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### Recommended Citation

Michels, S. (2005). When democracies fight: Tocqueville on the democratic peace. *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, 34(2), 23-36.

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# When Democracies Fight: Tocqueville on the Democratic Peace

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Do democratic norms and political culture play a greater role than structural determinants in realizing a democratic peace? Alexis de Tocqueville, a hitherto unappreciated theorist of international politics, offered such a view 175 years ago. This article examines Tocqueville's perspective on civil-military relations and the connection between democracy and peace. Tocqueville concludes that the key to the pacifism of a democracy is the equality of conditions it enjoys and the education that its soldiers receive prior to entering the military. Thus, in Tocqueville's estimation, the democratic peace has little to do with the practice of democracy, and everything to do with the economic well-being and political virtue of its citizens.

Democratic states do not go to war with one another. That is the central tenet of democratic peace theory.<sup>1</sup> Although it has been clarified and slightly altered since it originated with Emmanuel Kant's notion of a perpetual peace, it is, perhaps more than any other theory in international relations, widely accepted among scholars. As Levy notes, "the absence of war between democracies comes as close to anything we have to an empirical law."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Diehl has called the democratic peace "axiomatic."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The modern variant was first articulated by Dean V. Babst, "Elective Governments: A Force for Peace," *The Wisconsin Sociologist* 3/1 (1964): 9-14; also see Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "The War-Proneness of Democratic Regimes," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 1 (Summer 1976): 50-69.

Prior to these works, most classical liberal theorists—including Adam Smith, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill—had argued that commercial republics were more pacific.

<sup>2</sup> Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, Robert J. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabbs, eds. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Diehl, "Arms Race and Escalation: A Closer Look," *Journal of Peace Research* 20/3 (September 1983): 205-212; see also his "Armaments Without War: An Analysis of Some Underlying Effect," *Journal of Peace Research* 22/3 (September 1985): 249-259.

Of course there have been attempts to qualify or altogether refute it. Gowa contends that no evidence for a democratic peace exists pre-WWII and no reason to expect any to emerge afterwards. As she writes, "a democratic peace exists only during the Cold War."<sup>4</sup> Elman, too, has been critical, claiming that "Democratic peace theorists overemphasize domestic regime type and political ideology in explaining war and peace outcomes and underestimate the capacity for other domestic- and international-level factors to promote international cooperation and conflict."<sup>5</sup>

One area that has received particular attention among critics is whether such a peace translates into fewer wars by a democracy, much less between or among them. Rummel, among others, has argued that democratic states are less likely to go to war than non-democratic states. "When properly measured," he contends, "democracies are less violent than nondemocracies."<sup>6</sup> According to Rummel, democracy itself is a method of nonviolence.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence is pointing to culture as the explanation behind Rummel's view. Indeed, as Maoz and Abdolali have found, the democratic peace theory is better understood as a theory of understanding preferences of citizens, not the actions of states.<sup>8</sup> Morgan and Campbell agree. Although they take seriously the institutional constraints present in a democracy, they conclude, "the casual mechanism associating democracy with war-proneness operates through political culture rather than domestic political structure."<sup>9</sup> More recently, Weart envisions the democratic peace as "a democratic international political culture, with democratically oriented international institutions to sustain it," a feat that would require "every important nation to adopt a democratic political culture domestically."<sup>10</sup> These studies shift the focus from the structure of the national government and its decision-making processes to individual preferences and democratic values.

<sup>4</sup> Joanne Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets: The Elusive Democratic Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Fendius Elman, "Preface," *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?*, Miriam Fendius Elman, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> R. J. Rummel, *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Rummel's methodology is often criticized for its limited frame of reference. See S. Chan, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...Are the Democratic States More Pacific?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28 (December 1984): 617-48; and Eric Weede, "Democracy and War Involvement," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28 (December 1984): 649-694.

More recently, Rummel has been attacked by Robert L. Ivie for bringing his politics into the equation: "Not only is the ideological imperative behind this line of scholarship apparent in the desire to associate peace with freedom, rights, and liberty but also a political strategy is implied in the move to place the entire cluster under the sign of democracy on the grounds of promoting clarity." *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali, "Regime Types and International Conflict, 1816-1976," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33 (March 1989): 3-35.

<sup>9</sup> Clifton T. Morgan and Sally Howard Campbell, "Domestic Structure, Decisional Constraints, and War: So Why Kant Democracies Fight?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (June 1991): 189-210.

