

Alexis de Tocqueville

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In 2016, prior to his passing, Ralph Raico graciously sent his academic papers to the Mises Institute. This manuscript of Alexis de Tocqueville was among those papers and has never been published to our knowledge. It has been edited for typos only, and the inclusion of chapters for clarity.

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Contents

FOREWORD BY DAVID GORDON	5
INTRODUCTION BY RALPH RAICO	7
TOCQUEVILLE'S BACKGROUND	9
TRAVELS IN AMERICA	15
THE INTRODUCTION TO <i>DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA</i>	21
<i>DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA</i> , PART I	27
<i>DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA</i> , PART II	65
TOCQUEVILLE'S CONCLUSIONS AND INSIGHTS	79
PUBLICATION AND ITS AFTERMATH	87

Foreword

by David Gordon

MUCH OF RALPH RAICO'S SCHOLARLY WORK centers on French classical liberalism. We are thus especially fortunate to be able to publish an essay by him on one of the greatest French classical liberals of the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville. The essay appears to be an introduction to an edition, which never was published, of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Unfortunately, no further information about the essay has yet turned up.

Raico notes the fundamental theme in Tocqueville's book on democracy. Tocqueville thought that democracy and equality were inevitable, but he feared their onset. The cure was to mold democracy through enlightened leadership: "The Christian nations of our day seem to me to present a most alarming spectacle; the movement [toward democracy] which impels them is already so strong that it cannot be stopped, but it is not yet so rapid that it cannot be guided. ... A new science of politics is needed for a new world." (pp. 22–23)

If democracy were left unchecked, people would come to lead banal lives, guided by the soft despotism of the state: "I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observer is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike. ... Each exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his coun-

try. Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes it upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild.” (p. 82)

This dire trend could in part be countered if people were guided by enlightened self-interest, as they were in America: “In America, the individual understands that his own interest is bound up with that of his fellows and of society as a whole. He realizes that he will prosper if the laws are upheld and freedom respected — that he will suffer, in the most direct and personal way, from the breakdown of order or despotic government.” (p. 69)

Self-interest by itself, though, would not suffice to hold despotism at bay. It needed to be supplemented by religion. Tocqueville’s conclusion is all the remarkable because he himself had abandoned the Catholicism of his youth: “But self-interest, even when enlightened, and thus no threat to freedom, still has its drawbacks: Above all, Tocqueville’s old *bete noir*, the lowering of aspirations and a brutalization of the personality. The remedy for this is, again, religion. Should the state therefore establish a religion? By no means. The best support that politicians could give to religion, Tocqueville says, is to act as if they believed in it and act morally themselves.” (p. 71)

Raico shows in masterful fashion how Tocqueville’s insights stemmed from his historical context and his own distinctive personality. In his stress on social institutions and on the trend toward democracy, Tocqueville was influenced by François Guizot, who like him, was both a historian and political actor. His ambivalence toward the democratic trend manifested his own aristocratic personality, impatient of the mediocre: “Tocqueville scorned the small-minded preference for pleasure over greatness of character and achievement.” (p. 77) We can say exactly this about Ralph Raico himself.

Introduction

by Ralph Raico

IN THE YEAR 1835, MOST OF EUROPE was still in the grip of the conservative reaction that followed the French Revolution and fall of Napoleon. While liberal ideas were a force in public life in England and France, even there political power was in the hands of a small minority. Elsewhere, the spirit that prevailed was that of Prince Metternich, the minister of the Austrian Empire and sworn enemy of liberalism, nationalism, and democracy. When uprisings against this rigid order did occur, as in some of the Italian states or in Spain, they were quickly and easily crushed.

In that year, a work appeared in Paris, written by a 30-year-old French aristocrat. In the Introduction, the author states:

The gradual development of the principle of equality is a Providential fact. It has all the chief characteristics of such a fact: It is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress. The gradual and progressive development of social equality is at once the past and the future of mankind. To attempt to check democracy would be to resist the will of God.

The writer who thus challenged the official ideology of his time was Alexis de Tocqueville, and the work in which these words appear is his

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Democracy in America, at once a masterpiece of political philosophy and the best character analysis of the American people ever written.

In what follows we will discuss the life of Alexis de Tocqueville, including his background — which perhaps uniquely fitted him to be a fair and sensitive analyst of the democratic movement — and his famous voyage to the United States, in the company of his close friend, Gustave de Beaumont. Then we will outline the argument of the two parts of *Democracy in America*, the first published in 1835, the second five years later. How Tocqueville continued his search for the meaning and direction of modern society in his later works will also be suggested. Throughout, excerpts from his notebooks and voluminous correspondence will be cited to throw light on Tocqueville's passionate, lifelong quest to discover how liberty could be preserved in the modern world.

