

**Can The America Of The 1800s
Still Inspire Association Professionals In 2021?
By Rob Bergeron, CAE**

[This draft, as submitted to AENC, has 1,342 words]

Much has been said about how America just had to get through that seemingly never-ending 2020. And then, all of the sudden, we thought: can we now just get through January 2021?

Well, it's finally February. So, it's now one down and 11 to go for 2021. During these tumultuous times, the associations we know and love can lead by example for all Americans in several important ways. Here are some observations and ideas out of two books from long ago that could provide the motivation and momentum we all need in the here and now.

Inspiration from Alexis De Tocqueville's *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French aristocrat in his early 30s when he came to America in 1831 to study its penitentiary system, but he also came to see for himself this still young and maturing republic. His original intention was not to write a book but, ultimately, his nine months here were spent making it his ambition to study America's ambition.

To this day, *Democracy in America* is often considered to be the best book ever written on democracy and/or the best book ever written about America. This book is 772 pages long (but, don't worry—we'll only be reviewing quotes here and we'll keep our primary focus on its passages pertaining to associations!).

**"The most natural right of man, after that of acting on his own,
is that of combining his efforts with those of his fellows and acting together."**

Leaders and professionals in our industry today still cite the words of the inherently quotable de Tocqueville's words about and impressions of America's associations. He acknowledged that the country's strength relied heavily upon our support of them when he said "nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America." Indeed, he also offered that "if [people] are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spread." Seems like he may have been on to something here, huh?

De Tocqueville was astounded with what he observed. "As soon as several Americans have conceived a statement or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example." Yes, that's what we do.

In associations, he said, "all the members are advancing at the same time toward the same goal, but they are not obliged to follow exactly the same path. There has been no sacrifice of will or of reason, but rather will and reason are applied to bring success to a common enterprise." Yup, that's who we are.

So, if de Tocqueville was here with us in America in 2021, what would he tell us? I believe he would remind all that "if [Americans] did not learn some habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life, civilization itself would be in peril." Although de Tocqueville may not have loved everything he saw in America, his message would, no doubt, be an optimistic one. It would surely include one of his most insightful lines: "the greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults." That's some powerful stuff right there.

**"There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining
by the free action of the collective power of individuals."**

It could be said about de Tocqueville that he was among the most effective who has ever promoted the idea that people have more in common than in conflict, that we have more to unite us than to divide us.

Inspiration from General Henry M. Robert's *ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER*

General Henry M. Robert was a US Army officer who created the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies* in 1876 after he vowed to bring order to the chaos when a public church meeting he led went terribly awry. An authorship team selected by the Robert's Rules Association has been responsible for revising and updating the book.

Last year, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised - 12th Edition* (RROO) was released and is now the only current authorized edition of the classic work on parliamentary procedure. This book is 816 pages long (but, don't worry—we'll only be reviewing the general's commentary and principles here and not the often-arcane rules of precedence for its eight different types of motions!).

**"It is difficult to find another branch of knowledge [than parliamentary law]
where a small amount of study produces such great results in increased efficiency."**

First, a careful balance of rights is in place in RROO based upon a regard for the rights of the majority, of the minority, of individual members, of absentees, and of all these groups together. The balance among each of these entities creates the respectful but definite framework upon which successful discussion (and collaboration?) can thrive. The minority has the right to be heard. The majority has the right to prevail. Is this philosophy worth mention in 2021?

Then, discussions are framed by a few fundamentals to keep your communication on target. You conduct discussion by addressing no more than one subject at a time. You can stay focused through a definite way of saying "no." You conduct debate by alternating between opposite points of view. You can allow clarity for both sides of an issue while also providing a definite indication that it is time to shift from talking to voting. Once the vote has taken place, that issue is considered resolved and completed. Is this construct still appropriate (or viable?) these days?

Finally, your discourse is also defined by several guidelines to keep your conversation fair and appropriate. Just as de Tocqueville often included the need for civility in his tome, Robert insisted that decorum always be used in debate. Discussion is always to be confined to the merits of the pending question and not to the personalities involved. And finally: majority vote rules! Perceived consensus or a tie are insufficient; 50% plus one or unanimity are excessive. Are these approaches and definitions consistently respected and upheld today?

**"Where there is no law, but where every man does what is right in his own eyes,
there is the least of real liberty."**

It could be said about Robert that he was among the most effective who has ever promoted the idea that it is better to talk to someone than at someone, better to speak with someone than at anyone.

In closing, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) does a great job in present times of communicating about the critical role associations play in America. In fact, on January 7th, they released a message that said, in part: "Associations have a proven and unique ability to bring together individuals in support of a common purpose. Differences of opinion, background and experiences are welcomed."

ASAE has echoed de Tocqueville's notions by saying that associations "have their roots in America's founding, and over time, we have perfected the art of working together so that industries, professions, and individuals can succeed to their fullest." ASAE also recalled General Robert's instruction when saying that "today, association professionals are champions for all those who rely on civil discourse for the good of society. Through our ingrained ability to collaborate, we set an example for others who must to come together to achieve meaningful results."

I believe that the power of associations demonstrates how America works best when we work together. And I know that Americans need collaboration and problem-solving now more than ever. I am proud that associations have long been seen as leaders not just in the art of civil discourse, but in the ability to come together when things need to get done. And I also know that the best way to move forward is often to first take a look back.

Rob Bergeron, CAE—a new North Carolinian and a new AENC member—is the Principal Sherpa at Association Management Sherpa, LLC, serving as an experienced guide for non-profit leaders pursuing peak performance. He may be reached at RobBergeronCAE@gmail.com.