<sup>10</sup> Spencer R. Weart, *Never at War: Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 269.

One virtually untapped resource in understanding this aspect of the democratic peace is Alexis de Tocqueville. Certainly, he proved himself to be an adept observer of democracies, the United States in particular, and his classic, *Democracy in America*, is not silent on the issue of war. Indeed, if the democratic peace is a result of the values and behaviors in a democracy, there may be no better authority.

### The Military Spirit

Tocqueville's general thesis on democracy and war is summed up in the heading of the first chapter with war as its subject: "Why Democratic Peoples Naturally Want Peace But Democratic Armies War." The difference between the people and the military, Tocqueville professes, results from the spread of equality among the society as a whole. He writes, "I think one can accept it as a general and constant rule that among civilized nations warlike passions become rarer and less active as social conditions get nearer to equality."<sup>11</sup> According to Tocqueville, men are devoted to peace as a result of holding property. This change in attention is also a change in affection. Property rights dampen the warlike spirit and make citizens inclined to tranquility.

Tocqueville, however, is no idealist. He understands that all states, democracies included, need an army to secure themselves, regardless of any inclination toward peace. "No matter how greatly such nations may be devoted to peace," Tocqueville writes, "they must be ready to defend themselves if attacked, or in other words, they must have an army."<sup>12</sup> Democratic societies may not be prone to war, but that is of little consolation in a potentially violent, largely non-democratic world. True, the United States is in the fortunate position of having few neighbors, and none that are strong. This means, however, that the United States can more easily defend itself, not that no defense is needed. The military has a large role in democratic politics, which can be said more generally of all regimes.

Tocqueville begins his treatment of the military spirit in democracies by examining Europe. Understanding democracy, Tocqueville demonstrates repeatedly, means first understanding its more aristocratic counterpart. The military in aristocracies is untouched by the spirit of equality that marks a democracy. In aristocracies, it is birth that determines rank. Position in the military is determined by position in society: nobles become commanders, and the lower classes become soldiers. As a result, ambition within an aristocratic army is quite limited; even the most capable military man is limited by status. There is, for all intents and purposes, a caste-system within the ranks.<sup>13</sup> Men are satisfied with their place, if only because they can hold no other. Moreover, for the aristocratic man, the military is incidental to his status in society. He enters the military out of a sense of duty or for the sake of occupation. "It is not," Tocqueville explains, "his principle aim to acquire property, reputation, or power, for he enjoys those advantages on his own account without any need to leave home."<sup>14</sup>

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11 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, George Lawrence, trans. (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 646.

12 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 646.

13 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 646.

14 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 646.

The same cannot be said of the military in democracies. “In democratic armies all the soldiers may become officers, and that fact makes desire for promotion general and opens almost infinite doors to military ambition.”<sup>15</sup> The democratic military is just one additional means of advancement. There are no natural limits on what can be achieved; and status in society is determined by rank, unlike in aristocracies, where the situation is the opposite. *Ambition in aristocratic armies means nothing; in democratic armies, Tocqueville claims, it is the only thing. In democracies, ambition becomes “the essence of existence.”*<sup>16</sup>

Yet promotion is difficult in times of peace. This is particularly true of democracies, which are likely to have many members and few stations. These facts, when met with the ubiquitous spirit of equality, mean that “no one can make rapid progress, and many can make no progress at all.”<sup>17</sup> In democratic armies, great ambition is met with little opportunity.

The natural tendency for democratic militaries, therefore, is to regard war a means of advancement. “All the ambitious minds in a democratic army ardently long for war,” Tocqueville concludes, “because war makes vacancies available and at last allows violations of the rule of seniority, which is the one privilege natural to a democracy.”<sup>18</sup> If it were left to the military, democracies would be among the most war-prone regimes; if it were left to the people, democracies would be the most pacific. This results from the equality of conditions in a democratic society.

It is also true that this difference can place democracies at great risk. The natural ambition in a democratic military is made worse when a state “loses its military spirit,” Tocqueville warns.<sup>19</sup> When this occurs, it is not the elites but “the least important” who will enter the military.<sup>20</sup> The military becomes the career of last resort, for those lacking the intelligence and refinement found among the population as a whole. The more the military is despoiled in this manner, the less likely the elites are to view it favorably. The decline of the military forms a “vicious circle, from which it is hard to escape.”<sup>21</sup> The military becomes a separate and relatively barbaric nation set apart from the society it is designed to serve—the opposite of what we find in aristocracies.

