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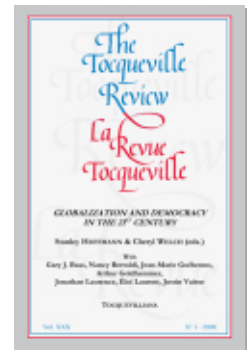
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A FEARFUL ASYMMETRY: CAN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE GLOBAL HEGEMONY

Arthur GOLDHAMMER

TIGER, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

Anyone who turns from the pages of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, written in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, to American democracy as it exists today is confronted at once with a paradox.¹ For in the first sentence of that work Tocqueville says that what struck him most forcefully about America was its "equality of conditions."² Yet by many widely used measures of social and economic as opposed to political equality, the United States does not appear to have remained, if indeed it ever was, an especially egalitarian society. According to the GINI index often cited by economists as a measure of inequality, the US ranks just 73rd in a list of 126 countries, compared with Germany, which ranks 14th, Denmark and Sweden, which rank 2nd and 4th respectively, France, 32nd, and Belgium, 33rd. The mean income of the top ten percent of earners in the United States is 15.9 times the mean income of the bottom 10 percent, compared with 6.9 for Germany and 9.1 for France.³

In the geopolitical realm, America is no longer merely first among equals but in a class by itself. Although accounting for just 3 percent of the world's population, it consumes 25 percent of its annual production of petroleum⁴ and receives 16 percent of worldwide imports while producing 9 percent of exports.⁵ Its \$12.5 trillion GDP is more than a quarter of total world GDP.⁶ Americans consume almost three times as much gasoline per capita as Germans and are responsible for nearly twice the per capita emission of greenhouse gases.⁷ American military spending reportedly exceeds that of the next fifteen military powers combined.

All of these facts are well known. What is less well known, especially outside the country's borders, is how fearful some Americans have become despite the commanding economic and military position of the United States.⁸ Despite the unequalled power that their country wields in the world, despite the unprecedented inequality of wealth they enjoy, some Americans are afraid—more afraid, I want to say, than the actual dangers they face warrant. They fear that inequality breeds envy and envy breeds irrational hatred.⁹ In the wake of the economic crisis that struck in 2008, moreover, Americans have become fearful that the economic inequality they once tolerated with equanimity as an “incentive” to hard work and increased productivity has become a debilitating weakness and itself a ground for fear that American supremacy is increasingly vulnerable.

But fear is unequally distributed in the United States. What I shall argue here is that, for deep historical reasons, the United States is not one republic but multiple republics. It is not unified, for all its showy allegiance to flag and Founding Fathers, by a single culture, a single history, or, most importantly, a single instinct in its response to emergency.¹⁰ Through long intimacy within a constitutional structure that enforces compromise, these multiple republics have learned to cooperate at home for mutual profit. But when their continental fortress is violated, they react in very different ways. The virtues that have made the domestic political system work—the forbearance of the strong, the patience of the weak, the instinctive grasp of the need for fairness even where strict reciprocity cannot exist—seem to some mere signs of weakness in the Hobbesian global arena. The world thus finds

itself with a hegemon whose political culture is ill adapted to its present role, while the United States finds its political culture subjected to stresses for which nothing in its past has prepared it.

TWO SENSES OF EQUALITY

America is not one republic but many republics. At bottom this multiplicity is rooted in ambivalence about equality, which Americans see as both an ideal to be striven for and a condition of vulnerability to be avoided. Why is this the case? How can we explain American democracy's tolerance of high degrees of inequality? Does such inequality contribute to the system's dynamism or threaten its stability? What alleviates the internal tensions to which inequality in democracy gives rise? Why do Americans, in defiance of Machiavelli, persist in the belief that as global hegemons they can be both feared as the superior power and loved as benevolent equals?

How might one approach these questions? I conceive my task as an exercise in applied political theory.¹¹ Begin by noticing that in the foregoing account of American ambivalence toward equality, I use equality in two different senses, to refer either to a relation between persons or to a relation between sovereign states. Both have deep roots in American political thought. The radicalism of the American Revolution¹² is encapsulated in the "self-evident truth" proclaimed at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Yet the equally fundamental Constitution of the United States, to which "We the People" of presumed equals gave its assent a decade later, posited a certain equality among the member states of the Union, an equality institutionalized in the apportionment of two Senate seats to each state, regardless of population; in the design of the Electoral College, which gives disproportionate weight to small states; and in the reservation of certain powers and privileges to the governments of the states as opposed to that of the Union.

