hieroglyphics for leadership indicated directions as to how the leader (shemsu) should interact with the follower (shemsu). Moreover, in

carrying out a study of Chinese business leaders, McDonald (2012) emphasized the foundation of leadership to Confucian teachings which had spanned over 2000 years. The Confucian views on leadership embraced harmony and loyalty (Cheung & Chan, 2005), vision and a sense of purpose (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008) and morality (Chen & Kao, 2009). Furthermore, there are also Greek epistemological considerations to leadership. Avery (2004) made reference to Plato who characterized leaders as men of 'gold', and followers as men of 'bronze.' Likewise, Van Vugt (2006) expressed the views of Plato who stated that leadership should only be handled by a philosopher-king. While Singh (2016), put forward the point that the knowledge of leadership in India is traceable to the 4th century BC. He confirmed his opinion by expressing the views of an Indian legend Kautilya who he argued had developed schools of thought on leadership that led to a strong economy in India (Singh, 2016).

Leadership in Nigeria

The leadership question in Nigeria among observers, analysts and academics is an endless one, with a great majority, holding the view that "leadership" is the major problem of Nigeria. Considering the nature and character of the Nigerian political leadership since independence, Ogunmilade, Nwoko and Akhigbe (2017) opined that, the perception rating of the ruling elites is jaundiced by intense power struggle to access statist structure, private economic resources, repressive tendencies and the preoccupation with political struggle to the neglect of critical development issues. Utomi (2020) described the Nigeria's political system and its leadership as one in which those who are out for "greater plunder" mobilize to push out the "lesser plunderers". To him, the arena of public life in Nigeria is an arena of plunder, thus there is disconnect between the leaders and the led. As Okadigbo (1987) has observed, political leadership in the country is merely focused on sharing state resources rather than improving the living conditions and well-being of the people. Therefore, what is of utmost importance to the leadership is "state capture and the control of the state resources and institutions. Consequently, there is palpable absence of rigor in dealing with problems in the country.

Similarly, Chiamogu and Okafor (2014) argued that the leaders of Nigeria do not have the culture or belief of common good for all the people. This has necessitated the migration of young Nigerians overseas in huge numbers seeking for greener pastures elsewhere, thereby creating the brain-drain situation witnessed in the country, depriving the nation on the much-needed human resource for development. The trouble with Nigeria as Achebe (1983) rightly noted in simply and squarely a failure of leadership. The bulk of leaders in Nigeria are certificated but do not have the knowledge and capacity to lead or govern. It is important to note that since the emergence of political community there has been the debate as to who should govern for the "common good" of all the people of the society. While there are many philosophical interventions from a number of thinkers, Plato's Republic dwelt more richly on this. The leadership situation in Nigeria fits into the situation Plato described as "Prisoners in the temple". In other words, misfits have found themselves in governance positions. As Plato argued, in this kind of circumstances, where those who are not specially trained to identify the "form of the Good", which in this case is the interest of all, in position of public office, it is not possible for those in authority to govern in the interest of all or for the common good of all.

The incompetence of the ruling class in Nigeria is most visible in its management of the nation's resources, security, inter-ethnic relationship, etc. One major evidence of leadership failure in Nigeria, according to Ochulor (2011) is the fact that as the seventh largest producer of crude oil in the world Nigeria imports fuel for its local consumption. On the other hand, other oil producing nations like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc, do not import fuel, but rather, export refined petrol and petroleum products and had invested their resources to massively improve on the living conditions of their citizenry, while Nigeria is now the Poverty Capital of the World. The state institutions and structures of government are not functional because of the low capacity and leadership weaknesses of the people manning them. For instance, the parliamentary system of government adopted at independence in 1960 did not work in Nigeria, while it is working well in UK, India, Canada, etc; so also, has the presidential system from 1979-1983, and up till date, yet it is working in USA, etc. This is so because the operators of the system lack adequate knowledge and skills to make them work optimally. As Ochulor (2011) has observed, the

leadership of Nigeria suffers from intellectual incapacity, lack of discipline and political inexperience. To him, "intellectual incapacity, lack of discipline and political inexperience on the part of our leaders lead to venality of office". Indeed, it is common knowledge that in Nigeria people bribe their way into public offices in the executive, legislature and judiciary.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Great Man's theory, which is primarily attributed to a Scottish philosopher and essayist; Thomas Carlyle who gave a series of lectures on heroism in 1840, later published as On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History, in which he states that universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory relies on two core assumptions, supported by several foundational beliefs:

