
Alexander at Gaugamela

Remember, upon the conduct of each depends the fate of all.

—Alexander the Great

The date is October 1, 331 BC. On the plains of Gaugamela, roughly 60 miles east of the modern-day northern Iraqi city of Mosul, Alexander the Great faces, for the third and final time, the mighty army of King Darius III of Persia. On this balmy autumn day, a force of 150,000 Macedonian, Greek, and mercenary warriors under Alexander's command, 1,500 miles from their home and with no means of escape, defeats a Persian army at least five times its size. King Darius flees the battle, and is killed six months later by one of his advisers. Alexander, at the age of 30, finds himself the ruler of an Asian empire of 70 million people. He has become history's first master of Creative Execution.

ALEXANDER COMES OF AGE

The clash at Gaugamela was the denouement of nearly 200 years of war and rivalry between the Greek city-states and the Persian Empire. The outnumbered but highly disciplined Greeks put up remarkable fights at landmark battles such as Marathon and Salamis, and Thermopylae—the “Gates of Fire”—where King Leonidas held off the

Persians with 300 of Sparta's best warriors, giving the Greek armies enough time to regroup and halt the invaders. Just as impressive, but not yet acclaimed in a 3-D Hollywood movie, is the feat of the Ten Thousand, a Greek army of 10,700 hoplite soldiers that found itself surrounded by Persian foes in 401 bc. Rather than surrender, the Ten Thousand voted to walk back from Babylon, located in the heart of the Persian Empire, to the shores of the Black Sea. That's a journey of roughly 700 miles through what is now northern Iraq and eastern Turkey, which was—and remains—an inhospitable land settled by fierce warrior tribes. Amazingly, five out of six Greek soldiers from those Ten Thousand made it back to shore, and in the process defeated every foe that opposed their march. Stories of the Ten Thousand's retreat through Persia permeated Greek history and its rulers' belief in their superior *ethos* (moral character) and battle tactics. As Victor Davis Hanson explains in *Carnage and Culture*, "The soldiers in the ranks sought face-to-face shock battle with their enemies. All accepted the need for strict discipline and fought shoulder to shoulder whenever practicable . . . To envision the equivalent of a Persian Ten Thousand is impossible." ¹

Growing up in this warlike Macedonian society, Alexander the Great not only learned the history of Greece's ongoing cold war with Persia but also received the best classical education available at the time. His tutor, Greek philosopher Aristotle, ensured that his royal pupil understood ethics, politics, and the arcane sciences of mathematics and philosophy. The relationship between master and student persevered throughout Alexander's career. Alexander once wrote to Aristotle that he would rather "excel the rest of mankind in my knowledge of what is best than in the extent of my power."² Paradoxically, this sensitivity to world culture and philosophy would play a significant role in Alexander's downfall following his conquest of Persia. Instead of subjugating the Persians and imposing Greek and Macedonian customs throughout his new empire—which by classical standards would have been the norm (and was the preferred technique of the Romans, whose empire would outlast Alexander's by 500 years)—Alexander

pardoned most of Darius's entourage, embraced Eastern beliefs, and dressed in the Persian style, drawing the ire of his fellow Macedonians.

By the time Alexander was in his teens, the enmity between the Greek city-states and Persia remained at an all-time high. But before they could face the Persians, the Macedonians had to tame Greece itself, which felt no compulsion to join any Macedonian adventure across the Aegean. The leading Greek city-states such as Athens, Sparta, and Thebes viewed Macedonia as an unworthy start-up, and weren't willing to commit their troops and funds to a foreign adventure as bold as the conquest of Persia. A contemporary equivalent would be a U.S.-led proposal to invade the entire Middle East in the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. None of America's allies in Europe or elsewhere would sign up for what they would perceive as an act of folly. Yet that is precisely the task that Alexander and his father, King Philip II, set out for themselves.

Philip's contribution to this grandiose dream was to build a crack Macedonian army that defeated the Greek forces of Athens and Thebes at Chaeronea in 338 BC. Only 18 at the time, Alexander led the cavalry charge that broke through the Greek center. This decisive, powerful, and bold move would become a trademark of Alexander's strategy for fighting the Persians. Thanks to this dramatic victory, Philip secured the allegiance of the Panhellenic states and was appointed *strategos* (general) in charge of the upcoming campaign against the Persians. For the first time, the Greek city-states and their new Macedonian overlord were united in a single front to take on the Persian juggernaut.