This low station makes democratic armies impatient and dissatisfied, however much their quality of life is better than what other militaries may experience. Moreover, a democratic military is generally led by someone populist in rhetoric who, despite himself owning a modicum of property, has little to lose from a revolution or war. In effect, the people have as much to lose from a war as military leaders stand to gain.<sup>22</sup> In a democracy, the people and the military differ in spirit and their desired aim, regardless of the equality of conditions that exists in the society as a whole.

The difference between the military and the people in a democracy makes the temper of the military that much more tenuous. “There is nothing more dangerous than an army amid an unwarlike nation,” Tocqueville remarks. “The citizens’ excessive love of quiet

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15 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 647.

16 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 647.

17 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 647.

18 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 647.

19 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 648.

20 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 648.

21 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 648.

22 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 648.

puts the constitution every day at the mercy of the soldiers.”<sup>23</sup> Military revolutions, which never threaten aristocracies, are a constant danger in democracies.

Since war is a great threat to liberty, one alternative is to enlarge the army. This will make offices available to the most ambitious. This solution, however, only increases the future danger. A larger army will have more room for promotion, but it will also mean more men wanting positions, and a greater hold on the people. This solution is proper, therefore, only in an aristocracy, where ambition is already limited.<sup>24</sup>

The simple solution is war. It is the surest, if not the easiest, way to satisfy the ambition of a democratic military. War is necessary at times, and it may even be advantageous to the stability of democracy; but it inadequately addresses the dilemma at hand. It merely postpones the predicament and increases the danger. Once the military has “tasted war,” it will be difficult to bring them to peace. Consequently, Tocqueville warns, “War could only be a remedy for a people always athirst for glory.”<sup>25</sup> It is easier for democratic armies to conquer other lands than it is to moderate themselves afterwards. The natural pacific nature of the people in a democracy makes war unlikely, but the natural ambition in a democratic military makes war difficult to stop once it has begun. Tocqueville’s provisional thesis reads like a law of physics: a democracy at peace tends to remain at peace; a democracy at war tends to remain at war.

Since the restlessness of the military is incurable, Tocqueville concludes that the only possible remedy must lie with the people. Tocqueville’s account of it demands quoting him at length:

*Democratic peoples are naturally afraid of disturbances and despotism. All that is needed is to turn these instincts into considered, intelligent, and stable tastes. When once the citizens have learned to make peaceful and productive use of freedom and have felt its benefits, when they have conceived a manly love of order and have freely submitted to discipline, these same men, if they follow the profession of arms, will bring into it, unconsciously and almost in spite of themselves, these same habits and mores. The general spirit of the nation, penetrating the spirit peculiar to the army, tempers the opinions and desires engendered by military life, or by the all-powerful influence of public opinion, actually represses them. Once you have educated, orderly, upstanding, and free citizens, you will have disciplined and obedient soldiers.*<sup>26</sup>

The solution Tocqueville offers has little to do with the military and everything to do with the values and norms a soldier adopts before entering its ranks. A people cannot control its military by force or by institutions: a democratic military can only be controlled by education, an education proper to any decent citizen.

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23 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 649.

24 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 650.

25 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 649.

26 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, pp. 650-51.

This is especially true of the professional soldier, for he is the one most divorced from civilian life and in the position to benefit most from the advancement that can come with war. This is not the case with conscripted soldiers and reservists. This part of the military, Tocqueville offers, are “called to the colors against their will, are always ready to return home, not feeling seriously committed to a soldier’s life, and only hoping to get out of it.”<sup>27</sup> Because these are the men most infused with the spirit of democratic liberty, they are also the most likely to preserve it. Tocqueville suggests that countries with a large reserve military will be less likely to go to war and more likely to act in accordance with the spirit of democratic liberty.<sup>28</sup>

Although the military will have professional officers who have permanently left civilian life, they will not be a source of instability. Ambition in democracies may be “universal and perpetual,” Tocqueville remarks, but it will not be lofty.<sup>29</sup> A professional soldier who has reached even a middling position within the ranks is likely to be satisfied with his station, such that “the least warlike and the least revolutionary part of a democratic army will always be its leaders.”<sup>30</sup> Instead, they will content themselves by reflecting on their minor accomplishments and will rarely endanger what they have achieved theretofore for the sake of some additional gain.

