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TOCQUEVILLE ON WAR AND DEMOCRACY

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Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society, it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed.

I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce [1]

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[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Vol I, trans Henry Reeve (New York Vintage Classics, 1990) Author's Introduction, 3

Rehabilitating Tocqueville

What could a 26 year old Frenchman, whose actual experience of America over 150 years ago lasted only some nine months, add to an extensive body of thinking on war, most of it written by professional soldiers or far more experienced writers and thinkers? Several factors suggest a re-evaluation of Tocqueville's work is long overdue, and may in fact be extraordinarily productive.

First, while many of his ideas are in wide circulation among political and social scientists (see bibliography for a small sample), only in the most rare cases is his influence acknowledged. This, regardless of the intrinsic merits of his contribution to any field of study, constitutes an oversight that can only be rectified by meticulous scholarship that gives proper attribution to the history of ideas. Second, there is virtually no mention in the professional military literature of Tocqueville's highly original contributions to thinking on the relationship between society and the armed forces. When searching for new ideas, it may be best to search where the light is less bright and the searchers are fewer Third and perhaps most important, much of the classical literature on war, armed forces, and civil-military relationships was written in an era when democratic states were virtually unknown or at least a considerable novelty The flurry of writing that closely followed the Napoleonic wars, to take but one example, never treated regime form as an independent variable, tending instead to focus

on aspects of war that were common to all armies Tocqueville's writings, in contrast, may shed light on previously unexamined relationship between democratic states and their military forces, and thus enhance the value of other studies that fail to address this important aspect of the topic.

This paper argues for a careful re-reading of Tocqueville's writing on the United States, with special attention to his passages on military issues, in the hope that both military professionals and their civilian masters will give serious attention to a body of ideas that continues to have relevance. In the century and a half since their writing, Tocqueville's observations have lost none of their freshness. In our age, when the relationship between society and the military is once again intensely debated, his still-fresh ideas may help guide this debate into more productive channels.

The first part of this paper goes directly to the source—Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*—attempting to clarify what Tocqueville said *prior* to discussing what he might have meant. It concludes with some thoughts on the place of his writing in the larger body of military thought, and proposes some reasons why this work has thus far been neglected.

Tocqueville on the Military

Tocqueville's writings on war and the military are compressed into a space occupying less than 30 pages, some of them buried in the appendices. They appear principally in the second volume of his *Democracy in America*, published in France in 1840 some five years after publication of the better known first volume. The first volume is largely political in nature, focusing on the United States specifically, while the second examines the effects of democracy on a host of other institutions and relationships, among them literature, finance, social relations, and military issues.

Tocqueville's writing on the armed forces takes the form of observations grouped into five chapters (XXII through XXVI) at the end of the second volume's Third Book. A listing of the chapter headings may give some insights into Tocqueville's thought:

- XXII *Why Democratic Nations Naturally Desire Peace, and Democratic Armies, War*
- XXIII *Which is the Most Warlike and Most Revolutionary Class in Democratic Armies*
- XXIV *Causes Which Render Democratic Armies Weaker Than Other Armies at the Outset of a Campaign, and More Formidable in Protracted Warfare*
- XXV *Of Discipline in Democratic Armies*

- XXVI *Some Considerations on War in Democratic Communities*

In addition to these chapters, three very brief appendices refer to military issues

- Appendix O, on differences between maritime and continental wars
- Appendix X, on the effects of widespread pacifism in armies
- Appendix AA, on the effects of a military coup in a democratic state

Generalizing the major chapter headings, we may understand Tocqueville's basic categories to be:

- relations between the state and its armed forces
- relations between elements *within* the armed forces
- relations between democratic states and other states
- factors internal to the armed forces as a whole
- factors common to states and societies as a whole

Applying these categories, it is possible to isolate the principal statements and their logical connections addressing these basic categories, which should clarify precisely what Tocqueville is saying. A modest attempt to do this in some systematic fashion follows.