As Philip began preparations for his ambitious campaign, Alexander wasted no time in convincing his peers and the king himself that he had grown into a mature warrior who could achieve great deeds against the odds. After watching his father's trainers approach a wild horse, Alexander asked if he could tame the creature himself. Philip consented, and announced that he would give the horse to Alexander if he succeeded. Alexander approached the animal and gently moved him away from the sun, having noticed that he became nervous at seeing

his own shadow. Then he rode his new mount—which was to become the indefatigable Bucephalus—into a controlled gallop to the amazed shouts of king and courtiers.

Soon thereafter, Alexander welcomed a Persian emissary while his father was away and peppered him with questions about his journey, the geography and obstacles he had encountered on his way to Macedonia, and the conditions of the Persian army and empire. The gracious emissary did not know that Alexander would use this information to invade Persia, nor would he have believed it. The Persian Empire stretched from the Indus River in the east to Egypt in the west—what encompasses today the whole of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Turkey.

Compared to this vast empire, Macedonia was just a speck on the map. Persians had every reason to believe that their empire was vastly superior to both Greece and Macedonia, not just in military might but in sheer manpower and economic resources. In the first Greco-Persian wars, the Persians had razed Athens, whereas the Greeks had never come near the Persian capital. Persia's legendary army, including King Darius's personal guard known as the Immortals, was thought to number up to a million men—although the real number of frontline warriors was probably less than half that. To some extent the Persians had a more advanced society than the Greeks, having introduced the world's first attempt to abolish slavery and embed principles of human rights and equality in government.

THE PERSIAN ADVENTURE

Two years after Chaeronea, Philip was assassinated by one of his seven bodyguards (several theories persist about Alexander's potential role in this regicide, although his involvement was never seriously considered at the time). Alexander immediately assumed the title of *strategos*. He crossed into Asia in 334 BC, with an army consisting of 8,000 horsemen and 43,000 infantrymen. The heart of Alexander's army was the Companion Cavalry, which Alexander himself led into battle, followed

by the Macedonian phalanx, a tight formation of infantry carrying 18-foot-long lances called *sarissai*. The first four or five rows of the phalanx would thrust their *sarissai* together, creating a packed wall of iron that could cleave its way through enemy infantry. Even though the Macedonians fielded far fewer men and cavalry mounts than the Persians, they were considered a crack force—much like Special Forces in today's armies. Alongside the Macedonians stood the newly allied Greeks from Athens, Thebes, and the other city-states vanquished at Chaeronea. Several thousand Greek mercenaries had also joined Darius's army, either in the belief that the untested young Alexander would crumble once he faced the entire Persian army, or simply out of spite after the humiliating defeat at the hands of Philip and Alexander.

Alexander's first test against the Persians took place at the Granicus River (modern-day Turkey) in May 334 BC. Facing the Persian army late in the day, Alexander ignored the advice of his more seasoned commanders, who wanted to wait for the following day to carry out a proper reconnaissance of the battlefield. Leaving little time for the Persians to assess the situation, Alexander deployed his troops on a wide front, with the heavy phalanx in the center and his Companion Cavalry on the right flank. Seeing Alexander to the far right, the Persians moved troops from the center to face his cavalry. Alexander's most senior general, Parmenion, launched a light charge on the left flank, thus forcing the Persians to withdraw even more troops from their center. Once this was accomplished and Alexander could see that the enemy center was depleted, he charged into the center gap with his Companions. As he reached the front line of Persian nobles, he challenged one of the enemy commanders, Rhoesaces, to fight him man to man. Alexander suffered a blow to his helmet, but recovered and struck down the Persian with his sword.

Alexander's personal triumph, after his bold crossing of the Granicus, energized his troops. The Persian center soon buckled under the double weight of the Macedonian cavalry and advancing phalanx, and the battle turned into a rout. Darius's army lost between 10,000 and 20,000 infantry and 2,500 cavalry, compared to 25 of Alexander's

Companions and 300 infantrymen, most of whom fell to Persian arrows and spears during the river crossing. This lopsided victory was a stunning achievement by the Macedonians, who not only had to ford a river while under enemy attack but also managed to conceal their intentions and strike the heart of the Persian army. So assured had Darius been of victory at the Granicus that he did not attend the battle, trusting instead several of his satraps to lead the Persian defense. Alexander showed no mercy for the Greek mercenaries who were captured, ordering the execution of more than 18,000, and condemning 2,000 to slavery. This ruthlessness would stand in stark contrast to Alexander's treatment of Persian prisoners, whom he later integrated into his army.

