JOHN C. KORITANSKY

Democracy and Nobility: A Comment on Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*

I. The Love of Equality and the Essence of Democracy

FROM the time of its first publication until the present, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* has commanded the attention of social and political scientists who have wanted to understand modern democracy as a distinctive form of political society. Tocqueville has been such a mine of useful and apt quotations that his name and several of his observations have become common parlance among social scientists and historians—so much so that it is almost waggish for a member of those professions to admit not having read *Democracy in America* at least once. Nevertheless, I think that the reasons for the continuing pertinence of Tocqueville’s work are not understood nearly as widely as his reputation extends. For as Tocqueville himself asserts, the source of his power and insight is his grasp of the particular “political passion,” the love of equality, that defines and animates democracy as distinct from other political forms.¹ I think that the centrality and the meaning of Tocqueville’s statement on this point is not generally appreciated because modern social scientists tend to have a more democratic understanding of democracy, so to speak, than that suggested by Tocqueville’s statement. That is to say, democrats think democracy to be the regime that is open to the widest variety of human types because it allows men their differences without interpreting those differences as differences in rank. Accordingly, if modern men appear to be a disturbingly homogeneous lot, modern democrats find the cause in the incidental features of our social life: e.g., bureaucracy and industrial routinization. Democracy is thought to be a set of procedures that do not necessarily lead to any substantive outcome, especially not regarding the kind of human being that will be generated by democracy.²

Tocqueville, on the other hand, does think that democracy represents the victory of a certain kind of man and that democracy will regenerate that kind to the exclusion of others. The love of equality is a distinctive aspect of the human soul; it is but one selection from the wider variety of human types. It does not characterize all men as such, but rather the class of men who have become decidedly preponderant. Thus, Tocqueville’s insight into the nature of modern democracy stems from a perspective that is different from democracy’s own perspective—he has not


John C. Koritansky is assistant professor of political science at Hiram College. He has contributed articles on Tocqueville to *Policy, and Publics*. He is currently working on a study of American public administration.

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II. The Meaning of the Inevitable Triumph of Democracy Over the Pre-democratic Order

Democracy in America is not composed in the manner of a treatise. More specifically, it does not delineate a view of human nature and then proceed to derive consequences for the order of political society. Indeed, Tocqueville goes so far as to deny that he has presented any argument to show that democracy is the regime most conducive to the best in human nature, although he is not at great pains to hide his preference for democracy. I suggest that the reason for this rather enigmatic feature of the book is not that Tocqueville really dispenses with the question of human nature. Rather it is that Tocqueville recognizes an ambiguity in his own understanding of human nature such that he is only able to set forth his view by way of a carefully drawn illustration instead of a definition. The illustration that he draws is contained in the 18th chapter of Volume I of the Democracy, "Some Considerations Concerning the Present and Probable Future Condition of the Three Races that Inhabit the United States."

In support of the distinctive importance of chapter 18, it is noteworthy that this is the one chapter in the whole two volume work where Tocqueville extends his gaze beyond the democratic order and considers man in a three-fold variety of conditions. The Reds, the Blacks, and the Whites seem to represent a comparison of the three fundamental alternative human conditions: aristocratic but barbaric freedom, abject servitude, and democratic equality. Tocqueville says that his remarks in this chapter are "...like tangents to (his) subject being American, but not democratic, (while his) main business has been to describe democracy." Nevertheless, while the chapter is strictly speaking tangential, it is not of marginal importance. Here and only here does Tocqueville go beyond the description of democracy and also beyond the recommendations for the improvement of democracy. In the comparison of the conditions of the three races, Tocqueville shows the natural primacy of the condition of democratic equality.

The displacement of the Indians by the Whites in America seems to be a clear parallel to the displacement of the feudal civilization by what would finally emerge as modern democracy. The Indians appear like a caricature of the feudal nobles. They suffer from too high an opinion of themselves, and this very pride makes for their weakness before the Whites. What is critical is that they consider it beneath their station to work. War and hunting are the only pursuits their sense of honor permits them. When the advance of the White farmer drives away the Indians' game, the thought of their tilling the soil never enters their heads, and so they flee with the deer. Were the Indians able to subsist on the wild fruits of the land, they might have successfully retained their proud refusal to labor even in the absence of game, but what is the deepest element of their tragedy is that the slightest touch with the White civilization ends the Indians with new

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3. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 185-9, 186.
4. Ibid. p. 643.
5. Ibid., p. 291.
wants that cannot be satisfied by means familiar to them. Their attempt to satisfy their new hungers by exchanging the booty of the hunt with Whites puts still greater strain on the game resources and deepens the scarcity. Both the Indians' social structure and the psychic structure are pathetically weak and vulnerable. Beyond the pathos generated by Tocqueville's touching description, we cannot help but conclude that the Indians are, literally, not fit to survive.