(a) ***Every Great Leaders is born already possessing certain traits that will enable them rise and lead on instinct:*** This assumption rests rest on several foundation including that great leader possesses innate attributes. Effective leadership is viewed as a genetic endowment or divine inspiration. Traits like charisma, intellect, courage, and intuition cannot be taught, learned, or acquired through training. Next, is that it prefers nature over nurture. The theory strongly favors "nature" in the nature vs. nurture debate, asserting that these individuals possess an inherent, almost mythical, superiority. Lastly, it presumes stable qualities for the great leader. These characteristics are believed to remain stable over time and across all situations, meaning a true leader would be successful regardless of the environment.

(b) ***Great Leaders Arise When the Need is Great:*** This assumption rests on the foundation that the emergence of the great leader is crisis-driven. The theory assumes that when a society, organization, or movement faces a massive crisis, the right leader will naturally emerge to conquer rivals and guide the masses. It implies that no matter the circumstances, if an individual possesses these rare leadership traits, they are destined to rise to a position of authority and influence. This theory, and history, claims these great leaders as heroes that were able to rise against the odds to defeat rivals while inspiring followers along the way. Theorists say that these leaders were then born with a specific set of traits and attributes that make them ideal candidates for leadership and roles of authority and power. This theory relies then heavily on born rather than made, nature rather than nurture and cultivates the idea that those in power deserve to lead and shouldn't be questioned because they have the unique traits that make them suited for the position

Modern Perspectives and Criticisms

While the Great Man Theory drove early studies into leadership traits, it is has attracted criticisms from modern organizational psychology. Critics point out that it: (a) Ignores the influence of the social, economic, and environmental conditions that allow a leader to succeed. (b) Fails to account for individuals who possess leadership skills but never find themselves in a position of power. (c) Is inherently biased, as it originally focused exclusively on men from aristocratic backgrounds while ignoring systemic opportunities. One of the most forceful critics of Carlyle's formulation of the great man theory was Herbert Spencer, who believed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was an unscientific position (Segal, 2000). He believed that the men Carlyle called "great men" were merely products of their social environment; you must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. That before he can remake his society, his society must make him (Spencer, 1896). However, William James, in his 1880 lecture "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment", published in the Atlantic Monthly, forcefully defended Carlyle and refuted Spencer, condemning what he viewed as an "impudent", "vague", and "dogmatic" argument (James, 1880). James argued thus: if anything is humanly certain it is that the great man's society, properly so called, does not make him before he can remake it. The mutations of societies, then, from generation to generation, are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the examples of

individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movements, setters of precedent or fashion, centers of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction.

Leo Tolstoy in his book, *War and Peace*; features criticism of Great Man Theories as a recurring theme in the philosophical digressions. According to Tolstoy, the significance of great individuals is imaginary; as a matter of fact, they are only "history's slaves", realizing the decree of Providence (Tolstoy, 1869). Contrastingly, Robert Faulkner, a proponent of Aristotelian magnanimity who in his book *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics*, criticizes the political bias in discussions on greatness and heroism, stating that the new liberalism's antipathy to superior statesmen and to human excellence is peculiarly zealous, parochial, and antiphilosophic (Faulkner, 2007). Essentially, the Great Man theory does not disregard the existence of other factors in the spheres of leadership, but unwaveringly argues that Great Men are the most significant factor in the making societal history while utilizing their intellect, physical ability and instinct. The Great Man theory literally provides us the most suitable theoretical framework for this study as it principally argues that the strength of a great is inborn and key to inspiring, organizing and leading historical positive political leadership in Nigeria. It means that to have the desired leadership performance in Nigeria, it requires a leadership that possesses the right kind of traits as enunciated in the Great Man Theory of Leadership, so as to elicit the right kind of attitudinal change in citizens of the country which would ultimately give way to the attainment of positive enduring socioeconomic development of the country.

