

## The Surprising M. Tocqueville

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*Antecedent facts, the nature of institutions, the cast of minds and the state of morals are*

*the materials of which are composed those impromptus which astonish and alarm us.*

*--Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>1</sup> [1]*

To anyone wishing to explore the perennial debate over the issue of whether the United States can more effectively promote the cause of liberty around the world by conducting itself as the exemplar of liberty at home or by exerting itself as the vindicator of liberty abroad, an examination of the American political and diplomatic tradition is an inescapable starting point, and no one has expounded on that tradition more fully and more lucidly than Alexis de Tocqueville. Reflecting on his North American travels in 1830-31, on the mass of documentation that he gathered on American thinking and political practice, and on his observation of the fate of liberty in France and elsewhere in Europe, he made himself perhaps the greatest advocate of freedom, and the most acute analyst of threats to freedom, that the modern world has seen; indeed, the greatest danger to his posthumous reputation may have been an over-familiarity with his work that has caused critics to dismiss him as the elegant explainer of the obvious. Aphorisms so brilliantly expressed can come, over time, to resemble clichés, or even

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1 [1] *Recollections*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, ed., J. P. Mayer (London: The Harvill Press, 1948), p. 68.

apologies for the unjust and unfree structures of power that critical theorists have perceived beneath Tocqueville's prescriptions for the preservation of liberty in equality. In that sense, Tocqueville has been a victim of his own success.

It is the argument of this paper that the thinking of this eminent Frenchman who made himself the keenest observer in history of the American regime may not be as clear to us as we think--that in fact there are at least two and perhaps three Tocquevillian lines of thought that are relevant to the contemporary debate on the proper role for the government of the United--the focus of its attention and the means most suited to its aims--in spreading the truths about liberty that Tocqueville contended were valid at all times and places. That we have inadequately appreciated the variety of counsel that Tocqueville has given us has perhaps been due to our neglect of Tocqueville the political actor as opposed to Tocqueville the author, and to a temptation to concentrate too exclusively on *Democracy in America*, and particularly on Book One of that seminal work, to the neglect of his other writings. There is more than one Tocquevillian path to liberty, and some of the alternate routes lead over unexpected terrain. Let us unfold the complete map.

### America as Exemplar

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville ranged far and wide over a host of aspects of society and referred to an immense variety of specific illustrations, but he brought order to the work by identifying a single fundamental problem underlying his particular observations, that of preserving human freedom in an age of increasing equality. Far from comfortably assuming that equality and liberty naturally are intertwined and mutually reinforce each other, he found many dangers to the preservation and advance of liberty that are peculiarly potent in an era in which

impatience with all distinctions, leading to a willingness to submit to any power that can erase those differences, is marked and growing. In bringing to the eyes of his European readers America's success in combining liberty with equality, he also wished to warn them of the difficulty of the task.

At the very outset of Volume One of *Democracy*, Tocqueville began discussing the causes that affected the chances of success of any country wishing to engage in such a delicate balancing act, and in the penultimate chapter of that volume he summarized and characterized these causes as circumstances, laws, and mores.<sup>2</sup> [2] The first of these sets of influences, which he also termed "accidental or providential", were by definition the least subject to human control, but they were not for that reason the most powerful; instead, he ranked them least in determinative influence. The fact that "the Americans have no neighbors and consequently no great wars," the fact that "America does not have a great capital" that could exercise the sort of malignant centralized control that Paris held over France, the fact that the earliest settlers of British North America had brought with them already formed habits of liberty, intelligence, and equality of conditions, the fact that they had found waiting for them a vast, rich, and "empty" country--all of these circumstances favorable to liberty were "independent of men's will"; indeed, they were due to "Providence". They meant that Americans were highly fortunate in their starting point in the quest for liberty in equality, but Tocqueville contended that other peoples (the countries of South America being his most pointed example) shared many of these advantages (in particular, geographic isolation and extensive natural resources) but had not

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<sup>2</sup> [2] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed., Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago : University of Chicago Press , 2000), Vol. One, Part Two, Chapter Nine.

managed to preserve ordered liberty. Circumstances, then, were immensely important, but they could not be considered definitive.

