

ISSUE BRIEF

“Information to Action”

Topic: Balanced Federalism

Title: *TOCQUEVILLE’S WARNING OF AMERICAN TYRANNY (PART 1)* by Joshua Charles

One of the greatest works ever written on the American Experiment was Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville was a young French aristocrat who originally went to the United States to study its penal system. He ended up greatly extending his stay and wrote his magnum opus over several years.

Many of his observations continue to be extraordinarily prophetic to this day. Few statesmen have been as prescient as Tocqueville. While it is often said that Tocqueville was entirely optimistic about the American Experiment, the truth is quite otherwise. Tocqueville greatly admired the United States for various reasons. But he also saw potentially significant problems in its culture and governance.

For example, he admired the federalism in the Constitution. But he also believed elements of American culture would ultimately concentrate all power in the federal government.

Toward the end of his two-volume work, he articulated perhaps his most precise and thought-provoking prognostication of them all, and it had to do with this very issue. We quote it at length:

“I had noted in my stay in the United States that a democratic state of society similar to the American model could lay itself open to the establishment of despotism with unusual ease...When the Roman emperors were at the height of their powers, the various nations inhabiting the Roman world still preserved their different customs and manners: although they obeyed the same monarch, most of the provinces were administered separately. They abounded in powerful and energetic townships and, although the whole government of the empire was concentrated in the emperor’s hands and he remained the arbiter of everything when the need arose, the small details of social life and private everyday existence normally eluded his control. The emperors, it is true, wielded immense and unchecked power...they often abused this power to deprive a citizen arbitrarily of his property or his life, but their tyranny was an excessive burden on a few people, but never spread over a great number. It latched on to a few main objects, leaving the rest alone. It was violent, but its extent was limited.

If despotism were to be established in present-day democracies, it would probably assume a different character. It would be more widespread and kinder. It would debase men without tormenting them...I wish to imagine under what new features despotism might appear in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of men, all alike and equal, turned in upon themselves in a restless search for those petty, vulgar

pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them living apart is almost unaware of the destiny of all the rest. His children and personal friends are for him the whole of the human race. As for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he stands alongside them but does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists only in himself and for himself; if he still retains his family circle, at any rate he may be said to have lost his country. Above these men stands an immense and protective power which alone is responsible for looking after their enjoyments and watching over their destiny. It is absolute, meticulous, ordered, provident, and kindly disposed. It would be like a fatherly authority if, fatherlike, its aims were to prepare men for manhood, but it seeks only to keep them in perpetual childhood. It prefers its citizens to enjoy themselves provided they have only enjoyment in mind. It works readily for their happiness, but wishes to be the only provider and judge of it. It provides their security, anticipates and guarantees their needs, supplies their pleasures, directs their principal concerns, manages their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances. Why can it not remove from them entirely the bother of thinking and the troubles of life?

Thus it reduces daily the value and frequency of the exercise of free choice: it restricts the activity of free will within a narrower range and gradually removes autonomy itself from each citizen...Thus, the ruling power, having taken each citizen one by one into its powerful grasp, and having molded him to its own liking, spreads its arms over the whole of society, covering the surface of social life with a network of petty, complicated, detailed, and uniform rules through which even the most original minds and the most energetic of spirits cannot reach the light in order to rise above the crowd. It does not break men's wills, but it does soften, bend, and control them. Rarely does it force men to act, but it constantly opposes what actions they perform. It does not tyrannize but it inhibits, represses, drains, snuffs out, dulls so much effort that finally it reduces each nation to nothing more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as shepherd."

To be continued with Part 2 next month.