Napoleon Bonaparte: Model for Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory of Leadership

Napoléon Bonaparte, also called Napoleon I (born August 15, 1769 in Ajaccio, Corsica died May 5, 1821, St. at Helena Island) was a French general, played a key role in the French Revolution (1789–99), became the First Consul (1799–1804), Emperor of France (1804–1814/15), and one of the most celebrated personages in the history of the West (Jacques-Louis, 2026) (Godechot, 2026). He was the fourth, and second surviving, child of Carlo Buonaparte, a lawyer, and his wife, Letizia Ramolino. His father's family, of ancient Tuscan nobility, had immigrated to Corsica in the 16th century. Napoleon was educated at three schools: briefly at Autumn, for five years at the military college of Brienne, and finally for one year at the military academy in Paris. It was during Napoleon's year in Paris that his father died of a stomach cancer in February 1785, leaving his family in straitened circumstances. Napoleon, although not the eldest son, assumed the position of head of the family before he was 16. In September he graduated from the military academy, ranking 42nd in a class of 58.

Leadership Legacy

Military Strategy & Operational Art

Napoleon transformed warfare by introducing the corps system independent, self-contained units that marched separately for speed and flexibility, then concentrated rapidly before a battle. His tactics prioritized decisive maneuvers to destroy the enemy's main field army rather than occupying territory.

The Napoleonic Code (Code Civil): Promulgated in 1804, the legal code standardized French law by establishing: (a) Equality before the law and freedom of religion. (b) Abolition of feudal privileges and hereditary nobility rights. (c) Protection of property rights and meritocratic civil service entry. While civil liberties for women were restricted under the code, its structural framework became the foundation for legal systems across Western Europe, Latin America, and beyond.

State Centralization and Institutional Reforms: Napoleon established durable administrative frameworks that survived long after his fall: (a) The Bank of France and currency stabilization via the gold-backed franc. (b) The Lycée system for standardized secondary and higher education. (c) The Prefectural administrative system, placing local government directly under central supervision.

4. Methodology

The study utilizes the Historical-Comparative (HC) approach of qualitative research design which examines social processes, institutions, or phenomena across time (historical) and space/contexts (comparative); seeking to understand how specific outcomes came to be by analyzing historical trajectories across different societies, regions, or eras. It relied on secondary method of data collection, and qualitative content analysis for data analysis. The Historical Analysis examined the historical context of Carlyle's theory, the leadership traits, and the limitations. Whereas, the Comparative Political Case Analysis applies the theoretical and historical insights to analyze the persistent challenges of political leadership in Nigeria.

Strengths of Great Man Traits (Napoleon Bonaparte) in Understanding Leadership Performance in Nigeria

Understanding leadership performance in Nigeria through the lens of Napoleon Bonaparte's core strengths offers a compelling framework. While governance in Nigeria is rooted in a constitutional democracy that differs fundamentally from the 19th-century imperial rule where Napoleon thrived, the functional leadership traits that enabled Napoleon's efficiency provide sharp insights into why some Nigerian leaders succeed and others systematically fail.

Cognitive Capacity and Mastery of Operational Details: Napoleon's ability to "compartmentalize" his mind, memorize vast details, and synthesize complex, multi-sector information enabled him to make rapid, informed decisions without relying blindly on advisers. This is very relevance to Nigerian leadership as it would be fundamental to navigating the complex policy environments in Nigeria. Nigeria's socio-political and economic ecosystem is exceptionally intricate (spanning foreign exchange crises, multi-tiered fiscal federalism, security threats, and complex energy transitions). A leader lacking deep, detail-oriented cognitive capacity easily becomes a captive of vested interests, political cabals, or technocratic echo chambers. In Nigeria, civil service bureaucracies often delay reforms through administrative obfuscation. Leaders with high intellectual bandwidth and strong detail orientation who master the Nigerian policy environment can bypass administrative inertia, ask the right questions, and enforce implementation.