The Macedonian army remained in Anatolia for a year, establishing its influence and eradicating Persian strongholds. It took a year for Darius to replace the army he had lost at the Granicus. This time the king himself took charge of the army, reinforced by a staggering array of allies and mercenaries. In total, Darius had under his command 100,000 Persian infantry and cavalry, 40,000 Armenians, 30,000 Greek mercenaries, and thousands of horsemen from the Persian Empire's eastern steppes. In short, Darius had three times more soldiers and cavalry than Alexander. The Persian army's strength would be seriously tested by Alexander, who had rotated a few of his troops from Greece and Macedonia after his initial victory, but still held on to the crack Macedonian phalanx and Companion Cavalry.

Buoyed by his vastly superior numbers, Darius deployed his army near the Issus river in southern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) in November 333 BC. He did not heed the warning of his Greek adviser Charidemus, who had led the Athenian resistance against Alexander's father and had joined Darius's ranks after the Greek defeat at Chaeronea. Upon viewing the massive Persian army, Charidemus pointedly observed: "[Your magnificent army] gleams with purple and gold; it is resplendent with armour and an opulence so great that those who have not witnessed it simply cannot conceive of it. The Macedonian line is certainly coarse and inelegant, but it protects behind its shields and lances immovable wedges of tough, densely

packed soldiers . . . What you need is strength like theirs. You must look for help in the land that produced those men—send off that silver and gold of yours to hire *soldiers* [emphasis added].”³

When he heard this shocking assessment, Darius ordered his soldiers to slit the Greek leader’s throat—but the kernel of truth that Charidemus had exposed at the cost of his own life would prove hauntingly accurate. Alexander caught the bulk of Darius’s army crossing a mountain pass at Issus and once again led the Persians to believe that he would attack from the left, while he personally led his Companion Cavalry to wheel around the right flank. Once he had routed the right wing of the Persian army, Alexander made a beeline for the Persian nerve center, charging into the flank of Darius’s center with the Companion Cavalry. Accounts of the battle depict Alexander establishing eye contact with Darius and attempting to strike the Persian king. Whatever did happen in the general melee, Darius quickly decided that Alexander was too much and fled the field in his chariot, leaving behind 110,000 Persian and allied dead. Alexander pursued Darius until nightfall but, delayed by the huge swaths of the retreating Persians, could not reach his quarry.

The battle of Issus cemented Alexander’s hold over the western crescent of the Persian Empire, confirming the fact that his first victory at the Granicus was no fluke and that the Macedonian army could accomplish its lofty goal of defeating Persia. The victory also provided the first glimpse into Alexander’s post-conquest strategy. Instead of the ruthless spirit he had shown at the Granicus by ordering the execution of all Greek prisoners, Alexander treated the captured wives and concubines of King Darius with deep respect. Not only did he promise that the women could keep their titles and belongings, but he allowed them to join his Macedonian court. Eventually Alexander would marry a Persian princess and incorporate units of the Persian army into his own.

At the Granicus and Issus, Alexander had shown Darius that he wasn’t afraid of the much larger Persian force, and that his tactical genius and personal courage could offset the numerical superiority of

the Persian army. But he still only occupied half of the Persian Empire. The other half, home to Darius's capital and immense wealth, still lay untouched in modern-day Iran and Iraq. And so instead of accepting the increasingly frantic offers of peace from Darius, Alexander set out for the Persian nest, convinced that he could once again meet and defeat Darius. After years of being tormented by the Persians, Alexander could feel that the advantage was finally swinging in favor of the underdogs. But the Persians had not given up, and, after learning two bitter lessons at the Granicus and Issus, were eager to show the world that they were no pushovers. Alexander was only too willing to oblige.

THE FINAL SHOWDOWN: GAUGAMELA

Here we are, then, the morning of October 1, 331 BC, three years after Alexander stepped foot on the Asian mainland. Waiting on a plain carefully chosen for its favorable terrain, Darius has control over the largest army ever assembled in the ancient world. Not to be outdone a third time, Darius cleared the plain of obstacles so that he could deploy his scythed chariots against the Macedonian infantry. He even brought elephants, imported from India, to add terror and firepower to his army. Altogether the Persian army was even more powerful than the one mustered at Issus. Its total numbers were estimated to be as high as one million by ancient scholars like Plutarch, but the most likely number was closer to 200,000, including a vast cavalry contingent perhaps numbering as many as 40,000. For his part, Alexander was relying on the same troops that had performed so brilliantly at the Granicus and Issus—augmented by fresh infantry and cavalry and hardened by two years of constant marching and fighting. Darius had arrayed his army in solid squares, confident that Alexander would not break through a tight defense.

