Tocqueville and Foreign Policy

Is it possible for the United States to pursue a coherent foreign policy? Democracies seem to face nearly insurmountable obstacles in conceiving and implementing an effective diplomacy, as recent events have shown. But these are hardly new issues for the United States. The insights of Alexis de Tocqueville 150 years ago remain relevant to this day and are explored here from three different perspectives.

Tocqueville Revisited: Are Good Democracies Bad Players in the Game of Nations?

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"IT IS ESPECIALLY in the conduct of their foreign relations," Tocqueville wrote, "that democracies appear to me decidedly inferior to other governments."[1] This classic statement has become part of our conventional wisdom, and the twentieth century has not done much to dispel Tocqueville's somber dictum. To be sure, the democracies have won the great wars—but only after they had lost the peace. They were good at fighting to the limits of human endurance but bad at playing the game of diplomacy that requires not cataclysmic exertion but patient, measured, and, above all, steady effort.

Before World War I France and Britain failed either to contain or conciliate the rising power of Prussia-Germany—hence the great test of strength and the unprecedented bloodletting that was the war of 1914–1918. Nor did the Treaty of Versailles, the product par excellence of the new democratic spirit in world affairs, bequeath a stable, let alone legitimate, order to Europe. First, there was the darker side of the democratic ethos: having bled in the war, the masses now demanded a voice in the peace—and that translated into a settlement suffused with retribution, which in turn planted the seed for the war to come.[2] Second, liberal-democratic ideology made short shrift of the requirements of a stable postwar balance. Instead of drawing viable borders in the East, Versailles decreed borders that were to follow the distribution of nationalities—with scant regard to the conflicts these new entities, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, henceforth would create by dint of their mere shape or existence.

Finally, having established a complicated peace, the democracies were not very good at securing it, recalling Tocqueville's warning that "a democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles."[3] Their energies spent in the Great War, the democratic powers (with the exception of France) did what comes naturally to a democracy. Britain and the United States turned inward, repudiating those (like Woodrow Wilson) who had drawn them into the European balance and refusing to shoulder the diplomatic and military costs the main-

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tenance of peace required. The disastrous results are familiar enough. With Britain and the United States out of the system, the power of the revisionists Germany and the Soviet Union began to seep into the vacuum. While there was still time to resist a resurgent Nazi Germany, "Britain slept" (as the famous little treatise by John F. Kennedy termed it) and the United States withdrew from Europe. And none of the democracies, France included, paid attention to the military dimension of diplomacy until it was too late.

Whence this pattern that Tocqueville dimly foresaw and that the record of the interwar period so tragically exemplified? Tocqueville's own answer, which echoes the claims of such other nineteenth-century thinkers as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer and before them the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, is that "democratic nations naturally desire peace."[4] Hence, the neglect of military power in times of tranquility.[5] "The warlike passions," he wrote, "will become more rare and less intense in proportion as social conditions are more equal." He listed numerous factors which "concur to quench the military spirit" in a democracy simply because such a system inherently favors the "equality of conditions."

> The ever increasing numbers of men of property who are lovers of peace, the growth of personal wealth which war so rapidly consumes, the mildness of manners, the gentleness of heart, those tendencies to pity [which are produced by equality], that coolness of understanding which renders men comparatively insensible to the violent and poetical excitement of arms. . . . [6]

Unlike Condorcet and Turgot, Comte and Spenser, Tocqueville understood, however, that democracies are neither inherently nor permanently pacific. (This insight is all the more remarkable, given that he wrote before the Civil War and the two world wars that would amply demonstrate the democracies' capacity for violence.) Though "it is extremely difficult in democratic times to draw nations into hostilities," Tocqueville argued, democracies are as bloody-minded as any other system once war has broken out. "When a war has at length. . .roused the whole community from their peaceful occupations and ruined their minor undertakings, the same passions that made them attach so much importance to the maintenance of peace will be turned to arms."[7]

In modern parlance, Tocqueville rendered a "binary theory" of democratic behavior: it is either yes or no, war or peace, passion or passivity. Yet what about foreign policy proper—the actions of nations between those extremes? Here Tocqueville is unambiguously pessimistic. At home, democracies are good at increasing and spreading wealth; they promote the "public spirit" and fortify the "respect for the law." But these advantages are at best incidental to the pursuit of foreign affairs. Here the premium is on endurance, perseverance, and attention to detail. Nor can a democracy "combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience. These are qualities that more especially belong to an individual or an aristocracy"—and "by which a nation, like an individual, attains a dominant position."[8]

If democracies are at best capable of stark choices—between war or peace, between the *levée en masse* or the life of the *bourgeois gentilhomme*—then it follows that they are equipped badly to deal with the rich spectrum

of choices in between, also known as "foreign policy" or "diplomacy." Such a gloomy conclusion should come as no surprise if we lengthen the lines of Tocqueville's analysis and contrast the ways of diplomacy with those of democracy.