The opposite is true of noncommissioned officers (NCOs). This class has also chosen a public life and made a career of the military. Yet an NCO does not enjoy the status that comes with being an officer. The NCO knows all of the dangers and vagaries of military life, without receiving any of its benefits. The only means by which an NCO can advance is war, so that is what he desires. “If he cannot have war,” Tocqueville warns, “he wants revolutions, which suspend the authority of rules and give him a hope, in the confusion of political passions, to chase his officer out and take his place.”<sup>31</sup> Revolutions are unlikely in democratic societies, but the noncommissioned class works against this tendency.<sup>32</sup> It is for this reason that Tocqueville hints at the future role that they will play in politics.

This typology of spirit and ambition in the ranks of democratic militaries is true of all times and of all places, Tocqueville claims. The lower-ranking members of the military will always be the most representative of society as a whole, and it is to them that we should turn our attention when it comes to securing the peace. Civilian control of the military is predicated on the civilian education of the military.

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<sup>27</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 652.

<sup>28</sup> Consider the extensive use of part-time forces in the United States. “The use of Guard and Reserve troops to support operational requirements has steadily grown from around 900,000 duty-days annually in the early 1990s to a sustained annual level of over 12 million duty-days since 1995, which equates to about 35,000 full-time personnel.” Donald Rumsfeld, *2002 Annual Defense Report*, U.S. Department of Defense, p. 64. Bruce Falconer refers to P. W. Singer, a fellow at the Brookings Institute, who estimates that the recent military action in Iraq could reach a ratio of 1 in 8. A decade ago the ratio was roughly 1:50. “U.S. Military Logistics,” *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2003), p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 653.

<sup>30</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 653.

<sup>31</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 654.

<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, pp. 634-45.

## Democracy at War

War has, for democracies, both advantages and disadvantages, and Tocqueville is quite clear on the latter. War will almost certainly satisfy the army, but war will also interfere with the remainder of society and its peaceful enjoyment of pleasures. If the people are sufficiently agitated, the result might be worse than the original predicament. It is also possible that the military will not wish the war to end. It may excite the military's potentially insatiable need for conquest.

Of greater concern is that wars, when extended, threaten liberty. It is not, Tocqueville contends, that military leaders will simply seize power after a victory. The greater danger is the involuntary concentration of power in the hands of civilian authorities. "If that does not lead to despotism by sudden violence," Tocqueville counsels, "it leads men gently in that direction by their habits."<sup>33</sup> Liberty is easily forgotten, if not sacrificed altogether, for the sake of victory in war.

Democracies might go to war less frequently than do other regimes, Tocqueville posits, but that means its armies are less tested and more prone to defeat when they are sent into battle. This is not the case with armies in aristocratic societies, for their armies are often superior to the society at large, given the type of men that are apt to join them. In one of the appendices to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville questions the extent to which a democracy can even defend itself.<sup>34</sup> It was for this reason, Tocqueville notes, that the more aristocratic South provided the best military leaders during the American Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Tocqueville believes that politicians are too beholden to their constituents to consider the long-term good of the country. As Reiter and Stam contend, "democracies win wars [more often than not] because of the offshoots of public consent and leaders' accountability to the voters."<sup>36</sup> The only book-length study of Tocqueville's view of American foreign policy addresses this question. "The chief paradox," Strausz-Hupé writes, "democratic peoples call for leadership but are loathe so submit to the discipline leadership entails."<sup>37</sup> Strausz-Hupé concludes that it is the job of leaders to educate the public on the need to sacrifice immediate self-interest for the sake of the long-term national interest.

In his study of Tocqueville and the foreign policy of the United States, David Clinton suggests that our level of education, the trend toward centralization in foreign affairs, the representative nature of our institutions, and our relative geographic isolation will all serve as checks on the people's unwillingness to defend itself. In terms of leadership, Clinton

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33 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 650.

34 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 734.

35 Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 651.

36 Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 3.

Also see Kurt Gaubatz, *Elections and War: The Electoral Incentive in the Democratic Politics of War and Peace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

37 Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Democracy and American Foreign Policy: Reflections on the Legacy of Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 2.



was also encouraged that the professional organizations such as the Foreign Service and the CIA might mitigate the democratic reluctance for war.<sup>38</sup> In any event, Tocqueville himself is just as concerned about the ability of a democracy to defend itself, as he was about the likelihood of a democracy going to war.