That a tension existed between these two senses of equality was obvious to both the Framers of the Constitution and the People who ratified it. The Tenth Amendment, which constituted the final clause of the so-called Bill of Rights (whose inclusion in the Constitution was a condition of ratification laid down by

those skeptical of the protections afforded by the main body of the document), codified this basic ambivalence. It states that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” This marvel of ambiguity—“to the States ... *or* to the people”—might be defended as the fruit of some considerable experience with a divided sovereignty in many ways similar to that which the Constitution proposed to establish.¹³ The several states, descended from colonies that had long labored under the yoke of British rule, were used to the idea that certain essential state functions, such as the provision of security and the regulation of trade, were best performed by a transcendent entity, a “superstate,” to use the terminology that Glyn Morgan has proposed for Europe.¹⁴ And the Articles of Confederation, the compact among the victorious former colonies that preceded the Constitution, had foundered on its ineffectiveness in fulfilling those functions. On the other hand, for all that American constitutionalism owed to British tradition, Enlightenment political theory, and colonial experience, America *was* in fact different, something quite unprecedented in the modern world, a republic created *de novo* and, if not quite on virgin land, yet still in a largely unexploited, and in 1787 quite sparsely populated, wilderness. And not just *a* republic but a canvas broad enough to accommodate *several* republics conceived in rather different lights.

Indeed, the continent in its very emptiness was pregnant with possibility. Diverse imaginations filled the splendid natural canvas with images of civilizations to come. Sometimes these mirrored civilizations of the past: Thomas Jefferson built himself an Italianate villa at Monticello and designed for the University of Virginia a library modeled on the Roman Capitol, yet the empire over which these stately symbols loomed was still populated chiefly by Indians, slaves, and humble farmers who scarcely had the leisure to pore over Palladian etchings. The painter Thomas Cole depicted an entire cycle of rise and fall, from inchoate wilderness to civilized landscape littered with strangely antique ruins of a fallen civilization. Other visionaries, of more pragmatic bent, imagined forests of masts in the harbors of New York,

Boston, or Philadelphia as dense as those in the major ports of Europe.

The sheer size of the American republic made it possible to conceive of the separate states as experiments in different forms of republican civilization. A republic was not simply a collection of free individuals but a community with a distinctive civic culture actively embraced by its citizens. Political thought in the new republics took on a certain aesthetic, plastic quality. Reasonable men could differ not only over how the fruits of their cooperation should be divided but also over what kinds of fruit they should seek to cultivate, and in what abundance. In Europe it seemed that man had no sooner asserted control over his destiny than he was obliged to reckon with mysterious powers that once again transcended him: social forces, productive forces, the world spirit, call them what you will, they limited man's freedom and left him less the artist of his civilization than the engineer, struggling to control an alien machine. Europeans might govern themselves, but they could not make history under conditions of their own choosing. Their civilization was too venerable, too complex, too oppressive for that. By contrast, America still glistened with viscous afterbirth. Tocqueville, seeking a metaphor to describe the newborn nation, wrote that "in a manner of speaking, the whole man already lies swaddled in his cradle. ... Every people bears the mark of its origins. The circumstances that surround its birth and aid its development also influence the subsequent course of its existence."¹⁵ Yes, but when the parents of the newborn hold decidedly different views of how the child is to be raised, there is reason to fear that the mature offspring will be unsettled in its identity.