Diplomacy is a game of ambiguous rules and stark dilemmas that are not so much resolved as they must be muted or suspended. It is a game of balance and appeasement where force is only the last resort—and even then it must be carefully constrained by the overarching purposes of policy. Diplomacy is the art of ruse and reinsurance, and as such, it does not divide the world into permanent friends and foes. Democratic politics thrives on publicity and public discourse; in fact, democracy cannot endure without the clamor of contending ideas and interests. Diplomacy, on the other hand, must act with circumspection and even secrecy; it frequently pretends to aspire to one objective (which it portrays as lofty and universal) even as it pursues another (which happens to be base and self-serving).

In the end the game of nations obeys no other law than that of reciprocity, yet a democracy is nothing if it does not obey the rule of law. Totalitarian-revolutionary regimes have never confused the Hobbesian realm of international politics with the predictable, legitimate, and hierarchical structures of domestic governance; a Stalin or a Hitler held on to contracts or promises only as long as these constraints did not interfere with the supreme interest of party and state. Democracies, on the other hand, are prone almost constitutionally to view the world as an extension of their domestic polities. They confuse the realm of law with the realm of power: they believe that international law has somehow the same hold on nations as domestic law has on citizens; indeed, they even hope (cf. Messrs. Kellog and Briand) that legal norms can undo international politics and then reconstitute it as a subspecies of domestic politics, with peaceful negotiation or compulsory adjudication unseating violence as the supreme arbiter among nations.

If diplomacy must be subtle, democracy lives the rough and tumble of domestic politics that ranges from the din of demonstrations to the demagoguery of the politico on the stump. Democracies decide their fates by choosing between crudely packaged alternatives in the shape of persons or ideologies; diplomacy seeks to enlarge options even as it purports to make a choice. Finally, notwithstanding perennial pleas, such as "politics stops at the water's edge," democracy does not really bow before the concept of raison d'état as a disembodied, almost Platonic idea of the national interest; in a democratic society, any issue is fair game as long as it promises electoral profit. In short, the art of diplomacy does not seem to lend itself to the democratic ethos, let alone to the democratic temper.

II.

Given these contrasts between the two realms and the "two cultures," Tocqueville surely must be right in claiming that, "in the conduct of their foreign relations, democracies appear decidedly inferior to other governments." Still, how do we test this theorem? What shall we put into the sample, and which slice of history shall we apply to the Master's yardstick? While it is true that the democracies failed in the pursuit of peace before and after World War I, what about the record after World War II?

It can be argued fairly that the

United States, as the democratic power par excellence, quite nicely disproved Tocqueville's skeptical predictions in the decades after 1947. Indeed, during these years the United States displayed all the qualities thought to be wanting in a democratic great power. Moving in the ambiguous realm of "neither war nor peace," the United States surely would have flummoxed the French sage who insisted, "Almost all the nations that have exercised a powerful influence upon the destinies of the world, by conceiving, following out, and executing vast designs, from the Romans to the English, have been governed by aristocratic institutions."[9]

In the decades of the postwar era the United States not only executed a "vast design" by singlehandedly erecting a new order on the ashes of the old; it also "persevered" in spite of "serious obstacles," to use Tocqueville's terminology. Within the confines of the democratic-industrial world, the United States built a global trading system (the Marshall Plan and GATT), a global monetary system (the IMF), an interlocking security system (NATO, SEATO, ANZUS, and, as a silent partner, CENTO), and a would-be global government (the UN) at least initially dominated by the United States. Nor did the United States lack the "patience" Tocqueville found absent in a democracy. In fact, the record of the 1950s and 1960s exemplified rather nicely the counsel George F. Kennan laid out in his oft-quoted "X" article of 1947: the "main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."[10]