In addition to civil-military relations, Tocqueville is also concerned about the experience and preparedness of the democratic military itself. The role of seniority in democratic armies makes officers less willing to retire, making leaders of democratic armies generally older than their aristocratic counterparts. This is true of generals and their subordinates. After a lengthy period of peace, a typical democratic army consists of officers who are too old and soldiers who are too young. The former are lethargic, the latter have no experience, and neither group has great ambition. “This is one great cause of defeat,” Tocqueville admonishes, “for the first condition of successful leadership in war is youth.”<sup>39</sup> This sad state of affairs is compounded by the low estimation of the military held by the people. Aristocracies—insofar as they use birth more than seniority as a guide to rank and have incentives for officers who wish to retire—do not share any of these flaws. In short, long periods of peace make democratic armies ill-prepared for the physical and mental demands of war.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the decline in military preparedness should not dissuade a democracy from going to war, for they are much more likely to win a long contest. All of the mechanisms and institutions that normally tend toward peace will be directed toward the war-effort and in time will erase any deficiencies of the democratic military. “War, having destroyed every industry, in the end becomes itself the one great industry, and every eager and ambitious desire sprung from equality is focused on it. For that reason,” Tocqueville continues, “those same democratic nations which are so hard to drag onto the battlefield sometimes perform prodigious feats once one has succeeded in putting arms in their hands.”<sup>41</sup> Democracies are indeed more peaceful than other regimes, but this is not a consequence of military prowess. Democratic armies should be lauded for their stamina, not their vigor, and they should be feared accordingly.

Americans are reluctant politically and sometimes private to a fault. The strength of a democracy lies in its dedication to the rights of private citizens. As a result, “A democratic people which has kept its manly mores will always find courageous soldiers when it needs them.”<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville wholeheartedly rejects the knock against democracy, which approached a natural law in the eyes of many ancient philosophers, that self-governed peoples are overly guided by passion. Tocqueville’s estimation is quite the contrary: when it comes to war, democracies are more reasoned and, as a result, far more resilient than are other regimes.

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<sup>38</sup> David Clinton, “Tocqueville’s Challenge,” *Washington Quarterly* 11 (1988): 184.

<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 655.

<sup>40</sup> Cohen contends that this analysis is for the most part consistent with what we seen in the American military today. “It is virtually inevitable,” he writes, “that [our] army will enter a war led by peacetime managers rather than military leaders” (p. 319).

<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 657.

<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 734.

Moreover, when it comes to war, democratic men are more adaptable than their aristocratic counterparts. The discipline of aristocratic armies suffers during peacetime, Tocqueville offers, for obedience is not natural among the nobility. Discipline stems from habits that are relaxed when not needed. Democratic men are able to appreciate when equality endangers the common good, and they are capable of obedience when necessity compels them.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, an extended war directs attention to the military and increases the number and quality of its members, extending to members of the elite, who are now induced to join. The subsequent competition produces great generals. "Equality allows every man to be ambitious, and death provides chances for every ambition," Tocqueville remarks.<sup>44</sup> In short, war matches ambition with opportunity and introduces a much-needed aristocratic element to an otherwise atrophic democratic military.

Although the true might of a democracy is not immediately harnessed, those with a genuinely democratic temperament will want the hostilities to end quickly. "The men of democracies are by nature passionately eager to acquire quickly what they covet and to enjoy it on easy terms," Tocqueville alleges. Consequently, "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."<sup>45</sup> The same character that makes democracies less likely to go to war makes democracies more likely to want a quick victory. Tocqueville thus connects the democratic peace to the equality of conditions: a democratic military does not care for the spoils of victory; their prime motivation is the safe return to their simple and uneventful lives. This is the spirit of private industry deployed on the battlefield.

This is particularly true given the unity of opinions that exists among a democratic people. Tocqueville writes:

Men with equal rights, education, and wealth, that is to say, men who are in just the same condition must have very similar needs, habits, and tastes. As they see things in the same light, their minds naturally incline to similar ideas, and though any one of them could part company with the rest and work out his own beliefs, in the end they all concur, unconsciously and unintentionally, in a certain number of common opinions.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the equality of conditions makes dissent unnecessary or even irrational.

Tocqueville's emphasis on the unity of opinion calls attention to the fact that he does not distinguish between what the people want and the policies that the state pursues. Absent from Tocqueville's treatment of democracy and war is any reference to the institutional constraints in a democracy, which echoes the conclusion of Maoz and Abdolali, among others. Tocqueville does not distinguish between the people and their leaders: he assumes that the state will do the bidding of the majority. "In general," Tocqueville writes, "the laws

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 659.