1. Relations between the state and its armed forces

1.1. As social conditions become more equal, the passion to conduct war will become more rare.[2] This occurs as a result of:

1.1.1. Reduction of property distribution inequalities, a characteristic of democratic societies;[3]

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[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Vol II, trans Henry Reeve (New York Vintage Classics, 1990), 264

1.1.2 Decreasing public spiritedness, caused by dissolution of the social bonds that characterize autocratic and strongly hierarchical societies;[4]

1.1.2. The inherent conservatism of societies in which there are no gross inequalities of opportunity.[5]

1.2 Nonetheless, in an international environment that remains competitive and potentially hostile, even inherently pacifistic democratic states are compelled to maintain armies.[6] The existence of standing forces produces pressures within the military for war, since:

1 2.1. Rank in democratic armies is not determined by birth. Democratic armed forces mirror the society that produces them. This has powerful effects on how promotion occurs within the ranks.

1 2.1 1. Rank in an aristocratic army is largely pre-determined by pre-existing social structures, which tends to limit ambition in uniform.

1.2.1.2 Rank in democratic armies is earned irrespective of prior social status, which tends to both produce and reward ambition within the ranks.

1 2 2. Promotion opportunities in peacetime democratic armies are comparatively scarce, due to the virtually unlimited pool of potential

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[3] Ibid , 254
[4] Ibid , 256
[5] Ibid , 257
[6] Ibid , 264

competitors and the lack of vacancies in the senior ranks that would naturally occur during wartime due to casualties.[7]

1 2.3. The combination of ambition and restricted opportunities for advancement results in a military whose mid-level leadership sees war as an opportunity for advancement; "war makes vacancies and warrants the violation of that law of seniority which is the sole privilege natural to democracy."[8]

1.3. Danger to democratic society arises, paradoxically, during those pacifistic periods in which a state places the *least* value on its armed forces, and as argued above, democratic states tend toward pacifism. This danger is the result of broad social attitudes toward the members of the armed forces:

1.3.1. When there is little social value placed on military service, the armed forces will cease to be attractive to the best qualified members of society. This leads to a destructive cycle in which "the best part of the nation shuns the military profession because that profession is not honored, and the profession is not honored because the best part of the nation has ceased to follow it."[9]

1.3.2. As members of the armed forces generally have little property, they have the least to lose in the event of government overthrow or radical changes in the social order.

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[7] Ibid , 266
[8] Ibid , 266
[9] Ibid , 267

1.3.3. The combination of restless ambition, relative social inferiority, and the sense that little is to be lost in any event tends to accentuate the isolation of the military from its society.[10]

1.4. The combination of these three key points results in a set of observations common to democratic states: "There are two things that a democratic people will always find very difficult, to begin a war and to end it."[11]

2. Relations between elements within the armed forces

2 1. Democratic states will tend to rely on conscription rather than volunteers for raising armed forces, as there is neither significant social nor financial gain from military service.[12]

2 1.1. Where conscription drives military service, terms of service for the majority of the armed forces tend to be comparatively short, and the attitudes of society as a whole tend to permeate the armed forces.

2.1.2 So long as conscription is applied fairly, without exception, the armed forces will tend to accept significant deprivation without complaint.

2.2 Those who see military service as a career will develop significantly different attitudes from those whose service is limited and who return relatively quickly to society

2.2.1 Uniquely military professional attitudes will not arise in the vast majority of a conscript army, as their attachment is to the society to which

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[10] Ibid , 267
[11] Ibid , 268
[12] Ibid , 271

they will soon return. This body of people is the most conservative in a democratic conscript army.

2.2 2. On the other hand, those who commit themselves to a military career renounce much of what they leave behind in civilian life

2.3. The officer corps will tend to develop a set of values and attitudes that is at odds with the rest of society. This is a result of:

2.3.1. The relationship between earned rank and the fate of the army In democratic states, the military officer has no equivalent civilian rank apart from military life.[13] This creates a powerful attachment to the institution

2.3.2. The effects of war on the individual's career This argument grows out of argument 1.3. above.

2 4. The most senior officers will tend to become increasingly conservative, becoming a distinctive group from the junior and mid-grade officer corps and the non-commissioned officers, who share similarly aggressive attitudes toward war

2 4 1. Acquisition of rank is similar to the acquisition of property, in that it creates an increasingly conservative attitude as the achievement or acquisition increases. The individual with the highest rank has the most to lose.

2.4 2. This tendency to protect existing gains begins to counterbalance the ambition of those who have advanced the farthest

[13] Ibid , 273

2.4.3. Senior commanders become the most conservative element in the armed forces: "...the least warlike and also the least revolutionary part of a democratic army will always be its chief commanders."[14]

2.4.4. The most dangerous group in the armed forces will be those who occupy the space between the large numbers of conscripts or short-term enlistees and the senior leadership. This group, unless given considerable career security, will tend to be least satisfied with the status quo, and will be the least pacifistic.