Seeing the bulk of the Persian army, Alexander's senior general, the influential Parmenion, suggested a night attack to surprise Darius. But Alexander, perhaps because of pride or out of his belief in the

prophesy that he would become master of the known world, revealed to him at the Temple of Amon in Egypt, simply told Parmenion, “I will not steal victory.” Alexander’s strategy for winning the day was again bold and compelling: he would feint an advance with his left and right wings, enticing Darius to reinforce his defenses away from his center, and lead a cavalry charge into the nexus of the Persian forces. As the battle began, Alexander used a new ruse: he walked his cavalry across the front of the Macedonian line from left to right, visibly exposing himself and causing Darius to believe that he would launch a cavalry charge on the Persian left flank. To match this perceived threat, Darius ordered his forces to reinforce the left flank, starting the depletion of the Persian center that Alexander desired. The Persian king then ordered a heavy cavalry attack into the Macedonian left, held by Parmenion. As ordered by Alexander, Parmenion refused battle and simply held off the cavalry charge, although the ferocity of the Persian attack came close to buckling the Macedonian line. Elements of the Persian cavalry broke through a gap in the Macedonian ranks, but instead of exploiting this sudden advantage by surrounding Parmenion’s left wing, the Persians chose to pillage the Macedonian supply camp, thus wasting their only opportunity to gain the upper hand.

At this turning point in the battle, Alexander saw that the Persian attacks on his left wing and his own feint had drawn off sufficient numbers from Darius’s center. The Macedonian phalanx had already dealt with Darius’s chariots by letting them through the front lines, encircling them, and killing most of the drivers and horses. Now it was their turn to attack, following Alexander’s charge at the head of the Companion Cavalry into the weakened Persian center. The outcome of the main charge was in doubt for some time, with both Darius and Alexander spurring their men forward and the Persians nearly enveloping Alexander. It took an apparent omen—the sight of an eagle gently hovering over Alexander in the middle of the carnage—to restore the confidence of the Macedonians, who finally drove through the main Persian body and came within sight of Darius. With his charioteer

dead and his forces beginning to retreat, Darius took the reins and fled for the second and last time as Alexander furiously pursued him.

The price tag for Darius's third and final defeat was horrendous. In the field of Gaugamela lay more than 50,000 Persian dead, along with 5,000 Macedonian dead, a ratio of 10 to 1. The Persian tally would have included Darius himself and the remainder of the fleeing Persians had Parmenion not sent a desperate signal for help, which Alexander received just as he was about to launch a full pursuit of Darius. Having to choose between capturing his main prize and saving the left wing of his army, Alexander turned his cavalry around to come to Parmenion's rescue. The Companion Cavalry quickly turned the tide back in the Macedonians' favor, and the last remnants of the Persian army surrendered or fled. As Victor Davis Hanson astutely writes, this final act showed that "Alexander's revolutionary practice of total pursuit and destruction of the defeated enemy ensured battle casualties unimaginable just a few decades earlier."⁴ Alexander didn't seek trophies or personal glory. He wanted to achieve total victory, and he had adopted Greek and Macedonian battle tactics to ensure that his army would not just defeat but annihilate the Persians.

ALEXANDER'S CREATIVE EXECUTION FORMULA

In total, Alexander's destruction of the Persian army at the Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela resulted in well over 200,000 Persian deaths. Alexander would enter the Persian capital of Babylon to claim its riches and take for himself Darius's throne before stepping into Afghanistan and India. Just how did Alexander, with his compact Macedonian army, manage to not only once, but *three times*, defeat a much superior foe? Starting with his first battle fighting the Greeks at Chaeronea, Alexander began to formulate a strategy for winning against the odds, and from that moment on continually refined his Creative Execution formula. As a result, Gaugamela and the conquest of the Persian Empire was the apotheosis of Greek and Macedonian warfare, and remains unmatched in the annals of antiquity. Only Julius Caesar would match Alexander's reputation as the most accomplished

general of the ancient world, yet the forces that Caesar fought in his greatest campaign in Gaul (modern-day France) were puny compared to the vast Persian armies and complex geography that Alexander faced in Asia. Caesar's genius was as much political as it was military, whereas Alexander had only one objective: the complete defeat and conquest of the Persian Empire.

Let's take a look at how Alexander's Persian campaign fits into the Creative Execution formula, and thereby shares the same qualities that were wielded centuries later by the U.S. Coast Guard and Thomas Cook.