The advance of the Whites at the expense of the Indians is by no means simply a savage conflict. The Whites remove the Indians with the greatest show of deference to humanity, and under the color of legal form. Moreover, the Indians do not defend themselves in the manner of brutes. Tocqueville reproduces the essence of both arguments, and, in so doing, he shows the weakness of both. As for the Indians, they make an argument in defense of their natural right to their property.

"From time immemorial, our common Father, who is in heaven, has given our ancestors the land we occupy; our ancestors have transmitted it to us as their heritage. We have preserved it with respect, for it contains their ashes. Have we ever ceded or lost this heritage? Permit us to ask you humbly what better right a nation can have to a country than the right of inheritance and immemorial possession? We know that the state of Georgia and the President of the United States claim today that we have lost this right. But this seems to us a gratuitous allegation. At what time have we lost it? What crime have we committed which could deprive us of our homeland?"

Such is the language of the Indians; what they say is true; what they foresee seems to me inevitable.

The case of the Indians is eloquent and touching—and it contains the truth that "natural right" is on the side of the Indians. But Tocqueville's obvious sympathetic feelings for the Indians does not determine his final judgment. To grasp Tocqueville's final judgment, it is necessary to consider the case that is made by the Whites.

See inter alia the report of February 24, 1830, written by Mr. Bell on behalf of the Committee on Indian Affairs, in which on page 3 it is established by very logical arguments and most learnedly proved that:

"The fundamental principle, that the Indians have no rights by virtue of their ancient possession either of soil or sovereignty, has never been abandoned either expressly or by implication."

Reading this report, written, moreover, by an able man, one is astonished at the facility and ease with which, from the very first words, the author dispose of arguments founded on natural right and reason, which he calls abstract and theoretical principles. The more I think about it, the more I feel that the only difference between civilized and uncivilized man with regard to justice is this: the former contests the justice of rights, the latter simply violates them. (my emphasis)

The astonishingly cavalier hypocrisy in the argument set forth by Mr. Bell should not obscure Tocqueville's concurrent admission that the Indians' argument is also, in its own way, hypocritical. The Whites assume an obligation to contest the justice of the Indians' claims—an obligation that they cannot possibly meet. But clearly, if the shoe were on the other foot, the Indians would feel no such compunction. More specifically, the Whites feel obliged to contest the justice of the Indians' argument because they are a property-holding civilization, and the very notion of property seems to presume the notion of natural right that must be honored even in the breach. But the Indians, Tocqueville says, own no property. He asserts that they "occupy" the land but they do not "own" it. It would seem, then, that in their appeal to the Whites in behalf of the natural right to

6. Ibid., p. 311.

7. Ibid., p. 312, fn. 29.
their property they make a kind of argument that they have no occasion to make except vis-à-vis the Whites, and even then they are forced to make it only because they are the weaker party. This reflection shows the problematical grounds of the natural right argument employed by the Indians. The problem is that natural right has no meaning outside political society of a certain kind. If this is the case, then must we not conclude that the necessarily inevitable conquest of the Indians by the Whites has the sanction of nature? A few pages preceding the quotation cited above, Tocqueville also quotes Mr. Bell, and in view of the sense in which the Whites’ property-holding civilization has been shown to be superior to the Indians’ proud barbarism, it would seem that Bell expresses the hard truth that:

... the practice of buying Indian titles is but the substitute which humanity and expediency have imposed, in the place of the sword in arriving at the actual enjoyment of property claimed by the right of discovery, and sanctioned by the natural superiority allowed to the claims of civilized communities over those of savage tribes.”

This harsh conclusion might be avoided if it were the case that the Whites might have resisted their own greed for land and preserved something of independence for the Indian nations through the exercise of their own self-control. But Tocqueville shows us that that would have been impossible. In another footnote he cites the examples of the conflict between the Americans and the French Canadians and also that between the Americans and the Mexicans, and he shows that the situation is similar. He concludes that, “If comparatively imperceptible differences in European civilization lead to such results, it is easy to see what must happen when the most fully developed civilization of Europe comes into contact with Indian barbarism.” Thus, the conflict between the

Indians and the Whites is as inevitable as the outcome of that conflict. We are confronted with the example of a nation that necessarily vanishes at the slightest touch with a more vigorous competitor; unless we lack seriousness, can we turn from the conclusion that the Whites’ civilization is superior?

Tocqueville continues his examination of the three races in the United States by examining the relationship between the Blacks and Whites in the American South. The point he makes here is that the Whites in the South have violated the principle of the fundamental equality of all men as such through the institution of Negro slavery. Whatever effect this institution may have on the Blacks, it is clear that the Whites have been corrupted by it. They begin to take on the contempt for labor and the glorification of hunting and war, characteristic of feudal nobles. And what is critical, they have grown weak because of it. Tocqueville’s comparison of the two sides of the Ohio River, slave and free, is proof of the corrupting and softening effects of the “reintroduction of inequality into the modern world.”