The American canvas remained spacious enough, even after the closing of the frontier, to accommodate a diversity of republics—a diversity, as we shall see, that is no longer confined within state or regional boundaries but diffused throughout the polity and that has no formal or fixed institutional counterpart. The apparent continuity of American democracy camouflages a deeply fissured political culture. The dual sense of equality has meant that the American republic, unlike the French, does not stake its identity on being "one and indivisible"—and this despite the inclusion of the very word "indivisible" in the Pledge of

Allegiance that every schoolchild in America recites daily.¹⁶ Tocqueville liked the idea of subsidiary sovereignties: the reservation of important powers to the several states provided the kind of bulwark against administrative despotism by the central government that he believed might have saved France from her woes. A very different sort of political theorist, the Southern statesman John Calhoun, conceived his doctrine of concurrent majorities in a similar spirit. In a nation composed of diverse civilizations, any one of which might come to dominate the others in a numerical sense, he argued that no simple majority should be permitted to dominate the whole. In matters affecting the fundamental character of the subcultures constituting the nation, Calhoun insisted, concurrent majorities must obtain.

FAIRNESS UNDER INEQUALITY

But of course Calhoun's theory was propounded in defense of slavery, and there's the rub. Instead of a warrant of justice, equality *among states* at times became a pillar of injustice. Regions might declare themselves to be republics within the republic. Equal rights and powers were to be granted, so Calhoun argued, to states or communities or competing ideas of civilization or rival ideas of the good rather than to citizens.

In American political philosophy, the phrase "rival ideas of the good" inevitably brings to mind John Rawls. His *Theory of Justice* has become a model for thinking about issues of social justice and about the kinds of rules we impose on ourselves in order to ensure that our freedom is consistent with the freedom of others. What interests me in the present context is the way in which equality figures in Rawls' theory. For Rawls, justice is essentially a matter of reciprocity, or as he puts it, fairness, and equality is invoked as a guarantee of reciprocity. If, in formulating the fundamental rules of a society, we do not know which position we will ultimately occupy—if, in other words, we are equal in our ignorance—fairness in the sense of reciprocity is automatically guaranteed: we will not assent to rules that disadvantage any position we may be called upon to occupy. This is the first step in Rawls' argument from what he calls the original position, a situation in which a society works out a compact regarding its basic rules behind a veil of ignorance as to who will

enjoy what share of the goods, talents, and other basic resources that will in fact become available once the veil is removed. The second step, the so-called difference principle, further refines the choice of principles of justice by preferring those that improve the position of the worst-off.

Rawls' thinking was influenced not only by Kant but also by the contractarian tradition in political thought. Now, the Constitution, too, reflects the influence of the contractarian tradition, but it was not a Rawlsian contract. The Framers did not exercise their political imagination behind a veil of ignorance. They represented very specific interests: small states versus large, agrarian versus commercial, slave versus free. The bargains they struck represented very firm expectations as to how they would affect what they knew in advance to be the positions they occupied in the nascent social order.¹⁷ No veil of ignorance ensured reciprocity in their bargaining.

The question therefore arises, in what sense can the Constitution be said to be a fair contract? A contract is a *quid pro quo*, but it is fair only if the thing given is equal in value to the thing received. Under the constitutional bargain, citizens of the more populous states ceded a power resource they might have claimed under the doctrine of strict equality and strict majority rule. This was the price of achieving any agreement at all. In other words, a minority used its obstructive power to obtain a concession from the majority. Was this a fair bargain?

We use the word "fair" in two distinct senses. On the one hand it means "free from bias." This is how Rawls intends it. The whole point of the original position is to ensure that the rule-makers cannot be biased. But we also use "fair" to mean "not taking undue advantage" and "disposed to concede every reasonable position" (*OED*). To refrain from taking undue advantage is to recognize that undue advantage, that is, inequality in power, exists. In a democracy based on the preponderance of a simple majority, anyone who believes that he may for one reason or another find himself more or less permanently in the minority, perhaps because he is a member of a dominated class or subculture, perhaps because he sees himself as part of an elite but vulnerable few, thus has reason to fear the basic law. The Framers

conceded this point in the particular matter of states' rights. This might seem to be a concession of relatively limited import, given the possibility that many other kinds of permanent minority might conceivably exist. The importance of recognizing this particular minority, that of a small state or a demographically dominated region, was that it focused attention on the inadequacy of majority rule as a principle of legitimacy.