Laws, the second category of causes, were among the three categories the one most amenable to conscious human direction, and the least subject to chance, fortune, or fate. "The principal goal of this book was to make the laws of the United States known," Tocqueville asserted to his readers, and among these laws freely chosen by the Americans three seemed to him "to concur more than all others to maintain a democratic republic in the New World": federalism, "which permits the Union to enjoy the power of a great republic and the security of a small one," the township institutions, particularly evident in New England, which, "moderating the despotism of the majority, at the same time give the people the taste for freedom and the art of being free," and judicial review, which allowed the courts "to correct the aberrations of democracy". Such laws, the clearest example of freedom exercised in human affairs, nicely complemented the unchangeable circumstances that most powerfully represented the role of necessity, with federalism allowing the United States to reap the greatest benefit from its sheltered geographic position and its vast extent, and local government and judicial review buttressing the traditions of study self-government and willingness to defend one's rights that Americans had inherited from "the first Puritan who landed on [American] shores."

Nevertheless, the most significant of the three causes of the American success in preserving liberty lay neither in circumstances nor in laws, neither in unadulterated freedom nor in iron necessity, but in the intermediate category of mores. Tocqueville's use of the term "mores" is not free from ambiguity (not least because the French *moeurs* has no exact equivalent in English), despite his effort to explain it: "not only do I apply it to mores properly so-called,

which one could call habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas of which the habits of the mind are formed. I therefore comprehend under this word the whole moral and intellectual state of a people.”

Mores took the possibilities opened by favorable circumstances and allowed peoples to realize those possibilities; mores formed the soil in which laws grew, nourishing those favorable to freedom while forming but rocky ground for statutes with a contrary aim. The success of the United States in escaping the ill effects of equality, and in preserving liberty even as equality progressed further there than anywhere else, had something to do with favored circumstances and beneficial laws, but most to do with the ideas and beliefs commonly accepted among the people. Those ideas and beliefs that predisposed citizens to be vigilant in guarding their rights and active in shaping their destiny, while peaceably accepting the authority of law, would constitute the strongest bulwark of liberty. In the United States, Tocqueville saw more of these mores than in Europe--in particular, administrative decentralization, the art of associating together to achieve shared ends rather than simply turning to government to do whatever needed doing, self-interest rightly understood (that is, a grasp of the truth that one's greatest self-interest lay not in purely private gain but in the public sphere--in preserving the free society in which one could pursue private goals), and a well-considered patriotism, which, in contrast to "instinctive" patriotism, loved one's country not simply because it held the familiar scenes in which one had grown up, but because one had helped to make the laws that governed it, making those laws one's own as well. Together, such mores would almost ensure the United States against the erosion of liberty and the erection of "soft despotism", at least for the foreseeable future.

When Tocqueville asked himself what contributed most to "serv[ing] to maintain a democratic republic in the United States"--that is, to combining equality with liberty and liberty with order--he accused his fellow Europeans of exaggerating the effect of both circumstance (the realm of necessity) and laws (the realm most open to conscious control and regular adjustment), and pointed to the middle ground of mores. Not only did "physical causes contribute less than laws, and laws less than mores," but mores could even outweigh the other two factors: "I am convinced that the happiest situation and the best laws cannot maintain a constitution despite mores, whereas the latter turn even the most unfavorable positions and the worst laws to good account." He would return to this theme of modified freedom in the conclusion of Volume Two, when he declared, in almost the final words of the work, "Providence has not created the human race either entirely independent or perfectly slave. It traces, it is true, a fatal circle around each man that he cannot leave; but within its vast limits man is powerful and free; so too with peoples."<sup>3</sup> [3]