Background

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE WAS BORN IN Paris, in 1805. He was descended from Norman nobility, one of the oldest aristocratic families in France. One of his ancestors fought with William the Conqueror, at the Battle of Hastings in the year 1066, and the family's history for centuries was closely intertwined with the history not only of Normandy, where where their lands and their ancestral castle were located, but of France as well. His mother's grandfather, Chrétien-Guillaume de Malesherbes, for instance, had been a conspicuous figure during the time of the French Enlightenment, in the mid-eighteenth century — a minister of Louis XV, responsible for, among other things, the censorship of books, but at the same time a personal friend of many of the *philosophes*, and sympathetic to their ideas. Malesherbes even connived to help the *philosophes* get around the censorship and publish their famous *Encyclopedia*. Years later, old and ailing, Malesherbes came out of retirement to act as defense attorney for Louis XVI, now on trial for treason before the revolutionary Convention. The king was found guilty and executed, and, for having defended him, so was Malesherbes. Others in Tocqueville's family were also guillotined during the Reign of Terror. In fact, Alexis de Tocqueville's father and mother had both been brought to Paris and imprisoned. They were awaiting execution, as counter-revolutionary aristocrats, when Robespierre suddenly fell from power, and the Reign of Terror ended. When Alexis's father, Hervé de Tocqueville left prison, his hair had turned completely white. He was 22 years old.

Alexis's mother appears to have been emotionally scarred by these experiences; afterwards, a melancholy aura seems to cling to her, which probably affected her son's personality. Many years later, Tocqueville recalled an incident from his childhood:

I remember as though it were yesterday a certain evening in my father's chateau. A family festivity had brought us and our nearest relations together. The servants had retired. We were all sitting about the hearth. My mother, who had a sweet and touching voice, began to sing an air ... relating to Louis XVI and his death. When she ceased, we were all weeping, not for the personal sufferings they had undergone, not even for the loss of so many of our blood in the civil war and on the scaffold, but for the fate of a man who had died fifteen years earlier, and whom most of those who shed tears for him had never seen. But that man had been the King.

Hervé de Tocqueville, Alexis's father, was a cultivated man, who wrote a *Philosophical History of the Reign of Louis XV*, and, when the Bourbon kings were restored to the throne, after Napoleon's fall, served as a prefect in various cities. Yet he was never a reactionary — or “Ultra” — avid to wipe out all the liberal gains of the past decades. In the mental ambience of his early years, Alexis de Tocqueville thus found an ancient aristocratic heritage and a deep-rooted loyalty to the French monarchy, but also an openness to liberal ideas and the recognition that tradition must be tempered with progress.

As a child, Tocqueville, like his two older brothers, was educated by a kindly old priest, the Abbé Lesueur, whom he dearly loved. But while the Abbé inculcated the Christian virtues in his charges, it seems that Alexis de Tocqueville's Catholic faith could not survive acquaintance with the skeptical writings of the authors he began to read as a teenager. Around this time, Tocqueville wrote down in his notes:

There is no Absolute Truth. ... If I were asked to classify human miseries I should rank them in the following order: one, Disease; two, Death; three [slight pause], Doubt.

Tocqueville continued his studies, which were preparing him for a career in law. In 1827, he was appointed an official at the law-court in the town of Versailles, in the department where his father was prefect. But the profes-

sion of law did not appeal to Tocqueville. Louis de Kergolay was a childhood friend with whom Tocqueville would continue to be close all his life —Tocqueville seemed to have a knack for intimate, lifelong friendships. To Kergolay he wrote:

You ask me how I am finding my new position. This is not something I can answer in a single word. ... I have a need to excel that will torment me cruelly all my life. ... [but] I am beginning to fear that with time I will become a law machine like most of my fellows, specialized people if ever there were any, as incapable of judging a great movement and of guiding a great undertaking as they are well fitted to deducing a series of axioms and to finding analogies and antonyms. I would rather burn my books than reach that point!