The constitutional compromise tempered majority rule by enforcing a certain—perhaps merely tactical—respect for minority sentiment. It taught the virtue, indeed the necessity, of forbearance—forbearance on the part of the dominant element in not pressing its advantage to an extreme, and forbearance, or perhaps it should be called patience, on the part of the dominated element in not demanding a strict *quid pro quo*. In the constitutional bargain, the weaker party, comprising the small states, got about as much as it could reasonably expect given the existing balance of power, and it was the bargain itself, with its promise of future gains greater than could be achieved without it, that compensated the stronger party for its concession. Conflict remained, but the probability of subsequent confrontation did not become an alibi for inaction or intransigence.

This pattern, replicated many times over, shaped the character of American democracy.¹⁸ It promoted, to an unusual degree, a tolerance not just of cultural diversity but of multiple comprehensive ideas of the good within a framework inviting tactical cooperation while allowing strategic divergence. It generated a political culture that bracketed deep differences in such a way as to encourage, as we shall see in a moment, boundary-crossing coalitions and piecemeal reform. I have emphasized the constitutional compromise granting rights to the several states as the seed of this culture, but I do not want to be misunderstood on this point. When I speak of multiple republics within the American republic, I am not thinking of the individual states or even of distinct regions or sections, except as an historical paradigm, for the federal structure was merely the seed of American diversity. The fruit was more diverse still: a multiplicity of diffuse but informal republics, by which I mean nothing more or less than groups of citizens whose ultimate ideas of the good, and of the relevance of political activity to achieving

those ideas, vary. These citizens may in some cases be concentrated in particular geographic regions, for regional diversity owing to both marked physical difference and profound economic differentiation is an important characteristic of the United States. In other cases, however, they may be scattered widely. If, for example, there is an evangelical culture, a religious republic, concentrated in the Bible Belt, there is an academic culture, a republic of letters, scattered among university towns from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Ann Arbor, Michigan, Austin, Texas, and Berkeley, California. But let me leave this point undeveloped, for space is limited, and move on to some historical examples of coalitions among the subcultures and sub-republics of the American polity.

SOME EXAMPLES

A key characteristic of the basic bargain I have described is the asymmetrical position of the parties. Consider a series of bargains conforming to this pattern, beginning with the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. Jackson's candidacy was propelled by the energies of agricultural expansion on the western fringe of the Cotton Belt.¹⁹ Independent smallholders in this area felt themselves to be under threat by the large planters who dominated the politics of the Southeast. Other antagonists included the commercial and banking interests of the Northeast, as well as entrepreneurial developers in their own region, whose champion was Henry Clay and his American System, under which development of the Southwest would have been managed by Washington in conjunction with local operators. These small farmers, whose "comprehensive view of the good" was essentially a Jeffersonian republic of yeoman farmers (assisted, to be sure, by slaves, seen as essential for the necessary hard labor in a region declared to be inhospitable to white labor), sought more land for themselves and their progeny, and Jackson, the heroic Indian fighter, promised to provide this by removing the Indians to the West; and they needed to borrow money at low interest to finance the purchase of land and new planting and therefore resented the management of the money supply by the Bank of the United States, which Jackson would eventually attack. The "Corrupt Bargain" of 1824, which had put John Quincy Adams into the White House, was for them the epitome of oppression by a

combination of their enemies, the Clayites and the Federalists of New England.

But they could not defeat this combination without a northern ally of their own, which the Little Magician, Martin Van Buren of New York, contrived to provide. Van Buren's stroke of political genius was to cobble together a winning coalition out of disgruntled elements in the North and the politically dominated but dynamic group of smallholders on the western fringes of the South.

Election figures reveal the asymmetrical nature of this coalition. "Jackson managed a bare majority in the free states (50.3%)," Daniel Walker Howe tells us, "while racking up 72.6 percent in the slave states." Yet owing to the original constitutional bargain, giving disproportionate representation to less populous states (owing to the way in which presidential electors were apportioned) as well as to slave states (owing to the Three-Fifths Compromise), Jackson's 400,000 popular votes in the North "brought him only 73 electoral votes, while the 200,000 southerners who voted for him produced 105."²⁰

Curiously, in this Jacksonian Democratic Party, it was the numerically smaller component that dominated. The candidate was a southerner, and the key promise that cemented the coalition was Van Buren's guarantee that the northern element would oppose anti-slavery forces in the north.²¹ Southern interests were more cohesive and well-defined than northern interests in the new party. But northern power brokers, like Van Buren, without whom these cohesive southern interests could not have gained power nationally, were amply compensated for their pains by, among other things, being helped to power in their own region. In this sense the bargain was a "fair" one, giving both sides good value for their cooperation, value that neither could have achieved without it.