In the case of the United States that Tocqueville witnessed when he visited North America in 1830-31, the relative influence of these three causes was perhaps less of a concern than in other countries, because for the Americans all three pointed in the same direction. Fortunate in their circumstances, they were also favored in their mores, which lay behind their generally beneficent laws. Under such conditions, the answer to the question posed by this panel--whether the United States better promotes the cause of liberty through action abroad or its example at home--is clear. Sheltered geographical circumstances created no necessity for Americans to concern themselves with the outside world. Laws favorable to freedom

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<sup>3</sup> [3] *DA*, Volume Two, Part Four, Chapter Eight.

domestically, such as a high degree of political decentralization under the American form of federalism, made the country little suited to an adventurous, interfering foreign policy. The mores that reinforced the lucky inheritance of circumstance and undergirded the laws would be maintained by actions and attitudes that Americans adopted among themselves--by inculcating the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood, or continuing to practice the art of associating together, for example.<sup>4</sup> [4] The role of the United States was to serve as a textbook, from which educators such as Tocqueville would draw their lessons for others; in that way, the practices of ordered liberty would be spread with the greatest chance of success, and not through the exercise of the military, diplomatic, or commercial might of the American state. Americans were free, and their freedom extended to the leeway they enjoyed to stand aside from the main currents of international politics while they cultivated their own garden.

#### France as Vindicator

Such is the more familiar tale, and the more familiar Tocquevillian lesson drawn from it. Yet neither Tocqueville's consideration of the dilemmas posed by the preservation of liberty in equality, nor his own active involvement in the political struggles of his day, ceased with the appearance of Volume One of *Democracy in America* in 1835. Volume Two was not published until 1840, and even more clearly than Volume One it wrestled with the general issue of the future of liberty in societies marked by equality, not simply the manner in which that issue manifested itself in the United States. It had to do so because Tocqueville recognized as well as any of his critics that, though the fundamental problem was a universal one, the prescription for

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<sup>4</sup> [4] See William Donohue, "Tocqueville's Reflections on Safeguarding Freedom in a Democracy," *Tocqueville Review* 6 (Fall 1984): 389-399.

meeting it necessarily had to be tailored to each people; in particular, he was, as has long been noted, "writing of America and thinking of France ."5 [5] Moreover, in the interval between the publication of Volumes One and Two, he had won election to the Chamber of Deputies, where he would serve to the end of the Orleans Monarchy in 1848; the experience of practical politics made him even more conscious of the difference in circumstances between his own country and the land he had visited.

In particular, two circumstances intervened, both of them examples of necessity because one was laid down by history and the other imposed by geography. In each, France differed radically from the United States . In the case of the first, liberty had been established among the people Tocqueville called the "Anglo-Americans" long before the taste for equality had reached its present power. The English colonists--the Puritan of Tocqueville's conception--had brought their ancient rights with them to the New World; their descendents the Americans therefore greeted the advent of equality with a set of mores that made them determined to protect these familiar liberties. In France , on the other hand, equality had been expanding for centuries before the idea of liberty gained ground in the early, moderate stages of the Revolution (as Tocqueville was to argue more fully in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*).6 [6] It had been an equality in

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5 [5] The literature on this subject is large, but a useful early example is Cushing Strout, "Tocqueville's Duality: Describing America and Thinking of Europe," *American Quarterly* XXI (Spring 1969): 87-99.

6 [6] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. Francois Furet and Francoise Melonio, trans. Alan Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. Book Two. Volume Two of this work, had Tocqueville lived to complete it, was to carry forward the demonstration of the consequences of the appearance of equality before liberty, in its argument that the sequence in which the two ideas appeared in the France of the *ancien regime* prepared the way for the equality in servitude that the French experienced under the Napoleonic Empire. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Vol. II, *Notes on the French*



servitude rather than an equality in liberty, and it had bequeathed to the French a set of moral and intellectual attitudes little calculated to make them public-spirited citizens. This was the history of a separate people, and it could not be simply assumed away or easily overlaid with a new set of beliefs drawn from across the Atlantic . Vast though the limits of the circle of human freedom were, those limits did exist, and French history was among them.