8. Ibid., p. 300, fn. 8.
What is perhaps most curious of all is that even the Southern Whites know that slavery is an uneconomic institution. They know that they are being impoverished through its effects.

Increasing enlightenment in the South makes the people there see that slavery is harmful to the master, and the same enlightenment makes them see, more clearly than they had seen before, that it is almost impossible to abolish it.

... Slavery is more and more entrenched in the laws just where its utility is most contested.\(^{16}\)

The Southern Whites know the cost of slavery, yet they retain it because to do otherwise would require that they mingle with the Blacks, and hence that they cast off those social distinctions that make them what they are. They would have to see themselves as other than members of the class that does not toll, but rather pursue the pleasures involved in hunting and war. The Southerners know that they are sacrificing something, but they willingly sacrifice the advantages of their Northern countrymen as beneath the dignity of men of honor. Their notion of honor that is proven vain by the fact that the Southerners are doomed by it.

What we learn from the discussion of the three races is that Tocqueville is profoundly indebted to Machiavelli’s view of human nature and politics. Indeed, there is much to suggest that Tocqueville is attempting to rejuvenate modernity by returning to the thought of that original modern philosopher. Tocqueville follows Machiavelli’s rejection as politically irrelevant any “other worldly” standard for human life. A notion of human excellence that leads to contempt for the requirements of success in this world just cannot be consistent with nature’s ordinances. Democracy is proved to be naturally superior to the inegalitarian order of the past because it is naturally stronger. And despite the fact that Tocqueville is not insensitive to certain brilliant features of the old order, it cannot be true that Tocqueville believed the old order to be better than the new, while resigning himself to its passing. What collapses of its own weakness cannot seriously and truly be called good.

It is this Machiavellianism that I think Tocqueville is suggesting to us when he asserts in his Introductory Chapter that, “God does not Himself need to speak for us to find sure signs of His will; it is enough to observe the customary progress of nature and the continuous tendency of events; I know, without special revelation, that the stars follow orbits in space traced by His finger.”\(^{11}\) Interpreted in this way, Tocqueville enjoys the irony of expressing his Machiavellian thought in a piously pious formula.

Just as Tocqueville agrees with Machiavelli that what is ultimately stronger must be ultimately better, he agrees too that this does not mean that whatever is is right. This is the difficult and important point. Like Machiavelli, Tocqueville holds that greatness (grandeur) goes with strength. The conflict with which the world abounds requires that we be concerned with success, but what makes the human conflict what it is is pride—and therefore any genuine success must contain the satisfaction of pride. Were it not for pride, pride in oneself and one’s own conquests, the struggles of this world would lose their human meaning. Tocqueville’s discussion of the races does not show that the Whites are superior because they have overcome pride. We should not forget that the central animus of the American civilization is the love of equality, and that, surely, is an expression of pride. What Tocqueville shows is that the democratic form of pride is superior to the older form which made an invidious and debilitating distinction between workers and warriors. The pre-democratic pride was self-defeating, the

\(^{10}\) Ibid., p. 531.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 6.
democratic form is self-vindicating; that is the core of the inevitable triumph of democracy. But for that triumph to be a victory for man, it must come to view as a victory. Democracy must see its own conquest and be swelled by it. If it does not lie in Tocqueville’s power to avert or advance the cause of democracy, still he can try to generate the political conditions wherein the citizens of modern democracy will recognize that cause as their own.

III. The Poetic Interpretation of the Commercial Activities of Democratic Citizens—How These Can Be Interpreted as Revealing the Natural Greatness of Man

Tocqueville’s recognition of the centrality of pride in all forms of political society has a decisive influence on his political thought. Pride is the root of the “political passion,” the love of equality, that is distinctive of democracy. It is useful to note that here Tocqueville follows Rousseau as well as Machiavelli, for in this regard Rousseau is the more direct heir of Machiavelli’s teaching than are the earlier modern philosophers, Hobbes and Locke. Rousseau had objected to Hobbes specifically because Hobbes had failed to realize the way in which civilized man has been alienated from his natural self and his natural rights. The “self” that civilized man loves is a vain construct, maintained and measured through the eyes of others and conventions we share with others. And Tocqueville follows the consequences Rousseau draws from this thought; namely, that it is not possible to derive social obligations from the rational extension of natural self-interest. Rather, the only way to reconcile social obligation with the happiness and freedom of vain men is to generate a public-spirited form of pride, whereby men can take pleasure in their duty. I suggest that what Tocqueville calls the “manly and legitimate passion for equality which rouses in all men a desire to be strong and respected” is intelligible only as a public-spiritedness that parallels Rousseau’s idea of the “general will.”