A second asymmetry appears when we look at the development of the working class after 1850. Immigrants began to enter the United States in large numbers in the late 1840s. A natural symbiosis developed between newly arrived immigrants and urban political entrepreneurs. As industrial cities expanded, construction of housing accelerated and municipal governments

raced to provide city services such as police and fire departments, sewers and water mains, transportation, hospitals, schools, and roads. Politics had already become associated with such services in an earlier period. In New York City, for example, volunteer fire departments had been Democratic political clubs. Now political organizers became conduits for state and city construction funds. They were in a position to provide new arrivals with the things they needed most: immediate employment, access to associated networks of private employers such as construction contractors, housing, help in resolving disputes with sometimes hostile authorities, and relief in case of adversity or illness. Political machines based on this symbiotic relationship between workers and ward heelers developed in most industrial cities.

Here, it is important to note that workers, especially immigrant workers, had no expectation of equal treatment. If they hoped eventually to improve their lot, they were nevertheless prepared to defer the expectation of anything like full equality to future generations. For the present they demanded only a “fair deal,” in full recognition of the fact that their bargaining position was weak. Although their political activity was intense, its goals were limited and local. Continuation of the appropriations on which this ad hoc welfare city-state depended took priority over issues of more national import. William Plunkitt, one of the more pungent political bosses of New York City, famous for his forthright distinction between “honest graft” (meaning profits reaped from public office) and “dishonest graft” (derived from extortion backed by the power of government), summed up his philosophy of politics with the words, “I seen my opportunities and I took ‘em.”²² His constituents, whose opportunities were surely more limited than his own, were nevertheless content for a time to take them where they saw them rather than pursue futile if uplifting abstractions. The prodigious growth of the economy in the late nineteenth century no doubt comforted them in the belief that this was the better long-run strategy, even though the lion’s share of that growth remained for the time being with the lions who prowled the higher levels of government. The politics of the industrial city-states flourished in a certain independence from the politics of the republic at large. So did the politics of the agrarian South and West, where splinter parties and populist

movements found scope for protest in state houses, and in the industrial Midwest, where the power of cartels was resisted in the courts.

Even as the weak sought by these political means to improve their bargaining position against the strong, the strong similarly sought ways to bargain with the stronger. In the 1876 presidential election, Samuel Tilden won more votes than his rival, Rutherford B. Hayes, but owing to a dispute over certification of electors in the Electoral College, neither candidate attained the required majority. Republicans in the North, abetted by railroad interests, bargained with Democratic elites in the South, whose interests included ridding their region of the last vestiges of post-Civil War occupation and exercising a measure of control over lucrative railroad development. The deal they struck, which gave Hayes the presidency, though manifestly unfair to many people and most notably to southern blacks, was nevertheless fair to the contracting parties. It couldn't have worked otherwise, for its illegal provisions could never have been enforced. Waspishly, one might call this bargain "fairness as injustice" (most especially to southern blacks, who were abandoned to their fate), but fair it was on its own terms. Fairness and exclusivity were by no means incompatible. With this bargain, Democratic elites in the South essentially relinquished national power in exchange for the right to maintain the "southern way of life."²³

For a fourth and final example, consider the heated 1896 contest for the presidency that pitted the populist Democratic orator William Jennings Bryan against the Republican "candidate of business," William McKinley. The Republicans, using selective tariffs, the gold standard, and opposition to anti-Catholic and anti-liquor sentiment as their instruments, forged a coalition that included not only industrialists but also important segments of the urban working class as well as western mining and ranching interests. Unnatural this alliance may have been, but the parties to the bargain, though remaining adversaries in essential respects, felt themselves sufficiently fortified in their separate republics that they judged the deal to be as fair as they had any reason to expect.²⁴