Another limit was that identified by Raymond Aron in an appreciation written a century after Tocqueville's death--that imposed by one's position in the international system. "Without neighbors, thus without enemies, the American state escaped the 'tyranny' of diplomacy and war, it preserved the spirit of the pioneers and also that of the first arrivals, the puritans." By contrast, " France is surrounded by neighbors who are always rivals and may at any time become enemies. She must place above all the good of external security, thus confer on the state extensive prerogatives."<sup>7</sup> [7] The language of necessity could not be clearer.

Neither of these historical or geographic circumstances would be favorable to the expedients that Tocqueville contended had served American liberty well. He admitted that a state in the cockpit of international politics could not afford to adopt decentralization, for if it did so it would almost certainly be defeated in any armed confrontation with a centralized state. The greater taste for equality that history had given to the French made them impatient with seeming

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*Revolution and Napoleon*, ed. Francois Furet and Francoise Melonio, trans. Alan Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

7 [7] Raymond Aron, "Idees politiques et vision historique de Tocqueville," *Revue Francais de Science Politique* X (September 1960): 518, 520. See also Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Livre du Centenaire, 1859-1959* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1960).

anomalies and inconsistencies that resulted when different jurisdictions made different decisions in a federal system, and indifferent to the pleas for independence by an "undemocratic" institution like the judiciary. How, then, in the face of these less favorable circumstances and in the absence of the almost naturally occurring practices of liberty that Tocqueville had witnessed in the United States, were American-like mores of civic virtue to be sustained? The empire of circumstances had reasserted itself, and the limits of the circle of human freedom were revealed.

One answer, for Tocqueville, lay in the subjects with which government would concern itself and the attitude that it would adopt toward those subjects. That foreign and security policy was one such fundamental subject for government action, he took for granted, simply because it was in relations with a threatening international environment that existential questions arose, or, as he put it, before a people could be happy it had to exist. Lacking the unusual, providential circumstances of the United States, France was necessarily involved in the struggles of European and therefore world politics. Here were tasks that only statesmen could undertake--unlike the actions of soft despotism, in which government insinuated itself into the everyday lives of its people, "protecting them against every danger, supervising their every activity," and attempting to do for them what they could and should do for themselves. Government had to promote the collective interests of its people in the widest arena of politics, the international.

Foreign policy was more than the promotion of the strictly material interests of the populace, however, and it was here that one came to the manner in which international questions were approached. For Tocqueville, the abiding necessity of nations in a democratic age was pride. Not to be confused with the "swashbucklers' pretensions" that he attributed to both Thiers and Napoleon III (the use of foreign policy to strike a pose or proffer a bluff, simply to distract

the people from their domestic difficulties, often without any mature consideration of whether one had the means of backing up such defiance), a foreign policy of pride was one that pursued high-minded objectives, not bombastically but resolutely, with the effect of reminding the people that they were citizens and not simply shoppers, with a duty to take part in political life and direct these historic enterprises. In other words, a foreign policy of greatness would shake the people out of the narrow individualism that could otherwise lull them into devoting themselves entirely to their own material wellbeing and forgetting to play the active role of citizenship that could alone protect their liberties. In a democratic age in which the universal temptation was to concern oneself with the small, the immediate, the soft, and the selfish, a properly active international attitude bracingly confronted the citizenry with the far-reaching, the long-term, the rigorous, and the public-spirited. Bereft of the favored circumstances of the United States , France had to pursue a glorious policy abroad if it was to maintain the mores that alone could sustain liberty at home.

The end in both cases was the same--the sustaining of the civic virtue that, beyond laws and circumstances, was the most potent means of preserving freedom in an age that, because of tendencies toward mediocrity, ease, and small-mindedness, was not necessarily friendly to liberty. How these mores were to be advanced, however, was heavily influenced by the uncontrollable circumstances of history and geography, as revealed most vividly in the international position of a people. Where that position was safely protected by favored historical legacies and a protected geographical location, as was true of few countries, but was the happy lot of the United States , the country could be a worthy exemplar of liberty by tending to the domestic mores that would support free laws and institutions, while largely ignoring the outside world. Where a people occupied the position of France, however, the path to civic virtue lay

elsewhere--through government action in general, and action internationally in particular, that "raised their sights" and reminded them to participate in the noble task of defending the regime. Under those circumstances, the conundrum of domestic liberty or foreign advocacy of freedom was a false choice; the habits of mind that would alone be compatible with the former needed the inspiration of the latter. Only if it acted in a high-minded way abroad could France cultivate the kind of citizenship that would make it an exemplar of liberty at home.<sup>8</sup> [8]