3. Relations between states and other states

3.1. The longer a state has been at peace, the greater the danger of losing a war. This results from several characteristics of democratic armies:

3.1.1. The longer the period of peace, the less likely the best talents of the state will have chosen the military as a profession. This argument is outlined in more detail above.

3 1.2. Promotion in democratic armies is based largely on seniority, a tendency that results in a highly conservative mind-set among the senior officers (see argument above), and in a high median age among the most senior leadership. This may be innocuous in peacetime, but at war the vigor of youth is desirable.[15]

3.1.2. The increasing conservatism of its senior leadership tends to spread throughout the ranks of a peacetime army. The most ambitious

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[14] Ibid , 273
[15] Ibid., 277

and talented people leave to seek their fortunes elsewhere, leaving behind a group of people whose generally view the armed forces as an extension of civilian life, and who have little interest in preparing for a war that would disrupt the comfortable routine of a peacetime army [16]

3.1.3. As there is little public support for the armed forces in peacetime in democratic states (see argument above), the armed forces will be negatively affected by a lack of moral backing from society as a whole, and this in turn will impair their fighting ability.

3 2 Once at war, however, protracted warfare favors democratic states

3.2.1. Democratic societies require a long time to focus their energies on anything other than the conduct of private business, but given adequate time, they attack this problem with the same energies they previously devoted to self-enrichment

3 2.2. War damages the business affairs of a state, which are largely speculative. War itself takes on this speculative nature, which is amenable to the energies of democratic civil society. It gradually absorbs all the energies and ambitions of society and channels them into prosecution of the war.

3.2.3. As war continues to attract public attention, the armed forces begin to attract the state's best talent. The destruction of the seniority system has strongly beneficial effects, as war "...breaks through

[16] Ibid , 277

regulations and allows extraordinary men to rise above the common level."[17]

3.2.4. There exists a "...secret connection between the military character and the character of democracies, which war brings to light."[18] The character traits that bring success in democracies, tend when diverted from business to produce highly effective combat forces. This secret connection is:

3.2.4.1 In democratic societies, there is a tendency to place a high value on quick acquisition of profit with the least possible expenditure of energy.

3.2.4.2. Democratic societies encourage the taking of great risks in exchange for the possibility of great rewards, and this is particularly the case in combat, which promises instant recognition or greatness in exchange for a moment of great bravery [19]

3.3 As a consequence of the role of time in the potential outcome of a war, democratic states have unique resources that, given adequate time, will give them a distinct advantage in a war with a non-democratic state.

4. Factors internal to the armed forces as a whole

4.1. Discipline in non-democratic societies results in centralization and obedience, a reflection of relations in society as a whole.

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[17] Ibid , 278
[18] Ibid , 278
[19] Ibid , 278

4.1.1. In non-democratic armies, discipline reflects the pre-existing social order. There is an essential continuity between society and the armed forces.

4.1.2. This condition of blind obedience has been conditioned by non-democratic society; it results in fighting forces that fight only on the basis of discipline rather than any attachment to society

4.2. Social equality in society does not destroy the bonds of discipline between military ranks, but discipline takes on new forms.

4.2.1 Democratic states cannot and should not adopt the same methods of discipline used in other armies, as this would be foreign to their nature What they would gain would be more than offset by what they lose.

4.2.2. Discipline in democratic armies should not attempt to destroy free will, but rather channel it.[20]

4.2 3. Obedience that has been directed to some purpose utilizing the free will of the soldier ".. is less exact, but it is more eager and more intelligent."[21]

4.3. Discipline in democratic armies is automatically strengthened during wartime through the operation of intelligent free will

4.3.1. Obedience rests on reason and is thus adjusted to conditions, often becoming more strict in the face of great danger than could otherwise have been ordered.