One could multiply examples right up to the present, but by now a pattern should be clear. The American political system has regularly produced surprisingly asymmetrical alliances: cross-class, cross-sectional, cross-cultural, cross-ethnic, cross-religious. In each of these bargains, one of the contracting parties has tended to take a broadly national, developmental, and future-oriented view, while the other has tended to take a more narrowly local, defensive, and present-minded view. Until recently, at least, the grand republic has been spacious enough to accommodate a constellation of lesser republics within its boundaries and within its Constitution. Conflict, even fundamental conflict over ultimate goods, has not prevented cooperation or coalition based on bargains perceived by the parties to be fair, and the devolution of some degree of power to subsidiary partners has, with a few not insignificant exceptions, diminished the need for system-threatening head-on confrontation. The American political culture is one in which weaker partners “see their opportunities and take them,” availing themselves of veto points and local institutions to alleviate though not eliminate the fears that dominant partners will press their advantage to the full. If this encourages a tinge of what has been called “paranoid style” in American politics, the system’s fearful asymmetry often permits a middle way between costly confrontation and impossible consensus.²⁵

AMERICA AND THE WORLD

I turn now to America and the world. The art of politics, like any art, must be learned. It cannot be deduced from abstract principles. The history of American democracy as I have ruthlessly abridged it here might be described as an elaborate exercise in learning how to reconcile the two senses of fairness, the one applying to individuals and their rights, the other to groups and their comprehensive ideas of the good. The essence of the art is to strike a fair though often unequal compromise among the latter. Tocqueville believed that the learning necessary to master the art of politics does not come about by itself. It requires leadership:

To educate democracy—if possible to revive its beliefs; to purify its mores; to regulate its impulses; to substitute, little by little, knowledge of affairs for inexperience and understanding of true interests for blind instinct; to adapt government to its time and

place; to alter it to fit circumstances and individuals—this is the primary duty imposed on the leaders of society today.²⁶

It might be thought that a political system that schools leaders in the art of forging asymmetrical coalitions, fair though unequal, would tend to educate citizens to accept a similar pattern of compromise in foreign affairs. Increasingly, however, the United States has sought to assert itself as hegemon rather than (dominant) partner in its relations with other countries.

Why has this happened? Consider three factors: the emergence of a specialized foreign-policy elite, the centralization of power, and the unique role of the presidency.²⁷ In discussing the key contractual bargains that have influenced the evolution of party systems in the United States, I have emphasized the importance of the federal structure of the Constitution and the decentralization of political power. And yet—*pace* Tocqueville—the growth of centralized power has been the central tendency of U. S. history, and at the very center of the center is the president, whose role today bears little resemblance to that of the weak executive imagined by the Framers. The foreign-policy elite tends to gather for obvious reasons around the commander-in-chief.

The President stands in an odd relationship to the rest of the polity. He does not so much preside over it as stand outside it. He is exalted above mere “politicians” in his role as chief of state and especially commander-in-chief, so that he is at once more remote from voters than other officials and more intimate with them, and this intimacy, ersatz though it may be, has been greatly magnified by television. Senators and representatives stand for territorial entities, but the President has a more visceral relationship with his people. His role is almost one of incarnation. He has the tools to be democracy’s educator par excellence, yet this is a function honored more often in the breach than in the observance. From the sinking of the Maine and the Zimmermann Telegram to the Tonkin Gulf and yellowcake uranium of more recent memory, presidents have repeatedly manipulated and exploited popular emotions rather than sought to purify them. The point is not whether the intention of such manipulation was in any given case good or prudent or shrewd; it is rather that the forbearance, patience, and fairness sometimes practiced in domestic politics have been deemed unworkable in the realm of foreign policy. It is

as if the elites concerned with foreign policy assume as a matter of course that the electorate is generally unconcerned with foreign affairs and that nothing short of an existential threat can suffice to rouse it from its pragmatic slumbers. If there is no existential threat, one can be manufactured—in the public interest, of course.

It might be objected that crises in foreign affairs often require an immediate and coordinated response, which only a central government that speaks with a single voice can provide. Yet few if any crises—not even the crisis of terrorism—arrive entirely by surprise, and deception is practiced not as a momentary tactic but as a sustained strategy. Indeed, it sometimes seems that the federal executive needs foreign crises in order to establish its supreme sovereignty at home. Though I don't make a habit of citing Carl Schmitt, his observation that "sovereignty is the power to declare an emergency" is pertinent here. It is the emergency itself that retrospectively legitimates the circumvention of democratic deliberation and the recourse to deception. "The Constitution," wrote Justice Holmes, "is not a suicide pact." True, but neither is it a license to take a shotgun to every trespasser.