Indeed, the history of U.S. containment policy during the first quarter-century of its career as a truly global power defies both Tocqueville and Kennan, who would soon go beyond the Master's melancholy critique of democracy and serve up the following acerbic indictment:

> I sometimes wonder whether . . . a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin; he lies in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat. You wonder whether it would not have been wiser for him to have taken a little more interest in what was going on at an earlier date and to have seen whether he could not have prevented some of these situations from arising.[11]

In spite of its "roll-back" rhetoric and its quasi-nuclear monopoly until the mid-1960s, the United States did not "lay about with blind determination"; nor did the United States need to have its "tail whacked off" to make it respond to its "interests being disturbed." Indeed, the bulk of U.S. policy was dedicated precisely to prevention and stabilization, which are a central purpose of diplomacy. In contrast to the interwar period, the United States did not withdraw from Europe but mounted a permanent military presence there. Far from ignoring the social and economic roots of military conflict, the United States infused capital, opened its own markets, and goaded the West Europeans into trade-expanding integration. The

United States, in short, did not "obey impulse rather than prudence"; nor did it "abandon a mature design for the gratification of a momentary passion."[12] Had Tocqueville lived, he surely would have added another chapter to *Democracy in America*, modifying his earlier pessimistic conclusions in praise of Republican foreign policy.

It is not clear, however, whether he would have held up the Soviet Union as a model—the totalitarian version of an oligarchy (one bridles at calling it an "aristocracy," which the Tocquevillian vocabulary always contrasts with "democracy"). The Soviet Union has all the presumptive advantages lacking in a democracy: secrecy, a "vast (doctrinal) design," and the ability to "combine, upon a single point and at a given time, so much power as an aristocracy or an absolute monarchy."[13] Yet how well has the Soviet Union fared in the world?

Like the democracies, it failed to deal with the menace of Nazi Germany until it was too late. After World War II the Soviet Union certainly failed to achieve its stated goal, the maintenance of the anti-Hitler coalition, reaping the enmity of its erstwhile friend instead. It did not win hegemony over Europe but rather the nasty fruits of the cold war—with countervailing alliances and constant counterpressure around its borders. In spite of assiduous diplomatic effort, Moscow did not manage to break the encircling ring of bases and allies the United States had thrown up. Where it leapfrogged those barriers, as in Egypt in the 1950s, the Soviet Union was expelled again in the early 1970s. Since then the Soviets have been excluded effectively from a peacemaking role in the Middle East. In Cuba, the greatest test of strength of the postwar era, Moscow was humiliated. After the defection of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union "lost" China in the 1960s—as had the United States in the late 1940s. Even within its pontifical and political empire in Eastern Europe, the USSR could hold on to its allies only by regular recourse to force. And where the Soviets did breach the ring, it finished with politically costly or economically wasteful engagements without apparent end—in Afghanistan, Angola, Cuba, and Ethiopia.

The purpose of this list is to make a point so obvious that it often is ignored in woeful comparisons between "us" and "them": by the yardstick of success and failure, it is by no means evident that the totalitarian regimes play a more nimble and intelligent game than the democracies. The postwar tally does not favor the Soviet Union, and, while it is possible to argue endlessly about what is and is not a gain or loss, the United States has done much better than Tocqueville predicted. There is, presumably, a good reason why the Master's record as a soothsayer is less than perfect.

It is never quite clear whether Tocqueville wrote about the failings of democracy as such or the peculiar state of America in the nineteenth century. Though he located the root cause of foreign-policy insufficiency in the constitution of a democracy, his eye was too sharp to ignore the obvious: that democratic America was sui generis by dint of geography. His commentary is filled with references to America's blessed condition, yet he did not engage in "multivariate analysis" by explicitly distinguishing between geography and democracy as they affect foreign policy. With the benefits of hindsight, we can and must draw that distinction today, and the result is arguably that the foreign policy effects Tocqueville attributed to democracy can be linked just as easily—if not bet-

ter—to America's benign insular state in the nineteenth century. As that condition waned, America's behavior in the world changed—regardless of its abiding democratic constitution.