Unique Strategy

More than any other general in ancient history, Alexander had a clearly articulated view of how he would conquer Asia and fulfill his countrymen's wish of bringing down the Achaemenid dynasty. It's important here to understand the difference between motive and strategy. Alexander's motive in conquering Asia was to remove the threat of Persian hegemony and create a harmonious world order. This goal was not new. Greek and Macedonian rulers for 200 years had been bent on eliminating the very real threat that the Persian Empire represented, and, as we saw with the march of the Ten Thousand, some had come close to succeeding. The newness of Alexander's strategy was the way in which he proposed to fight the Persians in order to win total victory—something that had eluded his predecessors and would inspire Western warfare for centuries to come. There were two unique yet simple elements to his strategy:

1. Feint and deny his left wing. In all his battles, Alexander would arrange his forces so that his left wing, usually commanded by his most experienced general, would “refuse” combat by simply standing their ground and deflecting enemy charges. This stratagem allowed Alexander to concentrate his offensive firepower in the center and right wing of his army, while giving the enemy the impression that

his main thrust would come from the left wing. This was an audacious strategy that almost cost Alexander his victory at Gaugamela when Parmenion's left wing buckled as it absorbed the onslaught of the Persian cavalry.

2. Lead a cavalry charge through the enemy center, followed by the bulk of the infantry to cut down enemy forces. At Issus and Gaugamela, Alexander led a charge that was directed at the center of the Persian lines and King Darius himself. Both times he came close to slaying Darius, and changed the tide of the battle by breaking through the enemy's lines and delivering a fatal blow with the combined power of his Companion Cavalry and phalanx.

Alexander's actions bring to life a key concept of Western warfare, which endures today under the name of "center of gravity" operations, where one attacker seeks to disrupt or destroy the opponent's nerve center. The U.S. Joint Staff Officer's Guide describes the center of gravity as "the characteristics, capabilities, or locations from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight." In the case of the Persian army, its will to fight clearly emanated from King Darius himself. Alexander understood that regardless of the size of the Persian army, going after its center—or Darius himself—would be the fastest way to defeat it. And that's the Unique Strategy he pursued at the Granicus, Issus, and finally Gaugamela.

The other unique aspect of Alexander's strategy was his personal commitment to lead the Companion Cavalry into action, and always use the cavalry and the phalanx as reinforcing elements of terror and destruction—what the Pentagon today would call "shock and awe." While the Greeks fought mostly as infantry, Alexander understood the advantage of heavy cavalry on the vast terrain of Asia, and selected his finest warriors to join him in the Companion Cavalry. As Hanson explains, Alexander was the master of delivering "stunning cavalry blows focused on a concentrated spot in the enemy line, horsemen from the rear turning the dazed enemy onto the spears of the advancing phalanx; [and] subsequent pursuit of enemy forces in the field."

He adds that “In all such cases, the overriding agenda was to find the enemy, charge him, and annihilate him in open battle—victory going not to the larger force, but to the one who could maintain rank and break the enemy as a cohesive whole.”⁵ The fact that Alexander successfully used the same strategy three times in a row to defeat Darius’s army is a testament to the Macedonians’ battle discipline and to the strategy’s near-faultless premises.

Candid Dialogue

The ubiquity of Candid Dialogue in Alexander’s leadership stands in stark contrast to the Persian way. At the onset of his campaign, looking for ways to motivate his troops, Alexander delivered a powerful speech reminding the Greeks and Macedonians fighting under his banner that they were “free men.” He referred to Persians as “slaves” who had no personal or political freedom. Accordingly, men in Alexander’s army were free to associate, hold assemblies, and sometimes vote on important issues. This familiarity and openness was replicated at the royal court, where Alexander often invited and recognized common soldiers and commanders. As Partha Bose reports, “Alexander studied Aristotle’s subtle framing—the way he would phrase a question, the way he would elongate or emphasize certain words, where he would pause in the asking. . . . He could frame a question in a certain way and, based on the response he got, be persuaded whether he could trust the respondent or be wary of him.”⁶ Alexander used this technique to test his generals’ and soldiers’ commitment to the Macedonian cause, and as a result clearly understood his troops’ mental state and readiness for battle.

Alexander’s unceremonious and inclusive style built a strong esprit de corps in his army, and inspired respect from his friends and enemies alike. He spoke plainly in explaining his aims and strategy, and in showing his pleasure or displeasure. In a disagreement with Parmenion, who was pushing him to accept the peace terms offered by Darius before Gaugamela, Alexander simply replied that he would

accept, too, were he Parmenion. The concept of free men fighting for a noble cause, Alexander's direct approach, and his use of fast couriers to relay information on the battlefield all contributed to his stunning victories. The *Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare* explains that "the superiority of western military practice derives in part from its tradition of free speech, unbridled investigation, and continual controversy, relatively free from state censorship or religious stricture."⁷ Unlike Alexander's open and inclusive style, King Darius behaved like an imperious monarch, and paid the price in battle. Instead of encouraging Candid Dialogue and listening to his commanders' advice for fighting Alexander, he ordered the execution of Charidemus, the only leader in his entourage courageous enough to tell him the truth about his ineffective army.