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[20] Ibid., 279
[21] Ibid., 279

4.3.2. The simultaneous operation of free will and enlightened self-interest of the soldiers in democratic armies compels a spontaneous discipline that results in greater flexibility and a greater ability to function when conditions change rapidly or there is no direct order to compel appropriate action.[22]

5. Factors common to states and societies as a whole

5.1. As democratic states proliferate, wars between them will become more rare.

5.1.1. The inherently pacifistic nature of democracies makes them generally reluctant to pursue war as state policy.

5.1.2. As democracies proliferate, the people within the various states will tend to share interests Furthermore, their commercial interests will tend to converge

5.1.3. War's effects on any state will be felt by all under democratic conditions; this there exists a powerful disincentive to wage a war that would be equally destructive to all parties.

5.2 If democratic states *are* driven to wage war, there will be a tendency for them to involve other states.

5 2.1. Despite the disincentives to wage war noted above, the interlocking interests of democratic societies will tend to draw in all affected parties, thereby expanding the number of states involved.

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[22] Ibid , 280

5.2.2. The identification of the individual with other individuals in warring states will tend to draw in bystander states, despite their initial reluctance.

5 3. As states become more alike, their success in war will rely increasingly on the sizes of their armed forces.

5.3.1. As states become more alike, their armed forces will become more similar There will be progressively smaller qualitative differences between forces.

5.3.2. When all soldiers are equally efficient, sheer numbers of soldiers will determine battlefield success.[23]

5.3.3. As numbers become the determinant of combat power in democratic states, armies will tend to grow in size despite the inherently pacifistic nature of the state

5.5. When a democratic state is invaded, it will tend to lay down its arms more quickly than would be the case in a non-democratic state.

5.5.1. Individuals in democracies are not bound together by hierarchical social ties. When their territory is invaded and their army defeated, there is no nucleus of resistance (as opposed to an aristocracy, which offers numerous focal points for resistance)

5.5.2. Resistance will tend to be sporadic and largely ineffective if the government falls and the state is figuratively decapitated.

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[23] Ibid , 283

5.6. Civil wars will be less prevalent and of shorter duration in democratic states.[24]

5.6.1. The absence of martial spirit in democracies noted above tends to encourage a reluctance on the part of democracies to wage war; this is true of civil wars as well

5.6.2. The centralized government apparatus has no competitor in democracies. Thus there is no institutional nucleus for a development of a rival to the existing government in a democracy.

5 6.3 Given this absence of centers of resistance, it will be far easier to take government at a single stroke than through a protracted war

5.6.4. In the event of a split within the armed forces, however, the insurrection will tend to be bloody but quick, since the first party that seized the government apparatus would have an immediate and probably insurmountable advantage.

[24] It is important to note Tocqueville's qualification of what constitutes a civil war He observes that in a conflict between two or more components of a confederate democracy, where significant power resides in the state governments, " civil wars are in fact nothing but foreign wars in disguise " Ibid , 286

Some Implications of Tocqueville's Theory

"Nothing is more unproductive to the mind than an abstract idea."[25]

Tocqueville makes a genuinely original contribution to thinking about military matters. He offers the reader a carefully reasoned theoretical framework that has its foundations in observations taken from the real world, explaining social phenomena in terms of individual behaviors and attitudes. Among his most significant contributions are:

- Suggesting the nature of the state is crucial to understanding military performance factors that cannot be explained by more traditional approaches.

- Treating seemingly trivial phenomena (such as promotion systems) as serious factors in explaining military performance.

- Describing the limits democracy places on how military force can be employed. This is above all a practical text, despite the richness of its theoretical structure, it returns regularly to the real world in an attempt to guide statesmen on a topic of supreme importance.

- Offering a comprehensive theory of civil-military relations that integrates social, economic, and political factors. Tocqueville's theory of military issues is not intended to stand alone. It is a sophisticated, multi-causal integrated approach to viewing issues that otherwise tend to be somewhat arbitrarily categorized in deference to the increasing specialization of the social sciences

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[25] Ibid , 231

- Using the nature of the state as the independent variable in explaining military phenomena. This approach has become somewhat of an industry in our time, but there is nothing else quite like it in the military literature The clarity of his observations at a time when democratic states were a very small minority on the international scene makes this all the more striking.

- His approach is initially descriptive, but then theoretical in a way that attempts to make logical sense of the mass of facts. Too often, writing on military issues leaps from the descriptive to the prescriptive without any conscious attempt at coherence or the use of theory to move beyond the mere generation of checklists. The result of Tocqueville's approach argues for intelligent, thoughtful analysis as a possible substitute for large-N statistical studies

- Teaching us about ourselves. *Democracy in America*, in fairness, was not written for Americans. Its intended audience was the French elite class, but it is often the case that we can learn the most from an outsider We tend to be too close to the object viewed. Tocqueville's distance allows him to see phenomena we might take for granted.