The "United States is a nation without neighbors," Tocqueville mused more than once. "Separated from the rest of the world by the ocean . . . it has no enemies, and its interests rarely come into contact with those of any other nation on the globe."[14] Elsewhere he asked, "How does it happen . . . that the American Union . . . is not dissolved by the occurrence of a great war? It is because it has no great wars to fear. Placed in the center of an immense continent . . . the Union is almost as much insulated from the world as if all its frontiers were girt by the ocean." He continued, "The great advantage of the United States . . . consists in a geographical position which renders . . . wars extremely improbable."[15] Whence it followed,

> "As the Union takes no part in the affairs of Europe, it has, properly speaking, no foreign interests to discuss, since it has, as yet, no powerful neighbor on the American continent. The country is as much removed from the passions of the Old World by its position as by its wishes, and it is called upon neither to repudiate nor to espouse them; while the dissensions of the New World are still concealed within the bosom of the future.
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> "The Union is free from all pre-existing obligations; it can profit by the experience of the old nations of Europe, without being obliged, as they are, to make the best of the past and to adapt it to their present circumstances. It is not, like them, compelled to accept an immense inheritance bequeathed by their forefathers, an inheritance of glory mingled with calamities and of alliances conflicting with national antipathies. The foreign policy of the United States is eminently expectant: it consists more in abstaining than in acting. It is therefore very difficult to ascertain, at present, what degree of sagacity the American democracy will display in the conduct of the foreign policy of the country; upon that point its adversaries as well as its friends must suspend their judgment."[16]

In short, the United States did not have a foreign policy because it did not need one. The jury was still out while Tocqueville was writing; therefore, he was right in tempering his policy-is-destiny theory with the insights from history and geography. He evidently sensed that there was (or more accurately, would be) more to American foreign policy than the peculiarities of a democratic constitution, and that eventually the "international system" would claim its due—overshadowing or reversing what democracy-cum-insularity allowed.

Once the United States was forced into the system for good (after the final collapse of the European balance during World War II) it had to play by the rules of that system and shelve both "abstinence" and "expectancy." Though a democracy, the United States had to adapt to a game as old as the nation-state itself, and to rules determined not by Montesquieu and Locke but at least in part by Hitler and Stalin. To eschew balance, raison d'état, and realpolitik in favor of the Founding Fathers' ethos was one thing while the British navy ruled the Atlantic; it was another once the power of the totalitarians reached out across the sea. No wonder, then, that the predictions of Tocqueville held good only as long as the conditions that had spawned them endured. Once the United States was plunged

into the existential condition of the classic great powers, America-the-Democracy was forced to behave like them, regardless of its constitution. Yet even Tocqueville, though drawn to "domestic determinism," clearly anticipated what his own theory apparently excluded—that the "system" would eventually impose itself on the "sub-system," changing a great many questions and answers in the process.

III.

How many questions and answers have changed today? Though events have blunted Tocqueville's glum conclusions, their abiding relevance cannot be gainsaid. Indeed, in many respects his pessimism actually falls short of reality because this relevance unfolded after that quarter-century during which the United States brilliantly and patiently had erected a global order whose benefits still are enjoyed today. Four shibboleths suggest where the problems lurk at the close of the twentieth century: Vietnam, Irangate, the "Post-Imperial Presidency," and nuclear weapons, none of which really demolishes the framework of Tocqueville's analysis.

The Vietnam War clearly showed that a democracy cannot "combine, upon a single point at a given time, so much power as an aristocracy or an absolute monarchy." Nor is this an American failing alone. Israel, the most "Sparta-like" nation in the annals of democracy, ran afoul the limits of democratic power during its "first imperial war" in Lebanon in 1982. France lived through the same experience in Algeria, and Britain presumably would have, too, if the Suez War had not been terminated swiftly by U.S. pressure. By contrast, the Soviet Union has been fighting in Afghanistan for eight years; if and when that war ends, it will not be because of popular revulsion.

The lesson seems clear: democracy cannot "persevere in a fixed design and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles" if that design is (a) open-ended and (b) dependent on force while only remotely related to "core security," i.e., the protection of the national space. In contrast to Vietnam, Grenada and the Falklands were "worked out" because success came swiftly and relatively cost-free. Yet the U.S. intervention in Lebanon was cut short abruptly once the prospect of no victory combined with the dramatic loss of American lives. Democracies, as Tocqueville would agree readily, are not fond of Clausewitz. While they are wedded to peace and, in the end, willing to plunge into unlimited war, democracies do not move smoothly along the "Clausewitzian continuum" where diplomacy and violence are but shades of one and the same spectrum of options. Hence Tocqueville's dictum, "There are two things that a democratic people always will find very difficult, to begin a war and to end it."[17] Unless they can be mobilized by great threats or great ideologies, democracies will hearken the call of peace and shy away from force as adjunct of policy.

