Ieyasu was determined to capitalise on his victory at Sekigahara, and more generally on the accomplishments of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. His main aim was to ensure the Tokugawa stayed in control of the nation. In this, he would be aided by his survival skills.

In some ways like the nation as a whole, Ieyasu owed much to a mixture of determination, pragmatism, astuteness, and good fortune. A remarkable survivor living in dangerous times, his life is the stuff of adventure stories and films.

He was born Matsudaira Takechiyo in 1542 in Mikawa Province (part of present-day Aichi Prefecture). His mother was just 15 years old and his father, the minor chieftain Matsudaira Hirotada (1526–49), just 17. The Matsudaira family were having trouble with their neighbours, the Oda to the west and the Imagawa to the east. They entered into an uneasy alliance with the Imagawa, and in 1547, to underpin this, Hirotada agreed to send them his young son Takechiyo as hostage. However, while on his way to the Imagawa base at Sunpu (Shizuoka), Takechiyo was captured by Oda forces and taken to the Oda base at Nagoya. Upon his father’s death in 1549 a truce was declared between the Oda and Matsudaira families, and Takechiyo resumed his role as hostage to the Imagawa.

Takechiyo stayed with the Imagawa till 1560, seemingly quite settled. While with them he married and became a father in his teens, like his
own father before him. He even fought with the Imagawa in their battles. Then in 1560 Imagawa Yoshimoto, the head of the family, was defeated and killed by Oda Nobunaga in the Battle of Okehazama. Takechiyo – now known as Motoyasu – was freed from his vassalage, and in fact became an ally of Nobunaga.

With the western borders of his home (Matsudaira) territory now secure through this alliance, Motoyasu turned his attention to the Imagawa territory to the east, and gradually achieved control of this by 1568. By this stage he had changed names again, to Tokugawa Ieyasu. In 1570 he moved his base to the former Imagawa stronghold in Shizuoka, and over the next decade, using his alliance with Nobunaga, was able to extend his territory. At times Nobunaga had doubts about his loyalty, but Ieyasu overcame these. In 1579 he had his own wife and first son – whom Nobunaga suspected of colluding with his old enemy the Takeda family – killed as evidence of his loyalty.

When Nobunaga died in 1582 Ieyasu made use of the ensuing turmoil to occupy Takeda territory in the provinces of Kai and Shinano (present-day Yamanashi and Nagano Prefectures). He was now a major force for Nobunaga’s successor Hideyoshi to reckon with.

In 1584 Ieyasu tried to challenge Hideyoshi’s authority, but failed, and the following year acknowledged Hideyoshi as his overlord. They then formed an uneasy alliance, which in 1590 helped overcome the Hōjō in the Kantō region (unrelated to the earlier Hōjō). Hideyoshi rewarded Ieyasu with territory taken from the Hōjō, but, still concerned about his loyalty, obliged him to take up this territory at the expense of his existing territory. Ieyasu had little choice but to agree. However, instead of moving into the Hōjō’s former base at Odawara, he chose instead the little fishing village of Edo, which was more centrally located within the territory. This obscure little village was later to become one of the world’s largest cities and major economic capitals, Tōkyō.

Over the next few years Ieyasu consolidated his huge holdings, which in effect comprised all the Kantō Plain. Among other things he built Edo Castle, which was later to form the foundations for the Imperial Palace. He was acknowledged by many daimyō as their overlord, and felt strong enough to break his promise to the dying Hideyoshi to safeguard Hideyoshi’s infant heir Hideyori. Having triumphed at Sekigahara in 1600 he was effectively the greatest power in the land.

To legitimise his position, in 1603 Ieyasu received the title of shōgun – unused since 1588 – from Emperor Go-Yōzei (r.1586–1611). He was now 61 years old. In the manner of earlier emperors and shōguns, just two years