A major event during Tocqueville's time at Versailles was his meeting with another young aristocrat, also attached to the law-court, Gustave de Beaumont. Tocqueville and Beaumont became fast friends, although unaware that their names would be linked together in history by a certain journey to America. Together they pursued an intensive course of reading. They studied economics in the works of Jean-Baptiste Say, who was then proselytizing for free market and free trade ideas in France. They paid particular attention to the modern historians, they hoped who could shed light on the tumultuous events of the past few decades. The historian who influenced Tocqueville most was François Guizot, who made a lasting impression on his mind in a number of respects.

Like other historians of his time, Guizot wanted to break away from the mere chronicle of kings and battles that he felt had filled too much of the accounts of past writers. History should be presented in the broadest possible way, as the history of *civilization*. The title of the course that Guizot gave at the Sorbonne from 1828 to 1830, which Tocqueville and Beaumont followed with close attention, was "The History of Civilization in Europe and France." That history could never be understood if we limit ourselves to political events, Guizot believed:

It is by the study of political institutions that the majority of writers, scholars, historians, and publicists have sought to know the state of society, the degree or the kind of its civilization. It would have been wiser to study first society itself in order to know and understand its political insti-

tutions. Before becoming causes, these institutions are effects. To understand political institutions, it is necessary to know the various social conditions and their relations.

Here is a note Tocqueville made for himself after listening to one of Guizot's lectures in July 1829:

The history of civilization aims and must aim at embracing everything at the same time. One must examine man in all the positions of his social existence. Such a history must follow his intellectual developments in the facts, in the mores, in the opinions, in the laws, and in the monuments of the intellect; it must descend into man himself and appreciate the foreign influences in the midst of which he finds himself situated. In a word, it is the whole man that must be painted, during a given period, and the history of civilization is nothing else than the resumé of all the ideas having a relation to him.

In his lectures, Guizot had also announced the grand theme around which he constructed his account of modern history — the struggle between the aristocracy and the rising middle class:

[In France there has occurred] a genuine war, such as the world knows between two peoples foreign to each other. For thirteen centuries, the conquered people struggled to shake off the yoke of the conquering people. Our history is the history of this struggle. In our times, the decisive battle was fought. It is called the Revolution.

This was a lesson Tocqueville would remember.

Meanwhile, the king of France, Charles X, was attempting to restore something like the Old Regime, with increased influence for the aristocracy and the Catholic Church, and supreme power for himself. "Better," Charles once said, "to saw wood for a living than to reign in the manner of the King of England."

He was sadly out of step with the times. Moderates and liberals of all shades, together with the common people of Paris, united to overthrow Charles. He was to be the last of the Bourbon kings of France, the "legitimate" line. His replacement was Louis Philippe, whose reign is known as the July Monarchy, since the revolution of 1830 occurred in that month.

Tocqueville was now in a quandary. His family had had close ties to the house of Bourbon and considered it a point of honor to serve the legitimate rulers of France. But Tocqueville saw that Charles — true to the saying about the Bourbons, that they never learned and they never forgot — was scheming to repeal the French Revolution, to Tocqueville's mind an absurdity. Reluctantly, Tocqueville and Beaumont swore the oath of loyalty to the new regime. Still, their careers in the legal profession appeared blighted. They decided to make a fresh start. In various ways, both young men had associations with the Great Republic of the West, the United States of America — Beaumont, for instance, was to marry a granddaughter of Lafayette, still an important political figure of the time. They applied to the government for a commission to study the penitentiary system in America. It was granted, and on April 2, 1831, the two friends sailed from the port of Le Havre. They already had plans for a work far outstripping any report on how criminals were punished in the United States. Beaumont wrote home:

We contemplate great projects. First, we will accomplish as best we can the mission given us. But, while doing the penitentiary system, we will see America. Wouldn't a book be a fine one if it gave an exact idea of the American people, showed their history in broad strokes, painted their character in bold outline, analyzed their social state, and corrected so many of the opinions we have that are erroneous on this point? We are laying the foundations of a great work which should make our reputation some day.

Travels in America

THE TRIP ACROSS THE ATLANTIC TOOK thirty-five days, They sighted land at Newfoundland, then proceeded down the coast. At Newport, they boarded a steamboat for New York, where they arrived on May 10th, Tocqueville found these new contraptions imposing, as he found New York itself. He wrote to a friend in France:

The next day we boarded a steamboat, which transported us here in eighteen hours. These are immense machines much larger than a house, in which 500, 600, and up to a thousand persons are gathered together in vast saloons, have beds and a good table at their disposal, and thus cover quite tranquility, without suspecting it, three or four leagues an hour.