Clear Roles and Accountabilities

Alexander showed true genius with the training and organization of his army, which he kept to a manageable size and focused on specific tasks and skills. He organized his army into three corps of specialized warriors: the Thessalian cavalry, which included the small group of Companion Cavalry that Alexander personally led, and which acted as the shock troops; the powerful phalanx, with its rows of *sarissai* that worked as a unit to mow down enemy infantry; and the javeliners who harassed enemy cavalry. Alexander kept his army purposely small in order to maintain effective control and wield these three groups in unison. Hanson observes that the "coordination between infantry and horsemen was an entirely new development in the history of Western warfare, and was designed to make numbers superfluous." He explains that the battles of the Macedonians "were not to be huge showing matches between phalanxes, but sudden Napoleonic blasts to particular spots, which when exploited would collapse and thereby ruin the morale of the others."⁸

Reflecting this organizing philosophy, all of Alexander's generals and soldiers knew their exact role and place on the battlefield. Unlike

Darius, whose decision making was tightly centralized, and whose army didn't follow a clearly established battle plan, Alexander's field commanders didn't need specific orders to understand what Alexander intended to do, or to follow him into battle once he launched his cavalry charge. "[Alexander's commanders] were so tightly linked in their sense of purpose and ambition that they were certain every one of them would know exactly what to do," writes Partha Bose. "The Companions had been trained to work independently or together as a group. They knew their role here, which was to charge into the Persian center at any cost. In pursuit of that single objective they kept adapting themselves as needed."⁹

Perhaps the most impressive illustration of Alexander's approach to dividing roles and responsibilities was the discipline of the troops that were to hold back and deny the left flank. Although Parmenion sent for help at Gaugamela, he never buckled or questioned his orders. The Persian cavalry, which for a fleeting moment had the opportunity to roll up the Macedonian left wing, in contrast, had no clear design and decided to sack the Macedonian camp. This single difference between the Macedonian and Persian war machines meant that the Persian army fought for the sake of fighting itself, rather than pursuing a clear goal. The greatest achievement sought by Persian leaders was to challenge and kill individual foes in man-to-man battles, a macho and entertaining, but otherwise futile, gesture. Macedonian leaders did not seek individual combat or glory but focused on fulfilling their part of Alexander's battle plan—even if it meant just standing their ground and refusing combat, as Parmenion was instructed.

Bold Action

Alexander was all about decisive, bold action to bring about a swift victory. This usually meant waiting for the right time to unleash the Companion Cavalry against the Persian center. The concentrated, decisive action that the Macedonians perfected with the Companion Cavalry was a Hellenic tradition unique to Western warfare. Greeks

and Macedonians practiced the art of synchronized movement and reinforcing maneuvers, which ensured that no part of the army would fight alone. At the battle of Thermopylae, King Leonidas only had 300 Spartans to block off the entire Persian army—because he knew that his soldiers would stick together and form a defensive shield that the Persians could not break. It took a Greek traitor, who showed Xerxes a way around the pass, for the Persians to finally overcome the Spartan defense after three days of stubborn resistance. Likewise in his first major battle at Chaeronea, Alexander waited until the left wing was under attack to launch the Macedonian main cavalry attack and surround the Athenians and Thebans.

Bold Action was a trademark of Alexander. He was an ardent admirer of Achilles, whose tomb he visited after landing in Asia. “I wish I could see Achilles’ lyre, which he played when he sang of the glorious deeds of brave men,” he exclaimed after anointing his hero’s grave with sacred oil.¹⁰ At the Granicus, he plunged into the river despite Parmenion’s warning that it was late in the day and that the opposite bank seemed rough and uneven. His love of Bold Action was made famous in the tale of the Gordian Knot, which takes place in the city of Gordium where Alexander set down his winter quarters in 333 BC. Unable to untie the thick rope because he could not find the ends, Alexander cut the knot in two with his sword, and produced the required result. This Bold Action earned him the favor of the local oracle, who declared that Alexander would become master of all Asia. To this day, the cutting of the Gordian Knot remains a symbol of Alexander’s untamed spirit and ability to make instant difficult decisions.