Tocqueville erred about war and democracy. He believed that democratic peoples, more keen to preserve their property than avid for glory, would prefer peace, while ambition for social advancement in the ranks of democratic armies would make them more bellicose than aristocratic armies.²⁸ Eagerness for war in the American military varies, but on the whole it has waned with growing American military power. The potential for advancement exists in peace as well as war, and with less risk. The people, however, remain peculiarly susceptible to the call to arms. So long as the likelihood of widespread destruction remains confined to foreign soil, they do not fear for their property and are strangely more willing to burden that property with taxes to pay for the military than for almost any other purpose. Few of them aspire to military glory, and although there is surely material advantage for the nation in military power, that consideration alone cannot account for the volatility of the martial passions, which in recent years have twice produced overwhelming majorities in favor of wars whose material benefits were open to serious doubt, and

equally overwhelming majorities against those wars when within a few years the costs became apparent.

Tocqueville makes a second suggestion about democracy and war that strikes me as having more merit. “I do not wish to speak ill of war,” he writes:

War almost always enlarges the thought and ennobles the heart of a people. There are cases in which war alone can halt the excessive development of certain penchants to which equality naturally gives rise, and in which it must be considered a necessary corrective to certain deep-seated afflictions of democratic societies.²⁹

I don’t think that this is a correct account of the effects of war on a people, but I do think that it accurately describes the beliefs of certain counselors of the American Prince. Among the “deep-seated afflictions of democratic societies” that Tocqueville himself identified is a certain centrifugal tendency. Tocqueville understood this affliction as “individualism,” a forsaking of public purpose for the exclusive pursuit of private well-being. A national government dedicated to a public purpose with broad appeal to the republics within the republic may serve as a remedy to such an ill.

One way of describing the more active national government that began to emerge around the time of World War I was that it filled this role of defining a transcendent national purpose. Under Wilson this assertion was still tentative. Under Roosevelt it explicitly took the form of subsuming diversity in unity, of overcoming the patchwork of local bargains I described earlier in order to build, at first, an active regulatory state capable of responding to the Depression and, later, a military machine capable of responding to fascism. The Cold War conveniently substituted one enemy for another while preserving a unity of national purpose, though cracks had already begun to appear. In Vietnam that unity shattered, and the lesser republics within the greater went their separate ways.

I am obliged to omit much diverting detail of the last forty years in order to conclude with one simple point. Among the various beliefs that motivated the neoconservatives who sought to influence American foreign policy from the latter years of the Cold War onward was the belief derived from Tocqueville that

war might be viewed not as a scourge of mankind but as a potential remedy for the ills of democracy. Underlying this belief is a fear that unless a democratic people is supplied with a national interest transcending the selfish egoism of individuals and the destructive tribalism of warring ideas of the good, entropy will prevail, disorder will replace order, and the virtues of democracy, in particular the capacity to generate restless creative energy, will succumb to the vices known to the Ancients and feared by conservatives ever since, namely, anarchy and oligarchy.³⁰

One can understand the fears of the neoconservatives and share their desire to infuse the nation with purpose, but one wishes that in their search for a mission they had looked to a chapter of *Democracy in America* other than the chapter on war, and that they had not overlooked the second part of the passage in which Tocqueville expresses his conviction that “there are two things that will always be very difficult for a democratic people to do: to start a war and to finish it.”³¹

Barack Obama, elected in 2008, now faces the challenge of finishing two wars started by others. To that end he is aided by his predecessor’s legacy. The hubris that attended the launch of the war in Iraq has dissipated. The United States may vastly outspend all other nations on military technology, but it has become abundantly clear that hardware can neither shock nor awe others into submission. The political accommodations ultimately brokered among Iraqis to deal with the “insurgency” resemble the contractual bargains characteristic of American politics—though it is reasonable to ask whether those accommodations are sufficiently “fair” to all parties to endure for very long. In any case, Obama appears to conceive of international relationships in terms of partnership rather than hegemony, and he seems to recognize that no contract can survive if one party comes to feel it has been swindled or disrespected by the other. He is more apt, in speeches, to evoke a future of mutual gains than to frighten (or threaten) with images of immediate annihilation. In short, he is trying to externalize the pattern of compromise typical of American domestic politics, after half a century in which our foreign policy has been shaped by a Manichaean imagery of freedom versus unfreedom and good versus evil. But he is