<sup>44</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 657.

<sup>45</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 658.

<sup>46</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 641.

of a democracy tend toward the good of the greatest number, for they spring from the majority of all the citizens, which may be mistaken but which cannot have an interest contrary to its own."<sup>47</sup> In this, Tocqueville points away from democratic institutions and political leaders and to the values prevalent among the majority of society. Theorists such as Waltz argue that wars between states occur because there are no institutional mechanisms to prevent them.<sup>48</sup> But from Tocqueville's perspective, the strength of self-interest in democracies and the power of the society are the only means to ever stop a war from occurring.

### The Egalitarian Peace

Tocqueville concurs with the democratic peace, or at least presents his own variant of it. For Tocqueville, democracy means equality of conditions, and it is equality that leads to a more pacific state. "When the principle of equality spreads, as in Europe now, not only within one nation, but at the same time among several neighboring peoples, the inhabitants of these various countries, despite different languages, customs, and laws, always resemble each other in an equal fear of war and love of peace."<sup>49</sup> Tocqueville's democratic peace is virtually unrelated to self-government; it is the principle of equality, and sometimes merely the idea of it, that binds states together. This is perhaps why he speaks in terms of "neighbors," for proximity allows ideas to be spread with great ease.<sup>50</sup> Princes can prepare for war, Tocqueville notes, but war will become less frequent as equality begins to cross borders.

The commercial spirit is the chief component behind this kind of movement. "As the spread of equality, taking place in several countries at once, simultaneously draws the inhabitants into trade and industry," Tocqueville writes, "not only do their tastes come to be alike, but their interests become so mixed and entangled that no nation can inflict on others ills which will not fall back on its own head."<sup>51</sup> The equality of conditions allows private interests to spread, without regard for borders. The institutional restrictions on waging war are incidental to the democratic peace, Tocqueville suggests, because the principle of equality and the spirit of commerce pay little regard to political structures or the sovereignty of states. As he writes succinctly, "Commerce is naturally the enemy of war."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 232; Cf. 60.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 182-83, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 660.

<sup>50</sup> The northern part of Mexico, for example, is the area more interested and active in politics. See Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico: The Democratic Transformation*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 92-93; and his "Province Versus the Center. Democratizing Mexico's Political Culture," *Assessing Democracy in Latin America: A Tribute to Russell H. Fitzgibbon*, Phillip Kelly, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 76-92.

<sup>51</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 660.

<sup>52</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 9. *Études économiques, politiques*, Gustave de Beaumont, ed. (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1866), p. 194.

For Tocqueville, the spread of equality and, with it, the spread of peace extend beyond the realm of economics and politics. Cultural differences will be erased or marginalized for the sake of mutual interest. “Neighboring democratic peoples do not only become alike... in certain respects, but in the end come to be alike in almost all matters,” Tocqueville alleges.<sup>53</sup> The equality of conditions lends itself to imitation and a shared identity—impossible feats in societies of rank, where egoism is the norm.

The thrust of Tocqueville’s analysis resembles what Gilbert calls “democratic internationalism.”<sup>54</sup> In Gilbert’s view the democratic peace is a result of grassroots politics and political pressures at the lowest levels. He contrasts this view with the strong institutional emphasis found in traditional democratic peace theories. Gilbert’s concern is that democratic leaders might constrain the spread of democracy or work against this uniting of interests. In his view “struggle from below [is] a *driving force* in democratic deliberations.”<sup>55</sup> His solution is any number of methods—including as a last resort, non-violent protest—to maintain the channels of open and democratic discourse.<sup>56</sup>

For Tocqueville, the danger is that conflicts, when they do arise, are more likely to be larger than they would be otherwise. “Wars become rarer,” Tocqueville warns, “but when they do come about, they spread over a vaster field.”<sup>57</sup> The blending of interests makes it unlikely that conflict will leave many states unaffected. Moreover, the similarity of temperament and interest means that battles are determined by sheer number of combatants, rather than military superiority. The equality of conditions forces “all small nations to incorporate themselves with great ones, or at least to follow the political lead of the latter.”<sup>58</sup> This also means that states are required to maintain large armies. Democracy equalizes war between states, as readily as it equalizes the other parts of society.