For anything like a general will to arise in modern democracy, there must be a medium—a ritual—through which it can act. Various alternatives are possible, as Rousseau had indicated, but the one that is most likely in the modern world is commercial activity. Commerce can be the medium through which democratic citizens feel themselves to participate in their nation’s life; but if commerce is to serve Tocqueville’s project in this way, it will have to be “poetically” interpreted so as to reflect a kind of splendor. Thus, it is a matter of critical importance for Tocqueville to find, as he does, that democracy is not devoid of the poetic instinct despite evidence to the contrary. In his chapter on poetry, he suggests that America exemplifies the form democracy’s poetic inspiration can take.

The Americans see themselves marching through the wilderness, drying up marshes, diverting rivers, peopling the wilds, and subduing nature. It is not just occasionally that their imagination catches a glimpse of this magnificent vision. It is something which plays a real part in the least, and in the most important, actions of every man, and it is always fluttering before his mind.

This and similar expressions near the end of Volume I illustrate that Tocqueville’s understanding of the relation between commerce and democracy is that commerce can be a medium through which a people gives expression to its “political passion.” The Americans, he


15. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, p. 453.
says, "put something heroic into their way of trading." They see it as part of the proud conquest of man over nature.

Through poetry, commerce can be the medium through which a democratic people can express a public spirited and noble form of their love of equality. And poetry, in turn, can reflect the splendor of commercial activity only if poetry can appeal to the cosmic significance of the conquest of nature through commerce. Thus, again following the lead of Rousseau, Tocqueville cannot complete the ennoblement of democracy without calling in the aid of a civil religion.17

It is my contention that Tocqueville's discussion of "the idea of the indefinite perfectibility of man" is a sketch of a religion that is compatible with the love of equality and that answers the need for a civil religion outlined above. Here, as was the case with his discussion of the three races, Tocqueville does not make explicit the significance of his discussion—the reason being perhaps that according to him no new religions are possible in the democratic order. If the doctrine of indefinite perfectibility were to be introduced in democracy, it would have to be done indirectly, perhaps by way of a denatured and humanized form of Christianity.

The suitability of the idea of indefinite perfectibility to democracy is carefully drawn by Tocqueville in his discussion of the intellectual propensities of democracy. Democracy has a kind of instinct for general and simple ideas—for too facile generalizations. The tendency for democratic citizens to gather a whole range of things under a simple label or general formula derives, in turn, from the fact that men themselves appear to be more like each other than did the men of aristocracy. Equal men find it "hard to think about one branch of mankind without widening (their) view until it includes the whole." From that they develop a habitual taste for generalizations in everything: "hence it becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human spirit to discover common rules for everything and to include a great number of objects under the same formula, and to explain a group of facts by one sole cause."18 There is a danger in democracy's intellectual propensity towards generalization. Equal men may lose sight of the significance of their own individuality; they may think of themselves as interchangeable elements in a flat, atomistic order of things.

The conception of units becomes an obsession. Men look for it everywhere, and when he thinks he has found it he gladly repose in that belief. Not content with the discovery that there is nothing in the world but one creation and one Creator, he is still embarrassed by this primary division of things and seeks to expand and simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole.19

Tocqueville calls this general frame of mind "Pantheism," and he devotes a chapter to an indictment of its political consequences. Pantheism "destroys human individuality, (and) just because it destroys it, will have secret charms for men living in democracies," he encourages all friends of liberty to unite their efforts in opposing this evil doctrine.

But under a different expression, the democratic intellectual propensity may be friendly to the idea of individual freedom. Indeed, Tocqueville suggests that the idea of genuine human freedom can only be grasped by a mind that is able to grasp the idea of mankind in general. Even the best

16. Ibid., p. 369.
19. Ibid., p. 404.
20. Ibid., p. 417.
products of the pre-democratic order were all but blind to the simple fact that characterizes all human beings as such; namely, freedom itself.

The profoundest and the most widespread minds of Greece and Rome never managed to grasp the very general but very simple conception of the likeness of all men and of the equal right of all at birth to liberty.22

The conclusion from this is of the greatest importance for an understanding of the foundation of Tocqueville's thought; democracy is the condition suitable to the revelation of a supremely important truth.

What is necessary is an interpretation, in the form of a public teaching, about the order of the world and man's place within it that commutes with democracy's instinct for a simple and general rule while at the same time supporting the idea of the individual and his freedom. I suggest it is in response to this need that Tocqueville addresses the chapter immediately following his indictment of Pantheism, "How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man."

Though man resembles the animals in many respects, one characteristic is peculiar to him alone: he improves himself and they do not. . . . So the idea of perfectibility is as old as the world; equality had no share in bringing it to birth, but it has given it a new character.