Irangate symbolizes a second constitutional weakness. On the most obvious level, the episode buttresses Tocqueville's point that a democracy "cannot combine its measures with secrecy." (Even that exemplar of a "republican monarchy," France, could not get away with the bombing of a Greenpeace ship in New Zealand.) Yet there is a more profound moral to the story. To act in the name of raison d'état, which sometimes requires saying one thing as one does another, does not sit well with the democratic ethos that demands that the govern-

ment submit to the same rules abroad that are sanctified at home, even with the Khomeinis of this world. When Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, in 1987, testified to the Congress (in so many words) that "I lied for the good of the nation, and I would do it again," he expressed the classic tenet of realpolitik, echoing Churchill's famous remark, "Sometimes the truth is so precious that it must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies." To which the predictable reply was, "If you lied to them, how do we know that you will not lie to the Congress?"

If Col. North invoked the distinction between the two realms, which lies at the heart of raison d'état, the Congress insisted on their congruence. From the vantage point of realism, North was right—as was Hobbes before him. Morality, though cast in universal precepts, does not flourish in independence from political community. To triumph, morality requires law, and law requires a sovereign with the indispensable accoutrements of enforcement, hence the ultimate powers of the state. Lying to the Congress has consequences—all the way to prison. Lying to the Khomeinis, i.e., between political communities not beholden to a common law, is an entirely different game. To begin with, we cannot rely on their veracity, let alone have their duplicity punished by a third, "objective" party. Second, the name of the game of nations is not truth but advantage, and, while it might help to have a reputation for reliability, such a posture might just as well invite the less scrupulous to exploit our credulity. Finally, in dealing with enemies, the measure of an act is not goodness but success: Does it minimize harm and maximize security?

Yet a democracy beholden to moral principles and the rule of law always will be uncomfortable with the eternal clash between ideal and interest, hence with the separation of the two realms. How can a good end justify bad means? If we play the game of the totalitarians, will we not become like them? Can the state still be good at home if it acts immorally abroad? This is why democracies are superb at fighting wars against the "children of darkness": their supreme evil easily justifies the lesser evils forced upon the "children of light." Yet short of Armageddon, the advantage is bound to lie with those who play by their own rules.

The "Post-Imperial Presidency" outlines a third problem area. In terms of his legal rights, the "President of the United States possesses almost royal prerogatives,"[18] Tocqueville noted. The Founding Fathers intended the president to embody the interests of the nation as a whole, giving him powers unequaled among the chief executives of the Western world. Presumably, his brief was to run widest where the "national interest" came into play vis-à-vis other nations. This idea was hardly different from the classic European concept of raison d'état or the *Primat der Aussenpolitik*: indeed, there is even a perfectly American phrase for it: "Politics stops at the water's edge."

Though many tend to idealize the era cut short in the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as the golden age of the presidency, American politics—perhaps with the exception of the two world wars—has never stopped at the water's edge. The very idea of reason of state is, in itself, inimical to the idea of democracy. If the people are the sovereign, why should certain issues be excluded from public debate? The very idea of the primacy of foreign policy is antidemocratic (and was so conceived by its German in-

ventors under the guise of lofty precept in the nineteenth century) because it presumes a "national" interest defined and guarded by an elite beyond the sway of the domestic political contest. In the democratic arena, any issue is fair game—whether it is federal taxes or Iranian terrorists. While the welfare of the state ought to be a limiting factor, it is not so in practice as long as the foreign issue at hand holds out electoral gain.

The cycles may come and go, and perhaps there soon will be another time when party discipline is restored along with the power of congressional committee chairmen, when there will be one rather than 436 secretaries of state, when a presidential aspirant like Jesse Jackson will not usurp the role of the U.S. ambassador in Syria. Yet the basic problem is endemic to democracy, and it is as manifest in Bonn, one of the youngest democracies, as it is in Washington, the oldest. The totalitarians always will be able to deliberate *in camera*, the democracies always will have to debate in the public square, and then untrammeled by any disembodied notion of raison d'état. This imposes a double handicap on the democracies: the nondemocratic players will know much of their opponents' hand before it is played. And in part, they even can determine how the deck is stacked. In a society dedicated to the freedom of information and speech, even non-nationals can enter into the debate, make their case heard and manipulate the domestic line-up while insulating their own society against the intrusion of their democratic rivals. It is a handicap, however, that knows no other remedy than the loss of liberty—a price too high to pay for "equality of opportunity" in the contest of nations.

