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## Book Review: The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present by David Runciman

Allison G.S. Knox

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**Runciman, David. *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013. 397 pages, \$14.95.**

*The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* is a fascinating discussion of democracy and society, particularly in the twentieth century. Runciman's argument is constructed from the notion that the very things that make democracies so successful are the same issues that make "democracies go wrong" (p. xv). Runciman takes the reader through an intellectual discussion of several periods of the twentieth century, highlighting the positive and negative attributes of a democracy when it comes to handling a multitude of political issues that include war, the environment, international political rivalries, and economy. Runciman principally approaches these dilemmas through the lens of the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, making the book an intriguing historical review of the twentieth century—one especially notable for its political turbulence.

Runciman's book is constructed in a particularly interesting manner. Utilizing Tocqueville's arguments as a lens, Runciman examines political crises that occurred during several important years including 1918, 1933, 1947, 1962, 1974, 1989, and 2008 (p. xix). Of course, these years are recognizable as particular moments of tumult in international politics. Through his review of democracies, and their response to these crises, Runciman highlights a number of important themes in the social sciences—threads that touch on organizational theory, society's influence on the political system, and the cyclical nature of politics, showing that democracies react in both positive and negative ways when they are faced with particularly difficult challenges like war or economic blunders.

Drawing on Tocqueville's work offers an interesting intellectual approach in Runciman's book. Runciman builds on Tocqueville's assertion that, "[he] was afraid that confidence in

democracy would prove to be a trap” (p. 11). Runciman also wrote that Tocqueville “discussed the dangers of the tyranny of the majority, which makes democracies impatient and vengeful” (p. 14). This discussion would be an interesting piece as Runciman examines the twentieth century and the various political crises that occurred.

Runciman also builds on the assertions of political scientists as he examines the various crises in the twentieth century. He explains that “what people think about the strengths and weaknesses of democracy helps shape how democracies perform in practice” (p. xxi). Society absolutely affects how a democracy works—just as Philip Selznick argued in *The TVA and the Grassroots*, noting that organizations are affected by numerous outside influences.<sup>1</sup> Runciman also states later in his book that “democracies have clear parallels with the way financial markets behave” (p. 309).

The author also touches on another important concept in political science—the notion of the bipolar world. He explains that international political rivals are important for democracies because “democracies needed plausible rivals in order to puncture their complacency” (p. 320). However, Runciman explains that democracies also needed these rivals to keep them honest, despite the notion that they tended to draw democracies into conflicts (p. 320).

Finally, Runciman makes several important observations about war and democracy. First, he makes two important points: “democracies [tend to] not go to war with one another,” and democracies tend to lose more wars than they win. (p. 305). He draws conclusions from analysis of prolonged conflicts such as the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting them as wars without clearly defined winners and losers (p. 305). He argues that “democratic politicians wary of needless conflicts” are “regularly reminded of the costs and risks” (p. 306). More interesting,

Runciman concludes that, “democratic peace is self-reinforcing but it is not self-fulfilling. As peace becomes the default option for democracies war does not disappear. Instead, it becomes harder to control. Democratic stability always creates the conditions for complacency and recklessness”(p. 308).

*The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* is a fascinating read for anyone interested in political science, democracy or twentieth century history. It is also perfect for a student studying the writings of Tocqueville. It is a scholarly piece that not only educates the reader, but also leaves one pondering aspects of the twentieth century in an intellectual light.

Allison G. S. Knox  
Instructor, Emergency Management & Fire Science  
American Military University  
Charles Town, WV  
Online Facilitator, Safety, Security & Emergency Management  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Richmond, KY  
Contributing Editor, *EDM Digest*  
American Public University System  
Charles Town, WV

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grassroots: A Study of Politics and Organization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).