Throughout his service in the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville sounded this activist theme. In his very first speech there, on April 15, 1837, he declared that among the few ties that continued to bind Frenchmen together, "there exists one, perhaps only one, which is unbroken and strong, the pride in the name that we bear," and warned that a foreign policy that tarnished that name could so undermine support for the regime that it would collapse: "Two great paths it seems to me can carry France today toward revolutions. The first of these paths, I acknowledge, would be violent, unjust, revolutionary, anarchic war. . . . But there is another path . . . that of peace without glory."<sup>9</sup> [9] Three years later, when the treaty right of British naval vessels to stop French ships on the high seas to search for slaves became highly controversial in France, Tocqueville's was among the voices most passionately calling for the government to take an unyielding line with London, and in response to criticism from his liberal friends in England he

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<sup>8</sup> [8] See Doris Goldstein, "Alexis de Tocqueville's Concept of Citizenship," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 108 (February 1964):39-53.

<sup>9</sup> [9] *Oeuvres Completes* (Paris: Gallmard, 1951- ), Tome III, *Ecrits et discours politiques*. Vol. , pp. 300-301.

was unapologetic, telling Mill for example, "The most elevated feeling now left to us is national pride."<sup>10</sup> [10]

The point of an active foreign policy, however, was not activity for its own sake but exertion on behalf of the kind of cause that would inspire French citizens to shake themselves free from their individualistic fascination with personal enrichment and to consider the good of the country. This aim was that of promoting liberty abroad. Thus his stinging critique of what he considered Francois Guizot's indifference to the fate of liberty elsewhere, so long as French material interests were protected:

France, if she were governed as she ought to be, would feel that her principal interest, her permanent interest, is to gain the triumph of liberal institutions across the world, not only for the love of these liberal institutions, but for the care even of her own strength and her grandeur. . . . The great interest of France is therefore to substitute liberal institutions for despotic institutions everywhere: that is, I dare to say, the capital interest of France .<sup>11</sup> [11]

France should never abandon "its glorious role as the avant-garde of the ideas of liberty."<sup>12</sup> [12]

Such was the burden of the parliamentary and public campaign waged by Tocqueville throughout the years of the July Monarchy, and waged with particular fierceness from 1841 on, after Guizot had become the primary power in the government. Its past and its position in the international system made it impossible for France to adopt the modest international role allowed to the United States . "Fortune, which has done such particular things in favor of the inhabitants

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<sup>10</sup> [10] Letter to John Stuart Mill, December 18, 1840, *OC*, VI, vol. 1, pp. 330-331.

<sup>11</sup> [11] Speech to the Chamber, January 20, 1845, *OC*, III, Part 2, p. 426.

<sup>12</sup> [12] Article in the journal *Le Commerce* (March 1, 1845), *OC*, III, Part 2, p. 467.

of the United States , has placed them in the midst of a wilderness where they have, so to speak, no neighbors,” he had recognized in *Democracy in America*. "A few thousand soldiers are enough for them, but this is American and not democratic.”<sup>13</sup> [13] Free countries do not derive any immunity from the harsh necessities of international life, including the possibility of war and the consequent need to keep up large armed forces, from their mores, but from their circumstances, if their circumstances have granted this exemption from the general lot of participants in international life. France, being immersed in rather than removed from rivalries and threats, was forced to hazard the laws and institutions that the United States could eschew, such as centralized government and large standing armies, for simple self-defense; it could hope to preserve freedom only by employing its strength in a high-minded fashion, "raising the sights" of its citizens, and thereby provoking in them a selfless dedication to the public good and an active involvement in politics that were, in their conditions, the only means of inculcating the all-important mores friendly to freedom.