Alexander made three bold decisions during the Persian campaign, and each one impacted the ultimate outcome:

1. He decided to attack the Persians as soon as he reached the Granicus, rather than wait until the next morning to assess the situation—as conventional wisdom would suggest. This decision took the Persians by surprise and gave Alexander the advantage by allowing him to deploy his troops in the formation he desired.

2. Again ignoring the advice of Parmenion, who advocated a night attack in order to avoid fighting the massed Persian army at Gaugamela, Alexander chose to wait until morning so that Darius could muster his entire army. He wanted to provoke Darius into a full-fledged battle, and didn't want a nighttime skirmish that would result in a confusing battle. This decision had a positive unintended consequence: expecting a night attack, Darius had kept his troops awake all night. As a result, the Persians who fought at Gaugamela did so without the benefit of a full night's sleep.
3. Perhaps the boldest decision Alexander ever made was to stop the pursuit of Darius when he realized that Parmenion was in an imminent state of collapse at Gaugamela. He put aside his personal need for vengeance and closure, and wheeled the Companion Cavalry back to save the Macedonian troops under Parmenion's command. It was a bold decision that sealed the Macedonian victory and effectively ended the reign of King Darius, who fled into the Persian countryside and was ultimately killed by one of his own officers.

Visible Leadership

Charging at the head of the Companion Cavalry with his distinctive white plumed helmet, there is no question that Alexander not only felt exalted about leading his army into battle but also believed that his place as a leader and conqueror was at the front of his line of battle. Alexander's determination and blind belief in his ability to overcome the odds presented by the Persian army was a huge contributor to his success on the battlefield. As Steve Forbes and John Prevas write, "Alexander's leadership style reflected his conviction that a man of ability and determination could inspire and direct others to accomplish anything he set his mind to . . . His willingness to remain at the forefront of every operation, never asking more from those he led than he himself was willing to give, is what enabled him to keep his army behind him for so long."¹¹ He was first to cross the Granicus, followed by 13 squadrons of cavalry, despite waist-high waters and the fact that

the Persian army was waiting for him on the opposite bank. He was wounded twice at Granicus and Issus, had several horses killed under him, but never withdrew from the field. As John Keegan wrote of Alexander's victory at Issus, "Outnumbered three to one, Alexander once again chose to attack on the strongest sector . . . crossing the enemy's missile zone at speed, and so braving what ought to have been a disabling barrage from the arrows of the Persian composite bowmen, he led the cavalry directly against the flank where Darius stood."¹²

The morning of Gaugamela, Alexander was fast asleep and had to be woken up by Parmenion, his second-in-command. Parmenion remarked that he couldn't fathom how Alexander could sleep undisturbed the morning of such a momentous battle. "Why not?" Alexander retorted. "Do you not see that we have already won the battle, now that we are delivered from roving around these endless devastated plains, and chasing this Darius, who will never stand and fight?"¹³ This could be considered boasting, but reflects the calm and confidence that Alexander felt and spread around his army. His direct, energetic leadership was anathema to Darius, who stayed isolated from his troops and demanded blind obedience.

During his 12 years in Asia, from Persia to Afghanistan and India, Alexander stood at the front of his army. Never once did he go home, or send his army into battle without being at the forefront. "[Alexander] was always the first into battle, he always fought in the very thick of it, and he was always the one pushing deeper and farther into the enemy ranks."¹⁴ Even outside of the battle zone, he acted as a visible leader, as he did by sparing the wives of Darius after Issus. By visibly showing restraint and giving his personal protection to the Persian princesses and queens, Alexander began the reconciliation process with the Persians, which ensured that his personal legacy was not just about conquest but also about blending Western and Eastern culture.

Alexander's personal leadership would be tested as his army pushed further east into modern-day Afghanistan and India. While the Greeks and Macedonians in his army had been motivated to fight King Darius

and bring down the Persian Empire, they felt no compulsion to exterminate the dozens of local tribes that opposed their journey eastward, where Alexander hoped to reach the Indian Ocean and embark with his troops for the homeward return. In his most visible act of leadership following Gaugamela, Alexander gathered his discontented commanders and delivered a speech that brought some of them to tears. “If, indeed, there is some cause for reproach regarding the hardship that you have endured up to now, or regarding my leadership, it is pointless for me to continue addressing you,” he said. He went on to name the dozens of lands that the Macedonians had conquered, then urged the men to “stand firm . . . for it is toil and danger that lead to glorious achievements, while pleasure lies in a life of courage and in a death that brings undying fame.”¹⁵ Eventually Alexander retreated to Persia, yet his visible leadership throughout the campaign from Persia to Afghanistan and India is what kept his Macedonian, Greek, and Persian forces from deserting his cause—or worse, from turning on each other.