When citizens are classified by rank, profession, or birth, and when all are obliged to follow the career which chance has opened before them, everyone thinks that he can see the ultimate limit of human advancement quite close in front of him, and no one attempts to fight against the inevitable fate. It is not that aristocratic peoples doubt men's capacity to improve himself, but they do not think it unlimited. They think in terms of acceleration, not change. . . . they assume in advance certain impassable limits to such progress. . . .

But when classes disappear and classes are brought together, when men are jumbled together and habits, customs, and laws are changing, when new facts impinge and new truths are discovered, when old conceptions vanish and new ones take their place, then the human mind imagines the possibility of an ideal but always fugitive perfection. . . .

Thus, seeking always, failing, picking himself up again, often disappointed, never discouraged, he is ever striving toward that immense grandeur glimpsed indistinctly at the end of the long track humanity must follow.23

The discussion of the doctrine of human perfectibility shows that this idea opposes the bad consequences of Pantheism, but it does not do so as traditional Christianity does, through recourse to a dualism between the mundane and the trans-worldly realms. The idea of indefinite perfectibility seems to deny the significance of any trans-worldly perfection—any "ideal" human nature to which no individual human being can perfectly correspond. According to the doctrine of perfectibility, the essence of human nature is a kind of openness.

From the standpoint of rationality, this notion of indefinite perfectibility is subject to a host of questions and objections. Fundamentally, there seems to be a confusion in it between the potentiality and the actuality of human nature. But Tocqueville makes no attempt to give a rational defense for the doctrine. He says only that it accords with democracy's intellectual propensities and that it has the enormous practical advantage of giving sanction to the notion of freedom. The idea of indefinite perfectibility sanctions a vision of society wherein each man, through the pursuit of the betterment of his own material conditions, sees himself contributing to a

22 Ibid. p. 191.

23 Ibid., pp. 419–20.
more general advance and that he thus partakes of "the natural greatness of man." Indefinite perfectibility is the doctrine that enables the indefinite progress in material well-being to which democracy gives license, and thus it is "the general and systematic conception by which a great people conducts all its affairs."

I once met an American sailor and asked him why his country's ships are made so they will not last long. He answered offhand that the art of navigation was making such progress that even the best of boats would be almost useless if it lasted more than a few years. 14

Properly set forth, the doctrine of human perfectibility yields to democracy a vision of itself that can enlarge the heart and can provide sanction and opportunity for noble exertions. For while democracy can only value the labor of the mind if it produces material goods, this need not mean that the status of the intelligence is thereby demeaned. It will not be demeaned if men can be brought to interpret material improvement as the sign of the greatness of human nature. 15

Indeed, it is just because knowledge is seen by democracy to be useful that, "...no one easily allows himself to be confined to the material cares of life, and the humblest artisan occasionally casts an eager, furtive glance at the higher regions of the mind." 16 To pull several strands together into one formula, I interpret Toqueville's discussion of the doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of man to be the cardinal element of a public philosophy or civil religion whereby he transforms democratic envy that "leads the weak to want to drag the strong down," into a healthy and proudful belief that one shares in a political order that reveals the natural greatness of man. The resulting pride is what Toqueville means both by the many love of equality and by the spirit of freedom.

IV. Inequality, Ambition, and the Consequent Insufficiency of Commerce as the Medium for the Expression of Democratic Virtue — The Prospects for War in Democracy and for Democracy in War

A severe problem remains for the foregoing account of Toqueville's attempt to reconcile nobility and democracy through a poetic interpretation of commerce. The problem stems from the fact that commerce tends to be universalistic. If commerce does not break down completely the cultural differences that exist among different nations, it tolerates such differences only to the extent that they do not interfere with productivity. Thus, while a nation may manifest a commercial kind of greatness, the very activity through which it does so tends to undercut the significance of that nation's independent existence. The poetic elaboration of commerce does not oppose democracy's own universalism — rather it is consistent with that universalism.

...it is not only the membership of a single nation that come to resemble each other; the nations themselves are assimilated, and one can form the picture of one vast democracy in which a nation counts as a single citizen.

The existence of the entire human race, its vicissitudes and its future, thus become a fertile theme for poetry. 17

The poetic vision of every democratic people points beyond itself; it points, so to speak, to the conventionality of its own particular conventions. 18 But how can men lay claim to nobility by conforming to conventions that they recognize as conventions? How is honor possible, where the very terms within which we honor are seen as false?