Institutional Architecture and Administrative Genius: Napoleon's enduring legacy is not his battles, but his institutional design; codifying law (Code Civil), establishing meritocratic civil service structures, and creating enduring fiscal institutions like the Bank of France. A critical failure in Nigerian governance has been the reliance on "strongmen" rather than strong institutions. Applying Napoleonic administrative focus highlights the need for Nigerian leaders who prioritize systemic reforms such as codifying transparent public procurement, automating tax collection, or reforming electoral/judicial frameworks. A reformist Nigerian leader succeeds precisely when he has built resilient, system-driven institutions that would have outlasted his individual tenures.

Meritocracy and Talent Magnetism: Napoleon shattered feudal privileges by establishing a strict meritocracy (a marshal's baton in every knapsack), promoting individuals based on demonstrated technical competence and courage rather than noble lineage. Its relevance to Nigerian leadership is in countering ethno-religious and quota pressures towards unlocking high-performing technocrats. In Nigeria, leadership recruitment is heavily constrained by federal character, quota systems, and political patron-client networks, often sacrificing merit for geopolitical balancing. Evaluating Nigerian leadership through this trait demonstrates that effective executive performance requires building cabinets and agencies based on technical track records. When Nigerian leaders appoint highly competent technocrats into key economic, security, and infrastructure roles, performance improves dramatically.

Morale, Communication, and Charismatic Agency: Napoleon understood that "the moral is to the physical as three is to one." He used inspiring rhetoric, personal presence, and psychological strategy to align his people around a grand vision. Nigerian citizens are disillusioned by their leaders resulting low public trust. And low public trust poses major hurdles for Nigerian leaders attempting difficult economic reforms (such as subsidy removals or tax restructuring). A leader possessing

Napoleonic communicative force can build a compelling national narrative that transcends ethno-religious fault lines, convincing citizens to endure short-term hardship for long-term structural gain.

TABLE 1: FRAMEWORK OF STRENGTHS OF GREAT MAN THEORY (NAPOLEON TRAITS) IN UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIAN

Napoleonic Traits	Relevance on Leadership in Nigeria	Expected Impact on Leadership
Cognitive Details and Mastery	Technical understanding of complex structural and institutional realities including geopolitics, bureaucracy, fiscal, security and legal systems	Prevents leaders from being manipulated by corrupt cartels or civil service inertia.
Institutional Design	Building lasting systems, digitizing process and codifying legal reforms.	Shifts governance from short-term patronage to long-term institutional stability.
Merit-Based Appointments	Appointing highly competent technocrats over political godfather's pick.	Improves implementation capacity in government ministries and agencies.
Charismatic Moral Force	Transparent communication and inspiring a collective national vision and sense of patriotism among the citizen.	Restores public trust and builds consensus for difficult structural and institutional reforms.

Limitations Great Man Traits (Napoleon Bonaparte) in Understanding Leadership Performance in Nigeria

While Napoleon Bonaparte's leadership traits offer valuable insights into personal drive and administrative efficiency, using them as a primary template to analyze leadership performance in Nigeria reveals fundamental analytical limitations. Fundamentally, Napoleon operated as an autocratic emperor in an expansionist 19th-century European state, whereas modern Nigeria is a complex, multi-ethnic, constitutional federal republic. Hence, applying Napoleonic traits directly overlooks critical structural, legal, and socio-cultural realities of Nigerian governance. These analytical limitations are discussed below:

Unlimited Executive Powers vs. Constitutional Separation of Powers: Napoleon exercised supreme, centralized authority. He legislated by decree, commanded the military directly, and created administrative frameworks without institutional opposition. Nigerian leaders operate under the structure of constitutional democracy with a distinct separation of powers. Thus, evaluating Nigerian leaders on Napoleonic unilateral action leads to authoritarian overreach. In Nigeria, a leader who attempts to rule like an emperor faces immediate gridlock from the National Assembly, judicial review, public protests, or even electoral rejection. Leadership performance in Nigeria requires negotiation, coalition-building, and consensus, not top-down executive command.