It is role of the state, therefore, to secure its citizens in light of these conditions. The state must recruit or conscript a large portion of the adult male population, and in a democratic society, the state has the power to do so. “The result,” says Tocqueville, “is that in ages of equality armies seem to increase in size in proportion as the military spirit declines.”<sup>59</sup> When soldiers are equal, war is a question of number, and it is the role of the state to raise the forces required to secure the state. Here is one instance where the policies of the state do matter, if only incidentally.

Hence, for democracies, war is a great risk. It is a risk not because it threatens material pursuits or the physical safety of its people, but because it threatens the very existence of the polity. While capable of amassing great resources for battle, democracies are easily overrun. “This can very well be explained,” Tocqueville notes. “Nothing is strong in a democracy except the state; once the military power of the state has been shattered by the

<sup>53</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 660.

<sup>54</sup> Alan Gilbert, *Must Global Politics Constrain Democracy? Great-Power Realism, Democratic Peace, and Democratic Internationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Gilbert, p. 189.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert, pp. 183-222.

<sup>57</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 660.

<sup>58</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 661.

<sup>59</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 661.

destruction of the army and the civil government paralyzed by the capture of the capital, what is left is a mere disorderly and powerless multitude, unable to resist the organized power which assailed it."<sup>60</sup> The equality of conditions means that civil society will crumble when citizens are forced to live without the protection of the state. Federalism may help to alleviate this danger, Tocqueville adds, but it is an incomplete solution.<sup>61</sup>

The opposite is true of aristocracies: they are difficult to conquer. In aristocratic regimes, the forces are not gathered as they are in democracies. Someone wishing to conquer them will always find "small pockets of resistance."<sup>62</sup> The strength in aristocracies exists independently of the state, so it will remain strong long after the state has been destroyed. The nobles will continue to fight, for the sake of their social standing, and the people will follow the nobles, without question.

Once a democratic state is conquered, its people lack the organizational mechanisms to continue fighting, and will probably lack the desire, too. There, citizens care more for their property than for their small and insignificant share of political power. "As a result," Tocqueville concludes, democratic people "are much less afraid of conquest and much more afraid of war than the inhabitants of an aristocratic land."<sup>63</sup> Democratic people are even reluctant to fight when hostilities threaten their homeland. A democratic state wishing to secure itself would be wise to "provide such a people with the rights and the political spirit which will endow each citizen with some of those interests which influence the behavior of nobles in aristocratic lands."<sup>64</sup> In an earlier passage, Tocqueville had written: "I do not wish to speak ill of war; war almost always widens 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 inveterate diseases to which democratic societies are liable."<sup>65</sup> In other words, democracy can be strengthened by an infusion of an aristocratic spirit. It was for this reason that he became enthusiastic when reading about the Crimean War and waxed poetic about potential French military engagements.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 662.

<sup>61</sup> Scott A. Silverstone examines the separation of powers in the U.S. federal system of government, "to test whether this specific mechanism produces any patterns of constraints on the use of force." Silverstone concludes, "Only federal union provides a broad enough institutional perspective to explain the common link between congressional behavior, presidential political incentives, and the role of parties, to establish a common domestic politics link among the various cases of constraints on military force that we find in pre-Civil War U.S. foreign policy." *Divided Union: The Politics of War in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 13, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 662.

<sup>63</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 663.

<sup>64</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 663.

<sup>65</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 649.

<sup>66</sup> See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 6, Pt. 1, J. P. Mayer and Gustave Rundler, ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 148; and his *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, Roger Boesche, ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 143.

In addition, writing in the 1830s, we might easily expect Tocqueville's analysis to be influenced by the Napoleonic Wars. Certainly, his belief that greatness can emerge from conflict made him an admirer of Napoleon. Tocqueville believed that Napoleon could "suppress every great passion of the human heart for the sake of one, that one which makes people die in battle."<sup>67</sup> Although he might not have even gone so far as Stendhal—who said of Napoleon, "he was our sole religion"<sup>68</sup>—he certainly would have been sympathetic to this view. As Boesche concludes in his study of Tocqueville, "Although he never sought war, he acknowledged that war could engender greatness, whereas avoiding war in order to ensure prosperity condemned a nation to the petty pursuit of mere wealth."<sup>69</sup>

Tocqueville ends the section on democracy and war by drawing a parallel between war and revolution. Democracies are less war-prone, and they are also less likely to have a revolution than are other states. Tocqueville considers wars on par with revolutions in that both are rarer in democratic states. The equality of conditions makes democracies more peaceful in every way possible. It seems that the military spirit, prominent in most aristocracies, is no match for the spirit of egalitarianism found in every democracy.