fighting against the inverse tendency, to internalize the Manichaeism of our recent foreign policy and make it a defining feature of our domestic political culture. The very language of domestic politics, in which senators can speak of resorting to “the nuclear option” to block the appointment of judges deemed too sympathetic to the other party, suggests a readiness to regard any gain by a group not sharing one’s own comprehensive idea of the good as an existential threat to one’s own political identity. Such an illiberal conception of democracy in America is a threat to its continued existence. A fearful asymmetry that induces salutary caution has been one instrument for achieving that necessary compromise domestically, and it may yet prove to have value in international relations as well.

NOTES

- [1] An earlier version of this paper was presented as a talk at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin in January 2007 under the auspices of the Harvard Center for European Studies Berlin Forum. The author wishes to thank Glyn Morgan, the discussant on that occasion, for helpful comments, as well as Cheryl Welch for her insightful critique.
- [2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), Introduction, p. 3. Cited hereafter as *DA*.
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_equality
- [4] <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/international/oilconsumption.html>
- [5] http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/its2005_e/its05_overview_e.pdf
- [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_%28nominal%29
- [7] Jacques Mistral, “Market Forces And Fair Institutions: The Political Economy of Europe and the US Reconsidered,” July 2006, unpublished, p. 52.
- [8] One foreign observer who has notice America’s growing fearfulness is Dominique Moisi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion* (New York: Doubleday, 2009). And of course the economic crisis of the past two years has sown fears that America will soon cede economic supremacy to China.
- [9] Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: revised edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971(1999)), p. 466: “We may think of envy as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though

their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages.”

- [10] My thinking on this point has been influenced by David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford, 1989), but I want to pay attention to later plantings than Fischer considers and to allow for the role of nurture as well as nature.
- [11] I owe the term to Glyn Morgan, *The Idea of a European Superstate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- [12] Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*
- [13] On the contrast between “the thing born” and “the thing made,” see Michael Kammen, *A Machine that Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1987).
- [14] Morgan, *The Idea of a European Superstate*.
- [15] *DA*, I.1.2, 31.
- [16] To be sure, a Civil War was fought to preserve the Union, but it was only the idea that a republic within the republic might base itself on the morally inadmissible principle of slavery that was rejected, not the ideal of divided sovereignty itself.
- [17] Nor was it a Lockean compact, as Forrest McDonald notes, “for the Lockean compact was between the people, on one side, and the prince, sovereign, or rulers on the other.” And it was not “a compact among the people to govern themselves,” precisely because of the special kind of equality granted to the states as subsidiary sovereigns. As evidence for the special nature of the constitutional contract, moreover, McDonald points to article 4, section 3, of the Constitution, “which prevents the states from being divided without their consent,” and to article 5, “which exempts equal suffrage by states in the Senate from the possibility of amendment. See Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (Kansas, 1985), pp. 180-181.
- [18] For a fuller discussion of the nature of asymmetrical bargaining in the somewhat different context of American higher lawmaking, see Arthur Goldhammer, “Fictions Not Intended to Deceive,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, 28(2), 2007:9-31.
- [19] Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 310; see also Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*.
- [20] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (Oxford: Oxford, 2007), p. 282.
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 279-80. Van Buren proposed a political alliance “between the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North” lest “prejudices between free and slave holding states ... inevitably take the place” left vacant by the absence of a cross-regional pro-slavery party.
- [22] William Riordon, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (New York: Signet Classic, 1995), p. 3.
- [23] C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford, 1966).

- [24] See Richard F. Bense, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- [25] See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, Vintage, 2008); David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971).
- [26] *DA*.
- [27] On the emergence of a distinctive foreign-policy elite, see Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005)
- [28] *DA*, II.3.22, p. 763.
- [29] *DA*, II.3.22, p. 765.
- [30] John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).
- [31] *DA*, II.3.22, p. 765.