The Structure of Centralized Efficiency vs. Ethno-Religious Diversity and Federal Structure: Napoleon built a highly centralized unitary state (the Jacobin model), imposing uniform legal code and administrative standards across territories. As Nigeria is a deeply structured into federation with over 250 ethnic groups, distinct religious majorities, and significant regional economic disparities. Attempting to apply a centralized (one-size-fits-all) Napoleonic approach in Nigeria would routinely fail. Leadership performance in Nigeria is judged not just by efficiency, but by inclusivity, conflict management, and regional balancing (e.g., managing the Federal Character principle). Applying very centralized policies would often trigger regional resistance and even a sense of insecurity. This is not far-fetched, as we can recall, the introduction of the unitary system by General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi through Unification Decree No. 34 on May 24, 1966, was a principal catalyst for the July 29, 1966 counter-coup (often referred to as the July Rematch) (Teniola, 2020). While Ironsi intended the system to eliminate ethnic tribalism and promote national cohesion, the decree backfired due to existing political tensions, ethnic mistrust, and the sensitive atmosphere following the January 15, 1966 coup. Nigeria was reconfigured from a federal structure into a centralized republic composed of provinces under a single authority in Lagos. The announcement of Decree No. 34 immediately led to violent

protests across Northern towns (such as Kano, Kaduna, and Zaria) targeting Igbo residents, marking early waves of anti-Igbo pogroms (Teniola, 2020). Within the armed forces, Northern soldiers and junior officers increasingly viewed Ironsi's actions not as neutral administrative reform, but as a deliberate attempt to institutionalize Igbo supremacy over the military and government.

Meritocracy vs. Patron/Client Realities: Napoleon's meritocratic principle (a marshal's baton in every knapsack) replaced aristocratic privilege with talent and battlefield performance. In Nigeria, political power is sustained through patron-client networks, political godfathers and geopolitical quotas or zoning. If a Nigerian leader attempts to operate purely through Napoleonic meritocracy without navigating these informal power structures, they risk political sabotage, defunding, or removal. Sustainable leadership performance in Nigeria may require a delicate balance between technocratic merit and political accommodation.

Morale via Battlefield Glory vs. Trust in Democratic Social Contract: Napoleon generated public legitimacy through military expansion, foreign conquest, and intense nationalist rhetoric. Nigeria's primary challenges are domestic: economic stabilization, poverty reduction, internal security, and infrastructure deficits. A Nigerian leader cannot build lasting public trust through grand rhetoric or external distraction. Performance in Nigeria depends on fulfilling the social contract providing electricity, security, stable purchasing power, and functional public infrastructures like schools, roads, etc. The Napoleonic focus on grand, heroic legacy fails to capture the systemic work required for democratic nation-building.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF THE ANALYTICAL LIMITATIONS

Napoleonic Traits	**Limitations of Application in Nigeria**
Autocratic Decisiveness	Blocked by legislative oversight, judiciary and federal checks
Unitary Centralization	Ignores the demands of multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition
Meritocracy	Do not account for political clientelism and federal character realities
Heroic/Conquest Legitimacy	Irrelevant for addressing service delivery, poverty and local security

Interface between Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory's Need for Great Leader (Napoleon Bonaparte) and Leadership in Nigeria.

There are certain sociopolitical conditions that pave way for the emergence of the great man leader. Thus, a key component proposal of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory of leader is that great leaders arise when the need is great. The theory assumes that when a society, organization, or movement faces a massive crisis, the right leader will naturally emerge to conquer rivals and guide the masses. As in the case of Napoleon who capitalized on the public's desperate need for stability after a decade of terror, alongside a meritocratic military system that allowed his tactical genius to shine, culminating in his successful emergence in 1799 albeit through coup.