FINAL TALLY

Alexander returned to Babylon in the winter of 324 BC, seven years after his victory at Gaugamela. These years were marred by brutal clashes in Afghanistan and India, where his army finally told Alexander that they would go no further. He made a number of unpopular decisions, marrying the ex-wife of a Persian commander, adopting Eastern fashion, and attempting to blend Persian troops into his own. As James Romm writes, Alexander’s integration of Persians into his Macedonian army “offended both the pride and the prejudices of his countrymen.” While the Macedonians had “accepted, grudgingly, his use of Persians as high officials, his adoptions of Persian dress and court rituals, even the marriages of the king and his top staff to Asian women . . . the integration of the armed forces was a more serious matter.”¹⁶ To make matters worse, Alexander had Parmenion put to death on charges of treason, and killed Cleitus, one his best

friends, in a fit of drunken rage. In a theme that was as relevant in 330 BC as it is today, Alexander's real troubles lay in managing the peace after his stunning victories over Darius.

Humbled but not discouraged, Alexander planned a fresh campaign against the Arab tribes to the south of his new empire. But he became ill, or was poisoned, and died in June of the following year (323 BC) at age 33. His embalmed body was taken to Alexandria, the Egyptian city he had founded on his outbound journey into Persia, to be entombed in a marble mausoleum. To this day, the actual location of Alexander's tomb remains one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of ancient times. When it is discovered, we may finally learn what killed Alexander.

Despite his reversals and untimely death, one can't argue that Alexander was an ancient master of Creative Execution. He formulated and executed a Unique Strategy to become, as he would be called after Gaugamela, Lord of the World. He carried out his mission with vigor and personal brilliance—in the process killing more than 300,000 Persians, Indians, and Afghans who opposed his eastward march. Alexander's victory was the equivalent of the United States invading the Soviet Union during the Cold War and defeating the Red Army on its own soil—a feat that Napoleon and Hitler both attempted with catastrophic results. Other than Caesar and Napoleon, no other general would come close to achieving such lopsided victories over a vastly superior enemy.

And so from Alexander's early mastery of Creative Execution, we derive some useful glimpses of what it takes to win against the odds, as well as warnings about the dangers of overconfidence. Historians might argue that Alexander's victories at the Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela were the result of decades of military preparations by his father, King Philip II, which gave the Macedonians an unparalleled edge in fighting the Persians. Likewise, one could argue that King Darius was a fool who overestimated his strength and was an incompetent military commander. A more astute military strategist, well

Battle & Year	Macedonian Losses	Persian Losses	Key Strategy
Granicus— 334 BC	300	10,000 to 20,000 plus 2,500 cavalry and 20,000 Greek mercenaries	Cross the Granicus river and charge the enemy center
Issus—333 BC	500 plus 10,000 wounded	110,000	Refuse left wing, cavalry punch through center
Gaugamela— 331 BC	5,000	50,000	Refuse left wing, cavalry and phalanx punch through center
<i>Totals</i>	<i>Roughly 6,000*</i>	<i>At least 170,000</i>	

* Many more thousands of Macedonian troops died crossing the desert from India back to the Persian heartland in the summer that preceded Alexander's death.

versed in Greek and Macedonian warfare, would surely have prevailed over Alexander with the massive forces and resources available to the Persians. Yet just as in any clash of armies or professional sports teams, it's the final score that counts. And the final score in Alexander's case is overwhelming. From his first clash at the Granicus to the final defeat of King Darius, Alexander put up some impressive numbers.

What we can say with certainty from those numbers is that the combination of a clear and unique Macedonian strategy, precisely practiced and executed over the course of three consecutive battles, resulted in Persian losses roughly 30 times what Alexander's army suffered. While many of the Persian losses were incurred during their retreats, when the Macedonian cavalry easily picked off panicked and disorganized men, Alexander's mastery of the battlefield and his desire for total victory yielded astounding results by ancient—and indeed modern—standards of warfare.

Alexander's personal leadership, charisma, and vision for the inclusion of the Persian Empire into the Western fold, while far-fetched and ultimately impractical, present us with a classic example of Creative Execution in action.

Now let's fast-forward to a time when cavalry charges still dominated the battlefield, but when naval warfare had morphed into a giant gunpowder duel between ships as tightly organized and efficient as Alexander's phalanx. There we shall meet the first master of Creative Execution at sea, who would, through a single action, bring 100 years of peace and prosperity to the European continent.