It is worth noting that Tocqueville makes no attempt to construct a general theory of war. His intent was to illustrate the effects of democracy on society as a whole and on its specific institutions. In any event, his line of argument suggests discussion of war without first stipulating the social arrangements that lead to creation of armed forces is pointless. Tocqueville's

army lives in the real world, a reflection of the society that produces it. Further abstraction would only serve to create artificial distinctions between consideration of the military and other branches of the social sciences, and this is precisely what Tocqueville cautions against.

Tocqueville claims his logical framework must be understood as a whole, but he clearly knows better than to fall into the trap of monocausality [26] While making a strong claim for the effects of democracy on every aspect of society, he cautions against crude oversimplification, noting that "to explain a mass of facts by a single cause becomes an ardent and sometimes an undiscerning passion in the human mind "[27]

What is Tocqueville's place in the history of ideas about war? A case for his inclusion in the pantheon is weakened somewhat by the fact that he makes no claim for having devised a theory of war, but an author's claims as to the ultimate meaning of his or her work can never be the basis for an independent evaluation. For every would-be theorist who claims to have devised a comprehensive theory that explains every case in history we may produce another whose work stands quietly on its own merits. Tocqueville's is such a study His work meets each of the criteria necessary for a hierarchical theory, which is far more than can be said of the more prevalent but less substantive 'how-to' checklists that abound throughout the literature. Tocqueville assembles facts, devises laws that explain those facts, and then constructs theory to relate

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[26] Ibid , Preface, v
[27] Ibid , 15

these laws in a way that gives them purpose. This is theoretical work of a very high order indeed.

If this is so, why has his work remained outside the mainstream of military thought? Several explanations come to mind:

- Its length is modest, perhaps too modest for its own good. The few pages that make up the core of his thought on the military lie well concealed in a lengthy discussion of economic and social issues that function as camouflage.

- It fails to form a discrete work devoted exclusively to the subject of war Tocqueville is an integrator, but this approach lies outside the more modern convention of classifying social research in categories that exclude them from discussion outside the guild.

- His work lies outside the mainstream of military thought It is written by a civilian—and an extraordinarily young civilian at that—who had no intention of writing a work of military theory. His outsider status works against his wider acceptance.

- Its accessibility and deceptive simplicity mask its rigidly theoretical nature. The price of admission may perhaps be too low to merit serious study in a discipline where terminological obscurity and complexity are too often seen as virtues.

- It remains buried in a work studied primarily by sociologists and students of government, and worse yet, in a rarely-read second volume to a far better known first volume.

Tocqueville's theory is not, of course, beyond criticism. His analysis is susceptible to attack on a number of fronts, among them:

- He may have aggregated characteristics of democracy in general with those unique to the United States in the 1830s. He is aware of the risks of this, of course, but given the newness of the phenomenon he was studying, there would have been an inevitable temptation to draw more from the American case than warranted.

- His brush is exceptionally broad. An older, more experience observer may have been more cautious in making predictions, preferring to comment on a narrower range of social issues.

- His number of cases may be too small to have useful predictive power It is always dangerous to draw too many conclusions from a limited data set.

- His notes on democracy may indeed have been valid in the 1830s, but America today only partially resembles the society Tocqueville describes. The complete validity of this counter-argument remains to be proven, of course, but there is no question that the world has changed in the interim, and not all of Tocqueville's assumptions may still be valid

There is clearly work to be done It would be foolish, though, to dismiss Tocqueville's theory out of hand, and indeed, as a thesis generation mechanism, it is unparalleled in research on democracy. Much of the current political science research on regime type and war relies implicitly on his theses (see bibliography), which argues powerfully for Tocqueville's continued relevance

This paper is not, however, intended to be a defense of his theory, but instead is an attempt to lay out its major principles as a preface to their thoughtful discussion.

Democracy describes the relationships between individuals in society, as well as the relationship of the individual to the government. This relationship has discernable effects on every aspect of society, even though other factors—particularly historical continuity—complicate and sometimes contravene these effects. Despite its limitations, Tocqueville's masterpiece remains without equal It enriches the study of military issues specifically and social issues in general, and richly repays careful analysis.

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