### Exemplar Redux

There then came another turn of the revolutionary wheel, or another stage in that single revolution that Tocqueville contended had begun in 1789 and had not ceased to assault society with new demands for equality in the sixty succeeding years. In February of 1848, the overthrow of the July Monarchy brought with it not only a change in governmental institutions but something very like a class war. The chamber of the Constituent Assembly, whose members, including Tocqueville, had been elected in the aftermath of the fall of Louis-Philippe to govern

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<sup>13</sup> [13] Volume Two, Part Three, Chapter Twenty-Two.

the country on an interim basis and write a new constitution, was invaded by protestors in May-- an event that came to seem less threatening only in retrospect when it was overshadowed by the June Days. These four days of fighting in Paris between, on the one side, the government and its defenders (many of them from the provinces) and, on the other, the proletariat of Paris exceeded in violence anything that the country would experience between the Terror and the Commune.<sup>14</sup>

[14] France emerged from the crisis with untested and (Tocqueville feared) unworkable political institutions, its economy in tatters, the loyalty of its armed forces in question, and its fellow great powers on the Continent aroused by fear of revolution and determined to stamp it out, with the concurrence of Paris or without it.

Circumstances, in other words, had changed. By the middle of 1848, both the power position of France and its relation to the major currents of opinion prevalent in its counterparts in Berlin , Vienna , and St. Petersburg had altered so radically from six months before that policy had to alter if it was to remain in touch with reality. A bold intention to seek out threats to liberty abroad and succor fellow liberals could no longer be sustained with the resources at hand. Raising citizen spirit by running the risks inherent in vindicating freedom elsewhere would accomplish nothing if the inevitable results of such intrepidity were defeat, the discrediting of the

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14 [14] Tocqueville tells the story of the political revolution that took place in February and the social revolution that nearly followed it in his *Recollections*. His viewpoint is that of a member of the opposition under the Orleanist Monarchy who was nevertheless sad to see the failure of an experiment in constitutional liberty, and a vigorous exponent of suppressing the envy, hatred, and lawlessness he perceived in the "socialism" that sought power in the June Days, who predicted with a heavy heart that fear of renewed disorder would drive the victorious part of the nation into sacrificing its liberty to anyone who would promise stability.

one free government of a major Continental capital, and the extension of the influence of the autocracies.

One of the earliest examples of this change in Tocqueville's thinking may be found in writings that he never intended to see the light of day. Britain and France had offered themselves as mediators in the war between Austria and Sardinia that was another legacy of the revolutionary spasm of 1848, and an international conference on the conflict was scheduled for Brussels . In October General Cavaignac appointed Tocqueville as a French delegate, and he spent that month and the following one examining the archives in preparation for his work. Ultimately the idea of the conference was abandoned, but when putting down his thoughts on the general direction of French foreign policy Tocqueville believed himself to be on the verge of assuming a position of considerable responsibility. Perhaps this realization made him particularly conscious of the virtue of prudence; at any rate, his tone was cautious. He continued to believe that "the interest in the extension of our democratic principles is one of the great interests of our policy," but he granted that it was not the only one. How could it be furthered when the effect of war would be to place more power domestically in the hands of the "anti-republic element"--the army? His answer to this dilemma would be familiar to anyone who had read his work on America of thirteen years before: "You have another means. Your example." Advancing the cause of liberty by standing as a working manifestation of it would not strain the hastily composed elements of the new French regime; survival of the government and testimony to its principles in action went hand in hand. He noted "the utility of peace, for liberty, for the Republic," and contrasted the present modest paths open to a liberal government of France with



the grander highway that had beckoned it in its days of greater potency: "In [17]90, the means of emancipation was war, today it is peace."<sup>15</sup> [15]