24. Ibid., p. 420.
25. Ibid., pp. 424-5, 518.
27. Ibid., p. 454.
To understand fully the problem of nobility in democracy, we must understand that, for Toqueville, there is no such thing as a universal standard of honor. If one can further suppose that all races should become mixed, and all peoples of the world should reach a state in which they all had the same interests and needs, and there was no characteristic trait distinguishing one from another, the practice of attaching a conventional value to men's actions would cease altogether. . . . It is the dissimilarities among men which give rise to the notion of honor. . . . But we must also understand that Toqueville does not think that democracy necessarily leads to a universal society. Were he to think so, the problem of reconciling nobility and democracy would prove impossible. Differences among democratic nations can persist. The problem stems from the fact that since equal men can imagine a single, planetary democracy, those differences will appear less significant than they once did.

Toqueville's discussion of the particular problem before us here occurs in the second half of Book III, Volume II of Democracy in America. It is in connection with this problem that he draws attention to a distinction regarding mankind regarding ambition. The distinction is that while all men need to be able to esteem themselves, and thus require standards that supply the terms of self-esteem, only some men are driven exclusively by a yearning for public recognition and honor. As for the generality of men, Toqueville's point is that they can accept the conventionality of their public conventions and even continue to conform to them, so long as those conventions are consistent with their own pursuit of material gain. Most men are willing and able to act as if they believed what they find convenient. But those few who yearn for honor exclusively cannot be accommodated in this way. They take themselves too seriously. The next question is whether democracy is compatible with the happiness of such men, and whether such men can be tolerated by democracy.

The last eight chapters of Book III, Volume II of Democracy in America are devoted to the problem of the few, ambitious men in democracy. These chapters are also the ones that contain Toqueville's reflections on war and democracy. The connection needs to be carefully explicated. In chapter 19, of Book III, Toqueville asserts that,

...when, despite all natural obstacles, [men of great ambition] do appear, they wear another face.

Under aristocracies the career open to ambition is often wide, but it does have fixed limits. In democratic countries the field of action is usually very narrow, but once those narrow bonds are passed, there is nothing left to stop it. As men are weak, and changeable, and as precedents have little force and laws do not last long, resistance to innovation is halffinished, and the fabric of society never stands up quite straight or firm. As a result, when ambitious men have once seized power, they think they can do anything. When power slips from their grasp, their thoughts at once turn to overturning the state in order to get it again.

It is impossible to follow Toqueville's argument here unless it is recognized that, despite the dangers that broad ambition...
poses to free institutions, Tocqueville does not brand ambition an evil, and he does not wish to expunge it. He accepts ambition of this kind as a given, and he argues that "it would be very dangerous if we tried to starve it or confine it beyond reason... we should be very careful not to hamper its free energy within the permitted limits."33 The question for Tocqueville is, therefore, how to make ambition "proportionate, moderate, and yet vast." Democracy must in some way find a substitute for the capacity of aristocracy to provide a legitimate field for the expression of ambition. But what sort of field for the ambitious is democracy able to provide?

Tocqueville further develops his discussion of the role of extraordinary ambition in democracy in chapter 21 of Book III, "Why Great Revolutions Will Become Rare." Near the opening of this chapter, Tocqueville issues the warning that this "...subject is important, and I ask the reader to follow my argument closely." The central point of this chapter is that, contrary to the opinion Tocqueville attributes to many of his contemporaries, democracy is not an unstable and revolutionary condition. The great class of men in democracy who are owners of modest amounts of property are the natural enemies of violent conditions: "Their excitement about small matters makes them calm about great ones."34 The consequence of what Tocqueville asserts here is that there is a disjunction between the great mass of citizens in democracy and the ambitious few, and on reflection it is this disjunction primarily that robs the ambitious few of a field of expression.

I am not suggesting that they resist him openly by means of well-thought-out schemes, or indeed by means of any considered determination to resist. They show no energy in fighting him and sometimes even applaud him, but they do not follow him. Secretly their apathy is opposed to his fire, their conservative interests to his revolutionary instincts, their hostile taste to his adventurous passion, their common sense to his flighty genius, their pride to his poetry. With immense effort he raises them for a moment; but they soon slip from him and fall back, as it were, by their own weight. He exhausts himself trying to animate this indifferent and proscribed crowd and finds at last that he is reduced to impotence, not because he is conquered but because he is alone.35

Though democracy is not incapable of being inspired by thoughts of public glory, it is hard to get equal men to sacrifice much for it. The ambitious are frustrated and become the enemies of society. Given this restatement of the issue, what is principally required in order to civilize extraordinary ambition is that the generality of men somehow be rendered fit to recognize and appreciate the value of such ambition. They must not be allowed to remain wholly preoccupied with their private activity; they must rather be put within reach of "those great and powerful public emotions which do indeed perturb peoples but which also make them grow and refresh them."36 With regard to this special problem of the role of the ambitious in democracy, we must conclude that the vision of the nation's glory that is conveniently conducive to the general pursuit of private satisfaction is not sufficient. The commercial glory of the democratic nation is an image that satisfies only the more modest form of political passion. It yields a sense of honor satisfying only to those who are not driven by a yearning for honor above all else. A people that is fit to reward with appropriate honors the actions of those who are driven most by ambition must themselves enter the field of those "great and powerful public emotions" that drive men to the greatest heights. Having made this point, Tocque-

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33. Ibid., p. 607.
34. Ibid., p. 613.
35. Ibid., p. 613.
36. Ibid., p. 619.
ville abruptly and without further explanation turns to the subject of the last five chapters of Book III, namely, the prospects for war in democracy and for democracy in war.