The Chaos of the French Revolution vs Institutional Breakdown in Nigeria: The revolution dismantled the old aristocratic order, disrupting traditional elites and shattering the established government. By the late 1790s, the ruling five-member *Directory* was corrupt, economically struggling, and fundamentally unstable, leaving France craving order and strong leadership. Incidentally, this aligns with the classical theories of revolution, whether structural, grievance-based, or mobilization-oriented (Davies, 1962; Skocpol, 1979; Goldstone, 2016), which identified a cluster of conditions that typically precede large-scale revolutionary rupture: widespread grievances, delegitimized authority, elite fragmentation, economic decline, and the emergence of collective identities capable of sustaining mass action. By these standards, contemporary Nigeria appears theoretically primed for revolution. Because chronic inequality, systemic corruption, governance failures, recurrent economic crises, and persistent public frustration constitute the very dynamics associated with revolutionary tipping points. The state of chaos in most affairs of the country is near anarchy.

Nigeria faces interconnected and severe challenges, primarily driven by widespread insecurity, severe economic hardship, poor infrastructure, and deep-seated governance issues. These intertwined crises continue to profoundly impact the daily lives of citizens across all regions. The pervasive challenges like kidnapping, regional terrorism, and banditry destabilize local communities. These

threats alongside illegal arms trafficking and weak border controls disrupt agricultural production, leading to massive displacement, and heavily undermine food security. The nation struggles with fiscal deficits, a heavy reliance on oil revenue, and crippling inflation. There is high unemployment and poverty rates severely limiting local community development and leave citizens with a high cost of living. Yet, there is lack of stable power (with frequent national grid collapses), poorly maintained roads, and insufficient emergency or healthcare facilities burden businesses and households daily. This exact dynamic has repeatedly played out in Nigeria. The failure of democratic institutions in the First (1960-1966) and Second (1979-1983) Republics plagued by corruption, electoral violence, and economic stagnation led the populace and military elites to embrace military interventions (e.g., Aguiyi-Ironsi, Gowon, Murtala Muhammed, Buhari, Babangida, and Abacha). In times of systemic collapse, a frustrated electorate or military elite often favors centralized, authoritarian efficiency over chaotic institutional democracy.

More recently, the repeated mass mobilizations and persistent calls for radical change such as the Occupy Nigeria in 2012, EndSARS in 2020 and the Obidient Movement which started in 2022 is an indication of institutional breakdown in Nigeria, a replica of the chaos associated with the French Revolution. The Occupy Nigeria was triggered by the removal of fuel subsidies in 2012, and marked a turning point in post-1999 protest culture. It unified labour unions, students and civil society in nationwide demonstrations. While initially successful in forcing partial policy reversal, elite infiltration, state repression, and negotiation demobilized the movement (Emmanuel & Ezeamalu, 2013). Its legacy lies in reawakening civic consciousness and popularizing protest as a democratic instrument. It unified labour unions, students, and civil society in nationwide demonstrations. Its strength lay in the broad, cross-sectional composition of its membership, cutting across class, gender, region, and occupation.

The 2020 EndSARS protest saw Nigerian youths took to the streets to demonstrate against the rogue police unit, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This followed a viral video of a man allegedly killed by SARS (NAN, 2020). EndSARS began as an online campaign against police brutality but evolved into Nigeria's largest youth-led protest in decades. Likewise, the Obidient Movement which is a political movement in Nigeria emerged in 2022 and became prominent in the lead-up to the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. It emerged around and largely driven by the then Labour Party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State. In other words, Obi did not create the movement (Opejobi, 2024). The Obidient movement channeled EndSARS-era disillusionment into electoral mobilization. It relied heavily on digital networks and diaspora support to challenge entrenched elite politics (Mgbaemena, 2024). The movement gained significant support, particularly from young Nigerians frustrated with systemic corruption, insecurity, poor governance, and economic challenges.

