

Alexis de Tocqueville

French author and politician Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) was born in Paris. His father was a government official, and de Tocqueville studied law as preparation for political life. Believing that monarchy was outdated, de Tocqueville looked to the United States as a model for democratic action. He traveled to America to learn about the political development of the country. *Democracy in America* was published in 1835; a second volume was published in 1840. He returned to France and was in political service until the coup of Louis Napoleon in 1850, which restored the monarchy.

An early work of sociology and political science, *Democracy in America* explores the effects of changes in social conditions on individuals and the state. De Tocqueville believed that democracy balanced liberty and equality, and that equality was “an unstoppable force” in modern life. One key difference he found between Americans and Europeans was in the former’s desire to make money, which in his opinion accounted for the different cultures and values. De Tocqueville’s work was highly regarded and remains influential in histories and cultural studies of the United States.

From *Democracy in America*

“It is evident,” says Hamilton in the *Federalist*, no. 12, “from the state of the country, from the habits of the people, from the experience we have had on the point itself that it is impracticable to raise any very considerable sums by direct taxation.” The direct tax is in fact the most visible and burdensome of taxes; but at the same time, it is the only one that can always be resorted to during a war.

A single example will allow the reader to judge.

The Constitution gives Congress the right to call the state militias into active duty when it is a matter of suppressing an insurrection or repelling an invasion. Another article says that in this case the President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the militia.

At the time of the War of 1812, the President ordered the militias of the North to move toward the national borders; Connecticut and Massachusetts, whose interests were harmed by the war,^o refused to send their contingents.

The Constitution, they said, authorizes the federal government to use the militias in cases of *insurrection or invasion*; but in the present situation there was neither insurrection nor invasion. They added that the same Constitution that gave the Union the right to call the militias into active service, left the states the right to appoint the officers. It followed, according to them, that even in war, no officer of the Union had the right to command the militias, except the President in person. But this was a matter of serving in an army commanded by someone other than him.

These absurd and destructive doctrines received not only the sanction^o of the Governors and the legislature, but also that of the courts of justice of these two states; and the federal government was forced to find elsewhere the troops that it needed.

^owhose interests . . . the war: Since Great Britain was the major trading partner of these states, the disruption of commerce inflicted serious economic damage upon them.

sanction: approval

[A fact of this nature proves, better than all that I could say, the inability the American Union would have to sustain a great war, even with the improved organization that the 1789 Constitution gave it.

Allow for a moment the existence of such a nation in the midst of the aggressive peoples of Europe where sovereignty is unified and omnipotent, and the relative weakness of the American Union will become for you a proven and plain truth.]

So how is it that the American Union, all protected as it is by the relative perfection of its laws, does not dissolve in the middle of a great war? It is because it has no great wars to fear.

[In general, we must give up citing the example of the United States to prove that confederations can sustain great wars, for the Union has never had a single one of this nature.

Even that of 1812, which the Americans speak about with such pride, was nothing compared to the smallest of those that the ambition of Louis XIV^o or the French Revolution brought about in Europe. The reason is simple.]

Placed in the center of an immense continent, where human industry can expand without limits, the Union is almost as isolated from the world as if it were enclosed on all sides by the ocean.

Canada numbers only a million inhabitants; its population is divided into two enemy nations.^o The rigors of climate limit the extent of its territory and close its ports for six months of the year.

From Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, there are still a few, half-destroyed, savage tribes that six thousand soldiers drive before them.

In the South, the Union at one point touches the empire of Mexico; probably great wars will come from there one day [if the Anglo-Americans and the Mexicans each continue to form a single, unified nation. In Mexico, in fact, there is a numerous population that, different from its neighbors by language, religion, habits and interest [broken text (ed.)]]. But, for a long time still, the little developed state of its civilization, the corruption of its mores^o and its poverty will prevent Mexico from taking an elevated rank among nations. As for the great powers of Europe, their distance makes them little to be feared.

So the great happiness of the United States is not to have found a federal constitution that allows it to sustain great wars, but to be so situated that there are none to fear.

No one can appreciate more than I the advantages of the federal system. There I see one of the most powerful devices favoring prosperity and human liberty. I envy the fate of nations permitted to adopt it. But I refuse nonetheless, to believe that confederated republics could struggle for long with equal strength, against a nation where governmental power would be centralized.

The people who, in the presence of the great military monarchies of Europe, would come to divide sovereignty, would seem to me to abdicate, by this fact alone, its power and perhaps its existence and its name.

Admirable position of the New World where man has only himself as an enemy. To be happy and free, he only has to want to be.

[1835]

Louis XIV: (1638–1715), King of France (1643–1715)

two enemy nations: In 1831 Canada was still a colony of Great Britain, which by the Constitution Act of 1791 had divided it into two separate political units, Lower Canada (the French) and Upper Canada (the English).

mores: customs