The most dangerous form of the danger to democracy from its most ambitious element is war. "All those who seek to destroy the freedom of the democratic nations must know that war is the surest and shortest means to accomplish this. That is the very first axiom of their science." Nevertheless, just as Tocqueville does not think that the problem of ambition can be resolved by purging democracy of its ambitious men, so Tocqueville does not think that democracy can purge itself of war and the concern with war. War would not be impossible unless there ceased to be distinct nations: a situation that is equivalent to the triumph of the worst prospects in democracy. For this reason Tocqueville takes it for granted that "... war is a hazard to which all nations are subject, democracies as well as the rest." The question, therefore, is how can the threat of war be minimized in conformity with the conditions necessary to the highest and strongest expression of public emotion?

Having said that all nations are necessarily subject to the hazard of war, Tocqueville goes on to say that war is not an unqualified evil. All too easily understressed is his statement that,

I do not wish to speak ill of war; war almost always underlies a nation's mental horizons and raises its heart. In some cases it may be the only factor which can prevent the exaggerated growth of certain inclinations naturally produced by equality and be the antidote needed for certain ineradicable diseases to which democratic societies are liable.

With reference to the central issue that underlies all these last several chapters of Book III, Volume II, the significance of this qualified praise of war is as follows. The only way that a people can be brought within reach of those truly "great and powerful public emotions" is to involve them in thinking about war. A people that fit to bestow with appropriate honors those who are most ambitious for honor must themselves know the nobility of the ultimate sacrifice a citizen can make for his country. The reader whose sympathy Tocqueville has won up to this point will have been prepared to draw the conclusion for himself, and Tocqueville, understandably, stops short of making it explicit. The people who are fit to honor their best citizens must combine the role of citizen and soldier, perhaps through the institution of something like universal military service.

The problem of reconciling nobility and democracy, which is the problem of democracy from Tocqueville's point of view, absolutely requires a combination of the roles of democratic citizen and soldier. This fact surely does not mean that Tocqueville recommends war and conquest as a way of life for modern democratic nations. But, like Machiavelli, Tocqueville suggests that a free people must never believe that their freedom depends on any security other than their own military strength. A citizenry that is disarmed, and puts its trust in hirelings, (Tocqueville's example here is the non-commissioned officer—the professional soldier) runs an increased risk of defeat. As Tocqueville describes him, the professional is susceptible to a reckless kind of ambition for war. War is the only condition in which rapid promotion is possible; therefore the professional soldier "... wants war; he always wants it and at any cost." Thus, Tocqueville would prevent the spirit of the professional soldier from characterizing the democratic

37. Ibid., p. 825.
38. Ibid., p. 621.
39. Ibid., p. 624.
army because he wants to civilize soldiery as well as to ennoble citizenship. The remedy for the army's vices can only be sought in the pacific and orderly habits of the private, citizen soldier. 42

One question remains of Tocqueville's discussion of war and democracy. Is the citizen army that Tocqueville seems to be recommending really fit to fight and win in a contest with trained professionals? Tocqueville considers this question in some detail, with the conclusion that democratic citizens can make excellent soldiers. There is, he notes, an often hidden connection between the spirit of democracy and the war passion.

Moreover, there is a hidden connection which war uncovers between the military and democratic mores.

The men of democracies are by nature passionately eager to acquire quickly what they covet and to enjoy it on easy terms. They for the most part love hazards and fear death much less than difficulty. It is in that spirit that they conduct their trade and industry, and this spirit carried with them onto the battlefield induces them willingly to risk their lives to secure in a moment the rewards of victory. No kind of greatness is more pleasing to the imagination of a democratic people than military greatness which is brilliant and sudden, won without hard work, by risking nothing but one's life.

An aristocratic people which, fighting against a democracy, does not succeed in bringing it to ruin in the first campaigns always runs a great risk in being defeated by it. 43

Tocqueville goes still beyond this statement in accounting for the excellence of the democratic army. Democracy's greatest advantage in war is that it is well constituted to recognize the glory that its citizens may win in battle. Aristocracy, by contrast, has difficulty seeing that it is a man's own life that he risks for his country.