In his circular to the voters of his district in the elections to the newly established National Assembly, held in May 1849, Tocqueville barely mentioned foreign affairs, but when he did it was to make them second in importance to success in the business of government at home. " France , gentlemen, knows by experience that the Republic can produce great efforts, great victories, great actions, great men; but what she has never seen produced until now is a regular government and by this material prosperity," he declared. "She ardently feels the need of these two things."<sup>16</sup> [16] Such was the line he took after his election, both as a member of the National Assembly and after June 2, when he was named Foreign Minister. The remarks he made on June 25 were representative of his stance. In contrast to his fiery speeches of 1840, when he had advocated a readiness by France to go to war simply to show that it could not be isolated by any agreement arrived at behind its back by the other four great powers, he now termed a "black" coalition of Austria, Prussia, and Russia against France and her republican institutions a "chimera" that "does not exist!" The consequence of the absence of any pressing foreign threat was that French policy should itself not be threatening to the other powers of Europe, no matter how strongly France might disagree with their illiberal governments, and "I therefore believe that the policy useful to the country, the policy our interests urge on us, is today the policy of peace." A period of quiet could allow the new Republic to take root in the affections of its citizens, while a precipitous war would certainly uproot it.

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<sup>15</sup> [15] *OC*, III, vol. 3, pp. 249-254.

<sup>16</sup> [16] *Ibid.*, pp. 257-261.

Accordingly, "not only do I want [peace] in the interest of humanity, out of hatred for the evils and horrors that war brings, I want it still more in the interest of the Republic." If the freshly minted liberal republic just established could live in order at home and peace abroad, it would be "immortal". "But it is not only from the purely national point of view, by the narrow egoism of a particular nationality, that I desire peace," he added. "No, I place the source of my desire still higher: I fear war, because I believe that it could bring on, not only for us but for the whole civilized world, a hideous shipwreck."<sup>17</sup> [17] If France blundered into war in the mistaken belief that by doing so it was advancing liberty in Europe, it might in fact endanger liberty, not only from the right, as the Eastern powers counter-attacked and probably successfully put down liberty everywhere, including in France itself, but also from the left, as the sacrifices and excitement of war would re-light the revolutionary fuse just extinguished in the June Days and encourage the socialists, whose rage for economic equality far outweighed any attachment they might have to liberty, to try once more to overthrow the liberal republic.

Subject to hostility both from the illiberal right and the revolutionary left, a shaky liberal government in France had no alternative to a modest policy of demonstrating that liberalism could work successfully in domestic affairs. As Tocqueville put it, "it was the same isolation as before February, with the continent more hostile to us and England more lukewarm. It was therefore necessary, as it had been then, to reduce ourselves to leading a small life, from day to day."<sup>18</sup> [18] The experience of guiding French foreign policy under such conditions even led him to cast a more kindly eye on the pacific stance of the Guizot years, as he asked himself

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<sup>17</sup> [17] Ibid., pp. 277-292.

<sup>18</sup> [18] *Recollections*, p. 287.

whether he and his friends had "attacked the foreign policy of Louis-P(hilippe)'s government too much (although that government really did lack both shame and patriotic feeling, but its difficulties really were great, too)."19 [19] Indeed, some of his most despairing complaints were against French public opinion, which failed to see the consequences following inevitably from the events of 1848:

The French nation, which had made and, in a certain way, still made so great a figure in the world, kicked against this necessity of the time: it had remained haughty while it ceased to be preponderant; it feared to act and tried to talk loudly; and it also expected its Government to be proud, without, however, permitting it to run the risks which such conduct entailed. A sorry condition for a Ministry of Foreign Affairs in such a country and at such a time!20 [20]

### The Surprising M Tocqueville

The aim of this paper has not been to try to catch an eminent political philosopher in contradictions, for in fact on the crucial issue of the considerations that ought to determine a country's foreign policy he remained consistent throughout his life. Rather, the purpose has been to suggest that in our reading of this great exponent of human freedom we have underestimated the power that he assigned to necessity. Mores were primary in sustaining the civic virtues essential to the preservation of liberty, but circumstances defined the actions that, at a given time and place, would best strengthen those mores in a particular people.