Fourth and last, there is the problem of nuclear weapons. Until 1945 U.S. history surely conformed to Tocqueville's "binary theory" of democratic foreign policy, with peace and war being rigorously separated states of the American condition. While the Europeans experienced both in endless alternation, with nary a decisive outcome, the United States did manage to achieve "final solutions" that obliterated the threat once and for all. If enemies could not be reformed, they were crushed. At home, the British were expelled, the Indians reduced to a harmless minority, and the South beaten into submission. Abroad, the Spaniards similarly were extruded from the hemisphere, and in the twentieth century Wilhelm II, Hitler, and Hirohito were forced to surrender unconditionally (whence political conversion at last could take its course).

Yet the nuclear age definitely has eliminated defeat as an objective of U.S. policy, and, as a result, the enemy's domestication, too, remains only a distant hope. Sheltered by vast deterrent strength, the United States and the Soviet Union cannot hope to prevail over each other. Yet precisely because they possess overwhelming destructive power, they cannot trust each other. Hence they are doomed to unending rivalry that resembles the condition of Europe's great powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and for reasons Tocqueville would have understood easily.

On the one hand, because there is nobody else to shoulder the global burden, the United States now has to play the classic game of nations—of balance, containment, and partial accommodation (also known as arms control and detente). On the other hand, that crown does not sit easily on America's head, given an older American tradition characterized by the familiar oscillation between radical in-

tervention and radical isolation. Such a tradition does not make for stable behavior. Thus, by Tocqueville's standards, U.S. foreign policy was at its best in the early postwar decades—when the Cold War functioned as the long-term moral equivalent of a real war against the "children of darkness," when the electorate was in a steady state of ideological mobilization, when presidents from Truman to Johnson were handed a "blank check" denominated in the currency of popular support for each and for any task assumed by the "Imperial Republic," as Raymond Aron called it.

Yet democracies, and most of all a true child of the Enlightenment like the United States, do not cherish the idea of permanent conflict. The historical optimism of the Enlightenment revolves around the core idea of transcendence, and in that teleology evil and strife appear as mere stepping stones on the path to ultimate salvation. With salvation foreclosed by nuclear bipolarity, there are the familiar cycles of postwar American policy. Set in motion by grand hopes for a "real" settlement and by ideological demobilization, they are completed by inevitable disappointment and moral as well as real rearmament. If Roosevelt brought us "Uncle Joe," Truman unleashed his containment doctrine (and war in Korea), followed by Dulles's "pactomania." Johnson's globalist vision foundered in Vietnam, spawning the antiwar movement and McGovern's cry, "Come home, America." In reaction to Nixon's realpolitik, Jimmy Carter offered "world order" and the call to "shed our inordinate fear of Communism." In turn, that brought about militant neo-containment à la Reagan, massive rearmament, and the doxology of the "evil empire." Hardly into his second term, Reagan II turned against Reagan I, taking the road to Reykjavik and descending with the message of wholesale nuclear disarmament. Such cycles do not make for a foreign policy where a "mature design" overwhelms the "gratification of a momentary passion."[19]

Another implication of nuclear bipolarity, though more in the nature of a possibility, returns us once more to the conclusions Tocqueville drew from America's unique insular situation. By an ironic twist of history and for the first time since the British navy ruled the Atlantic, nuclear weapons and intercontinental missiles have brought the will o' the wisp of isolationism at least within theoretical reach. Robert W. Tucker suggested the following logic of a nuclear Fortress America:

> Having withdrawn once again from the world beyond this hemisphere, though now possessed of a surfeit of deterrent power in form of nuclear missile weapons, we would have little reason to fear attack, for an attacker would know with virtual certainty that he had far more to lose than to gain from so acting. To this extent, nuclear missile weapons give substance to the long-discredited isolationist dream. So long as it is clear that they will be employed only in the direct defense of the homeland, they confer a physical security that is virtually complete, and that the loss of allies cannot alter.[20]