The (aristocratic) soldier has broken into military discipline, so to say, before he enters the army, or rather military discipline is only a more perfect form of social servitude. So in aristocratic armies the private soon comes to be insensible to everything except the orders of the leaders. He acts without thought, triumphs without excitement, and is killed without complaint. In such a condition he is no more a man, but he is a veritable formidable animal trained for war. 44

Democracy, however, is freer with its gratitude. Indeed, Tocqueville's discussion of the military advantages of democracy reads like a straightforward elaboration of what Machiavelli says regarding the vital differences between the people and the nobles; namely, the nobles are stingy with their gratitude. 45

Marshal Rommel is alleged to have said on some occasion that the soldiers of the American democratic army are the fiercest and hence the best that he opposed—after the first battle. Whether Rommel actually said that tribute or not it nicely accords with what Tocqueville reveals as the root of democracy's natural supremacy. Democracy fights only at first with instruments, but afterwards with men. Tocqueville's discussion of war and democracy reveals that what he means by the noble love of equality is in fact the warrior spirit. His central purpose in Democracy in America can be summed up as an attempt to keep that spirit alive.

Democratic peoples must despise of ever obtaining from their soldiers this blind, detailed, resigned, and equable obedience which aristocracies can impose without trouble. The state of society in no way prepares men for this, and there is a danger that they will lose their natural advantages by trying artificially to acquire this one. In

42. Ibid., esp. pp. 625 & 629.
43. Ibid., pp. 622–3.
44. Ibid., p. 634.
democracies military discipline ought not to try to cancel out the spontaneous exercise of the faculties; it should aspire only to direct them; and the obedience thus trained will be less precise but more impetuous and intelligent. It should be rooted in the will of the man who obeys; it relies not only on instinct, but on reason too, and consequently will often grow stricter as the danger makes this necessary. The discipline of an aristocratic army is apt to relax in wartime, for it is based on habit, and war upsets habits. But in a democratic army discipline is strengthened in the face of the enemy, for each soldier sees very clearly that to conquer he must be silent and obey.

Those nations that have achieved most in war have never known any other discipline than that of which I speak. In antiquity only free men and citizens were accepted for the army, and they differed but little from one another and were accustomed to treat one another as equals. In that sense the armies of antiquity can be called democratic, even when they sprang from an aristocratic society. As a result, in those armies a sort of fraternal familiarity prevailed between officers and men. To read Plutarch’s lives of great commanders convinces one of that. The soldiers are constantly talking, and talking very freely, to their generals, while the latter gladly listen to what they say and answer it. Their words and their example lead the army much more than any constraint or punishment. They were as much companions as leaders to their men.

I do not know if the Greeks and Romans ever brought the small details of military discipline to such perfection as the Russians have done, but that did not prevent Alexander from conquering Asia, and the Romans the world. 46

V. Conclusion

For the students whose outlook on politics has been influenced by Machiavelli, nothing seems more disappointing than the absence of grandeur from the modern materialistic world. The de-glorification of modern politics had been performed by Hobbes and Locke, who extended but also perverted Machiavelli’s arguments. Hobbes and Locke had learned from Machiavelli the vanity of man’s concern with otherworldly pleasures, and they concluded that political society could be founded on the basis of men’s willingness to support the conditions necessary to their pursuit of material gain. But with the rejection of the political relevance of otherworldly concerns, Hobbes and Locke rejected the possibility of men attaching glory to their political triumphs with reference to divine sanction—and hence the modern world was de-glorified.

I believe that Tocqueville tries to renew men’s instinct for greatness. He tries to rejuvenate modern political life by way of a return to the original thought of Machiavelli. What is central to this attempt is Tocqueville’s recognition of the centrality of man’s “political passion,” rooted in pride, as versus man’s desire for material gain. Hobbes and Locke had erred because they had not seen that Machiavelli’s denial of man’s divine life does not mean that men are simply materialists. The desire for glory is central for man even though the divinity whose sanction is necessary for glory cannot become the object of human concern or activity.

Like Machiavelli, Tocqueville thinks man can escape the shadowy precariousness of his existence through worldly greatness—at least to whatever extent any escape is possible. From the perspective formed by Plato, what is denied by Machiavelli and Tocqueville is the erectile root of men’s political passion; for Plato shows that eros necessarily longs for immortality and cannot be satisfied with the opinions or appearances of this world, however great. The consequences of this difference in perspective between Plato and Tocqueville is that Tocqueville can try to resist democracy’s tendency towards atomistic

homogeneity through an invigoration of its spirit; he does not argue, as does Plato, the necessity for moderating eros. Toqueville's project is misdirected if the real problem of democracy is, as Plato warned, that democracy liberates an eros that destroys all restraints in law and decency that remind eros of its mortal condition, and in that way reduces society to a sub-

human equality. I think that modern students can profit much from Toqueville's reassertion of the centrality of "political passion" in political affairs. The most profitable result may be to tame that very political passion and to redirect one concern for "equal social justice" toward the question of nature and the human soul.

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