Technocracy and Meritocracy vs. Prebendalism: One of Napoleon's major contributions was the establishment of a meritocratic state (careers open to talent) and the Code Napoléon, alongside economic and educational reforms. He relied heavily on administrative competence, centralized planning, and merit over noble lineage. Modern Nigerian leadership frequently struggles with prebendalism, where state offices are treated as spoils to be distributed along ethnic, regional, or partisan lines. However, when Nigerian leaders have successfully built power or left lasting legacies (e.g., the technocratic economic management teams under various administrations), it would have mirror-imaged Napoleon's strategy, surrounding political authority with high-performing technocrats to rebuild fiscal stability and infrastructure.

Crisis of Legitimacy and Populist Appeal: Napoleon was initially seen as an outsider from Corsica without traditional aristocratic standing. He constructed his legitimacy through brilliant military victories, decisive action, and direct appeals to national pride (populism), rather than divine right or hereditary tradition. In Nigeria, political leaders often lack structural legitimacy due to disputed elections, voter apathy, or institutional distrust. To bridge this gap, Nigerian political figures frequently rely on personal charisma, populist economic promises, or identity politics (ethnicity and

religion) to consolidate authority. The quest for "popular legitimacy" through charismatic authority remains a central theme in Nigerian elections.

Over-Centralization and Executive Imperialism: After establishing the Consulate, Napoleon rapidly centralized power, eventually crowning himself Emperor. He suppressed opposition, controlled the press, and weakened local regional autonomy to construct a hyper-centralized imperial state. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution creates a powerful executive presidency, what can be an imperial presidency, which inherits much of its structural DNA from former military dictatorships. Nigerian state governors and presidents often hold immense centralized control over resources (via federal allocations and security votes). This centralized political structure often stifles true federalism, mirroring Napoleon's concentration of administrative authority in Paris at the expense of local governance.

TABLE 3: MATRIX OF INTERFACE BETWEEN THOMAS CARLYLE'S GREAT MAN THEORY'S NEED FOR GREAT LEADER (NAPOLEON BONAPARTE) AND LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA

Axis of Analysis	**Rise of Napoleon (France (1789 -1799)**	**Leadership Dynamics in Nigeria**
Trigger Power	Public fatigue with corruption, economic hardship, insecurity and revolution.	Post-independence institutional failures, economic crises and insecurity
Basis of Authority	Decisive action, military prestige, personal merit and national stability	Ethnic coalition building, patronage networks and executive power
Governance Style	Hyper-centralized technocracy and strong executive authority	Strong executive structure, ongoing struggle between centralized power and true federalism
Structural Legacy	Long-lasting administrative, legal framework (Napoleon Code) and educational systems.	Institutional fragility with recurrent constitutional and security debates.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The persistent challenge of poor leadership performance in Nigeria remains the primary barrier to the nation fulfilling its immense potential. Despite being endowed with vast natural wealth and a vibrant and entrepreneurial population, decades of governance marked by systemic corruption, institutional decay, policy inconsistency, and a lack of accountability have stalled sustainable development. As the quest for good leadership in Nigeria continue, Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory highlights the power of charismatic, decisive leadership in driving transformational change, as vividly demonstrated by the rise and reforms of Napoleon Bonaparte. However, applying this theory to Nigeria reveals that relying solely on extraordinary individuals is insufficient to overcome the nation's deeply entrenched political and structural challenges. While Nigeria undeniably needs visionaries with Napoleon's strategic resolve and institutional ambition, Bonaparte's ultimate downfall serves as a critical warning against authoritarian overreach and individual hubris. Ultimately, the key lesson for Nigerian political leadership is that true greatness lies not in dominating power, but in building enduring, inclusive institutions that outlast any single leader. The paper recommends that the strength of Great Man Theory should be adopted as a guiding principle in electing political leaders who will help build and stabilize institutions and structures that will guarantee good governance and accountability in Nigeria.

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