Where the international position of a people was safely protected by favored historical legacies and a sheltered geographical location, as was true of few countries, but was the happy

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19 [19] Ibid., p. 285.

20 [20] Ibid., p. 287.

lot of the United States at the time of Tocqueville's tour, the country could be a worthy exemplar of liberty by tending to the domestic mores that would underpin free laws and institutions, while largely ignoring the outside world. Where a people occupied the position of France under Louis-Philippe, however, the path to civic virtue lay elsewhere--through government action in general, and action internationally in particular, that "raised their sights" and reminded them to participate in the noble task of defending the regime, by supporting liberty through its international vindication. Again, where a people occupied the position of France following the Revolution of 1848, with its power much diminished and the risks of conflict very great, then, as Tocqueville the Foreign Minister told his ambassador in Austria at the time of the Hungarian revolt, "we can only take a passive part. . . . our distance from the seat of war must impose upon us, in the present state of our affairs and of those of Europe , a certain reserve."21 [21]

The question for present policy then is one of the circumstances of the United States--whether it more nearly resembles the America that Tocqueville saw and envied, or Orleanist France, whose route to ordered liberty required the bracing vindication of freedom abroad, or Republican France, whose weakness necessitated drawing back to the role of exemplar. Certainly, contemporary America has the same political and social history--the same legacy of having achieved liberty before equality, the same inheritance of English common-law freedoms and puritan religion--though with a far more diverse population than the one that he found dominated by "Anglo-Americans". The supporting legal practices, like federalism and judicial review, remain, much attenuated in the one case and strengthened in the other.

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21 [21] Quoted in *Recollections*, p. 305.

Rather, it is in the external circumstances that one can argue that the limits on human choice have most altered. The near-disappearance of the protection afforded by two great oceans and comparatively weak neighbors has been a truism for two generations, and it has been accentuated by the vulnerability to terrorist actions demonstrated by the events of 9/11. The almost universally demanded response to that threat to national and personal security has intruded government into many areas of life previously left to individual choice or the dealings of private entities. No longer can it be said that the United States is a largely decentralized political system with minimal armed forces.

Beyond these specific developments, no one of which was autonomously chosen by Americans, but all of which were more or less imposed on them by decisions and conditions abroad, there is the more general shift in the position of the United States from the periphery to the center of the international system. Its alliances, its leadership in financial and other international institutions, its active involvement in the diplomacy dealing with almost every issue, its near-universal diplomatic representation around the world, its influence on popular culture globally, all suggest a very different place in international society from the fortunate isolation of a seaboard republic, with an enormous undeveloped hinterland drawing it away from Europe, which Tocqueville witnessed. The mutual influence of the United States and the rest of the world is multi-faceted, immediate, powerful, and inescapable.

Under these circumstances, one must at least ask whether the better parallel for the United States of the early twenty-first century is the France of the 1830s and 1840s in which Tocqueville hoped to draw lessons from the America of his day but for which, as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, the Constituent Assembly, and the National Assembly, as a political

publicist, and as Foreign Minister, he prescribed two very different policies. One-- diplomatically active, militarily somewhat interventionist, supportive of the imperial *mission civilatrice*, insistent on taking a leading part in the international defense of liberal values--was a policy that Tocqueville thought dictated by circumstances of relatively great external power but a certain distractedness and love of ease at home; this was a policy of inspiration and discipline. The other--diplomatically cautious, militarily abstentionist, intent on domestic reform and prosperity, committed to the domestic reaffirmation of liberal values--was a policy that he believed was required by circumstances of straitened international influence and popular unwillingness to run risks for the freedom of others abroad; this was a policy of prudence and accommodation. The surprising Monsieur Tocqueville might today, in the light of radically altered international and domestic circumstances, counsel imitating less the country ostensibly described in *Democracy in America* and more the country for whose instruction it was composed--but he would be the first to admit that the question of the France that should be considered the analog of the United States of 2008 is one that cannot be answered simply by reference to one's will, but must be guided by recognition of imperious necessity.

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