

# Alexander De Tocqueville on Why America Has No More Statesmen

When you think of American statesmen, you likely think of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. They led America through periods of political chaos and enormous uncertainty when few others could.

Many long for statesmen of a similar type to lead America through its current challenges, but does America have any statesman left? Why does it seem like there's no one to answer the call?

One explanation could be that it's simply a consequence of how a long-established democratic society shapes the character of those in it. In his famous work *Democracy in America*, Alexander De Tocqueville points out that revolution creates enlarged ambition in the citizenry. Extraordinary circumstances tend to foster extraordinary passions. But once a democratic nation has been established, while ambition in general may be widespread, "lofty ambition" declines. De Tocqueville identifies two main certain characteristics of a democratic society that contribute to this: a focus on personal wealth and the obstacles to exceptional achievement.

De Tocqueville argues that a cultural emphasis on personal economic affairs can stunt lofty ambition:

"What chiefly diverts the man of democracies from lofty ambition is not the scantiness of their fortunes, but the vehemence of the exertions they daily make to improve them. They strain their faculties to the utmost to achieve paltry results, and this cannot fail speedily to limit their range of view, and to circumscribe their powers. They might be much poorer, and still be greater."

This narrowness of vision, he argues, precludes great feats of statesmanship and intellectual virtue. In De Tocqueville's view: "A man cannot gradually enlarge his mind as he does his house." And even if children are born into wealth, he says they will inherit their parents' focus on personal economic advancement, which will endure across generations.

In addition, De Tocqueville asserts that the greater equality within a democratic society can create more inflexible and arduous paths for those with lofty ambition. De Tocqueville puts it as such:

"Men living in democracies . . . find out at last that the laws of their country open a boundless field of action before them, but that no one can hope to hasten across it. Between them and the final object of their desires they perceive a multitude of small intermediate impediments, which must be slowly surmounted: this prospect wearies and discourages their ambition at once. They therefore give up hopes so doubtful and remote, to search nearer to themselves for less lofty and more easy enjoyments."

Even with a limitless array of potential achievements, as men become more equal, De Tocqueville says that "the rules for advancement become more inflexible, advancement itself slower, the difficulty of arriving quickly at a certain height far greater." Attaining a level of social or political stature apart from that of the common man carries the promise of hardship and constant struggle, such that most opt instead for more modest goals. Only those of a singular type would choose to undertake the journey necessary for greatness worthy of a statesman.

The difficulty of principled statesmanship is exemplified in how most Congressmen appear to prioritize staying in power and avoiding controversial viewpoints that go against party leadership. In an [interview](#) with *Politico*, Congressman Raul Labrador lamented this reality in America's legislative

branch:

“The membership wants leadership to exercise a strong hand because they want this game to continue. It protects them from making tough decisions ... It’s much easier to go along and get along with leadership, to do what the special interest groups want you to do, because they’re all going to give you money for your campaign and help you get reelected.”

It seems that for most elected politicians, attempting meaningful change that goes against the status quo is not worth the risk of losing re-election.

What can be done?

De Tocqueville argues that citizens should acquire “a more enlarged idea of themselves”. He says that a wholesale criticism of pride has had the unintended consequence of diminishing the ambition of those who would otherwise strive for greatness, civic or otherwise. A certain measured confidence in oneself is needed to restore the type of lofty ambition necessary for principled statesmanship and the kind of political bravery so desperately needed in modern society. While pride may be a vice, De Tocqueville contends that viewing your existence as insignificant and trivial could be even worse – not only for yourself, but also for the republic.

Do you agree with De Tocqueville’s diagnosis? His prescription? Who are America’s current statesmen, and what sets them apart?

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