Though the case can be refuted plausibly,[21] it should not be dismissed because the isolationist instinct has by no means disappeared. The Strategic Defense Initiative is surely one manifestation; the neoconservative (and liberal) critiques of America's presence in Europe is another. Insofar as nuclear weapons "give substance to the

isolationist dream," they also dramatize Tocqueville's fundamental point about America's "great advantage"—and its enduring temptation: a "geographical position which renders . . . wars extremely improbable."[22] Physical insulation has been pierced by technology. But ironically, nuclear weapons have replicated that American *Ur*-condition, which evokes security without dependence and entanglement, hence the blessings of a setting where sagacity, patience, and attention to detail might no longer need to contend with the democratic temper.

IV.

Tocqueville wrote about the tension between democracy-in-America and America-in-the-world and kept in suspense by the country's blessed geographical condition. Nuclear bipolarity embodies a similar tension. Bipolarity bids the United States to play the game of balance and containment on a global scale, to compensate for each and every shift, to harness allies, and to deny them to its great adversary. Nuclear weapons, contrarily, transmit a countervailing message. They spell not nervous vigilance and steady exertion but safety and indifference. When it comes to "core security," the United States can deter by itself any and each challenger, singly or in combination. Though nuclear weapons invoke supreme terror, they also confer a margin of security no great power ever has enjoyed.

Such an asset translates into great leeway for error, but unlike the physical distance that once separated the United States from the rest of the world, lesser nations risk deadly punishment for smallish errors. Even for great powers (e.g., France in the 1930s), existential consequences can grow from faults Tocqueville saw rooted in the ethos and temper of democracy. Yet there is also solace in Tocqueville's diagnosis, for America in particular and the democracies in general.

"Though a democracy is more liable to error than a monarchy or a body of nobles," he postulated, "the chances of its regaining the right path when once it has acknowledged its mistake are greater also; because it is rarely embarrassed by interests that conflict with those of the majority and resist the authority of reason." Nonetheless, there is a nasty twist to this soothing message: "But a democracy can obtain truth only as result of experience; and many nations may perish while they are awaiting the consequences of their errors."

Yet the United States is different: "The great privilege of the Americans does not consist in being more enlightened than other nations, but in being able to repair the faults they may commit."[23] Historically, this verdict is surely correct—with Pearl Harbor and the victorious aftermath serving as the most dramatic piece of evidence. Yet it is not clear whether the solace stems from democracy or rather from geography and sheer power (which is just another word for a wide margin for error). And so the fundamental question persists: Is the United States wise or just lucky? Does America's "great privilege" grow from its marvelous political system—or in fact from past physical insulation and its latter day nuclear equivalent?

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1945), p. 243.

2. It is instructive to compare Versailles with the outcome of the Prussian war against Austria in 1866 and the Franco-Prussian

War of 1870–1871. In 1866 Bismarck still could resist the popular cry for a march on Vienna, exacting no more than the cession of Holstein while countering the *gross-deutsch* nationalists with the classic counsel of diplomatic prudence. "We shall need Austrian strength for ourselves later." A mere five years later the handwriting of mass participation was already on the wall, and the clamor of the populace could not longer be stilled. Though Bismarck was loath to take Alsace and Lorraine from defeated France for fear of provoking a future war, nationalist sentiment forced his hand, thus paving the road to World War I.

3. *Tocqueville*, p. 243.

4. Thus the title of chapter 23, *Democracy in America*, vol. II.

5. "Among democratic nations in time of peace the military profession is held in little honor and practiced with little spirit." Vol. II. p. 292.

6. Vol. I, p. 279.

7. Vol. II. p. 292.

8. Vol. I. p. 243–244.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

10. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs*. July 1947, p. 575.

11. George F. Kennan. *American Diplomacy. 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1951), p. 66.

12. Vol. I. p. 244.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 242–243 (emphasis added).

17. Vol. II. p. 283.

18. Vol. I. p. 131.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

20. "Containment and the Search for Alternatives: A Critique," in Aaron Wildavsky, ed., *Beyond Containment* (San Francisco, Calif.: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press. 1983), p. 81. Tucker states the case only in order to reject it.

21. I have tried to do so in *The Limited Partnership: Europe, the United States, and the Burdens of Alliance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1987), ch. 5.

22. Vol. I. p. 178.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 239.