Perhaps the gravest challenge to theorists concerns the extent to which the notion of a democratic peace becomes normative or prescriptive. Most recently, Ivie has argued that it is "the quest for a perfect peace—that becomes itself a potential motive for war."<sup>70</sup> And Kozhemiakin concludes, "democratization is not a reliable recipe for international peace. It is when the process of democratic reforms is going well, due to the combination of favorable structural factors and skilled leadership, that international security is most likely to be enhanced. In other less fortunate cases, problematic democratization increases the chances for international violence."<sup>71</sup>

Tocqueville's support of the French conquest of Algeria means that he is not spared from this allegation. Although it is a view absent from *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville does appear to consider national self-interest over individual rights of non-democratic peoples.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, as Richter rightly contends, Tocqueville's "advocacy of imperialism was based on what he considered moral grounds: the European nations could escape from the selfishness of individualism only by undertaking great tasks."<sup>73</sup> Tocqueville may have been misguided, Richter continues, but this only attests to the pervasiveness of such attitudes throughout nineteenth century Europe.

When placed in their proper context, Tocqueville's perspective on equality and culture might actually serve to calm the fears of those who see the democratic peace theory as a rationale for war against non-democracies. If, as Tocqueville argues, the spread of equality

<sup>67</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and the Correspondence with Gobineau*, John Lukacs, ed. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), p. 150.

<sup>68</sup> As quoted in Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 86.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ivie, p. 100.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander V. Kozhemiakin, *Expanding the Zone of Peace? Democratization and International Security* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 131.

<sup>72</sup> Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville on Algeria," *Review of Politics* 25/3 (July 1963): 364.

<sup>73</sup> Richter, p. 385.

is something inevitable or even ordained by God, a foreign policy designed to advance democracy is unnecessary and potentially counterproductive, since the most important element of the democratic peace is not a state's political structure but the political culture of its people.

### Conclusion

Tocqueville's methodology and limited frame of reference do not allow him to speak to whether democratic peace theory is empirically true.<sup>74</sup> As Richter writes, Tocqueville's "ideas [are] oriented to choice and action, rather than to careful definition and systematic consistency."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, his analysis provides a broad cultural understanding of the reasons behind why such a peace might be realized among democratic states. Certainly, Tocqueville has much to teach us about the culture behind a democratic peace, even if the truth of it is left for others to determine.

For one thing, Tocqueville saw democracy as synonymous with equality; indeed, he uses the words virtually interchangeably.<sup>76</sup> This means that a democracy is less likely to go to war when its military reflects the character and interests of the citizens as a whole. Political values and cultural norms determine whether any particular democracy is war-prone. For all his talk of equality, Tocqueville considers democracies anything but equal.

Tocqueville introduces new criteria for a state to be considered democratic: self-governments vary according to the equality of conditions. Where conditions are not equal, the regime cannot be democratic. From Tocqueville's perspective, it is illogical to call a people democratic if they do not know the equality of conditions. By calling attention to the commercial spirit and the importance of private interests, Tocqueville emphasizes the role of development in the democratic peace. Poverty is never a recipe for peace, regardless of how leaders are selected.

For Tocqueville, it is this equality of conditions that can make a democracy peaceful. Tocqueville's assessment of the democracy and peace will prove increasingly valuable as democracy becomes more varied, if wealth remains illusive, and as the world becomes more in need of understanding the relationship between democratic culture and war.

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<sup>74</sup> Appreciating the limitations of Tocqueville's methodology, Eliot A. Cohen calls for a combination of Tocqueville and von Clausewitz for the study of war. "A Tocquevillian-Clausewitzian approach," he claims, "would help us understand that questions of civil-military relations, strategy, and institutional impetus are inextricably linked, that institutional pressures may cause strategic difficulties, and vice versa." "Tocqueville on War," *Tocqueville's Political Science: Classic Essays*, Peter Lawler, ed. (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1992), p. 330.

<sup>75</sup> Richter, p. 362.

<sup>76</sup> This is not to say that equality is the only characteristic of democracy, but it is certainly the one from which the others follow. As Pierre Manent notes, "Equality of conditions is the common center of democratic societies, and it prevails in them all more or less. This generative fact develops more or less freely and has consequences more or less complete. But it is to this fact that one must direct oneself to understand democracy." *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, John Waggoner, trans. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), p. 2.