New York is located in one of the most admirable sites I know, with an immense port, at the mouth of a river. It is the key to northern America. Through it each year arrive thousands of foreigners who will populate the wilderness of the west. Its population, which was only 20,000 souls fifty years ago, is today 230,000. It is a clean city, built of brick and marble, but without noteworthy public monuments.

Within a month of his arrival, Tocqueville was beginning to put his first impressions of the new nation in order and to sketch the outlines of a theory. He already identified one of the keys to the riddle of an America

that was vastly diversified, yet by and large harmonious and stable: the role of self-interest. As he wrote home:

Imagine, my friend, if you can, a society formed of all the nations of the world, English, German, French, people having different languages, beliefs, opinions, in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own. What serves as the link among such diverse elements? What makes all of this into one people? Interest — that is the secret. The private interest that breaks through at each moment, the interest that, moreover, appears openly and even proclaims itself a social theory!

Tocqueville and Beaumont were welcomed with enthusiasm both by the public authorities and private citizens, who showered them with attention and hospitality. While they naturally sought out people of knowledge and learning, who could teach them the most, the two Frenchmen mingled with Americans of different social classes, observing, absorbing impressions, above all asking countless questions and listening carefully to the answers. Much of what they experienced they admired, Tocqueville expressed this in a long letter to his boyhood friend, another aristocrat, Louis de Kergolay:

These people incontestably are situated higher on the moral scale than among us; each man has a sense of his independent position and his individual dignity that does not always make his bearing very agreeable, but which definitely leads him to respect himself and to respect others. I especially admire two things here: the first is the extreme respect people have for the law; alone, and without public force, it commands in an irresistible way. The second thing that I envy the people here is the ease with which they do without government.

Evidently, Americans did possess some common ideas and something that could be called a national character, after all. The absence of government astonished Tocqueville in the first months of his trip. It led him to draw comparisons with his native land. He wrote another friend:

What is most striking to everyone who travels in this country is the spectacle of a society marching along all alone,

without guide or support, by the sole fact of the cooperation of individual wills. In spite of anxiously searching for the government, one can find it nowhere, and the truth is that it does not, so to speak, exist at all. The government is so small a thing here that I cannot conceive how it so large in France. The Ministry of the Interior's 1200 [twelve hundred] employees seem to be inexplicable.

In this case, by "government" Tocqueville probably had in mind the *central government*, since in his work he would describe the state and, especially, the local authorities as quite active. But the questions of centralized power and proliferating bureaucracy, on which he was already gathering ideas and beginning to theorize, were to stand out as major themes of his book.

Tocqueville and Beaumont's journey took them throughout the United States — in fact, into territories yet unsettled by white men — and even into Canada. From New York City they headed upstate, stopping at Sing-Sing to inspect the prison which was already famous. This was one of the occasions when they remembered the ostensible purpose of their trip. They proceeded across New York State, to Buffalo, then a frontier town. By steamer they travelled to Detroit, a town, they estimated, of two or three thousand souls. They decided to press on to the limits of settlement. In August, the two friends rode on horseback through the forest, toward their destination:

The village of Saginaw is the last point inhabited by Europeans, toward the northwest of the vast peninsula of Michigan. It can be considered an advance post, a sort of refuge that the whites have come to place among the Indian nations. ... Thirty persons, men, women, old men, and children, at the time of our passage, composed the whole of this little society, scarce formed, germ confided to the wilderness that the wilderness is to make fruitful.

Eventually, they traveled, by steamboat, as far as Green Bay, to observe the life of the Indians. A steam-boat brought them back to Detroit and then Buffalo, where they began to make their way north. The falls at Niagara they found so spectacular that the two eloquent young men were practically speechless.

In Montreal and Quebec City, Tocqueville and Beaumont were amazed and fascinated to find a population that closely resembled their countrymen — like most Frenchmen, they had supposed that the French-

Canadians had become Anglicized. Tocqueville made as close a study of their customs and ideas as he could before departing for New England. Their destination was Boston, the city with the greatest claim at the time of being the center of culture and intellect in America. There they spent a month, seeking out the leading lights of the community. Then it was across Connecticut, back to New York, and on to Philadelphia, and to Baltimore. Here they visited the great patriarch of the city, Charles Carroll, 95 years old and the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. They also witnessed at first hand, for the first time, the institution of Negro slavery. Once, they were taken to an asylum, where they were shown a young black man, screaming in terror. They were told that he lived in constant fear of a certain slave trader, who had mistreated him badly. The two travellers were deeply moved. It seems that it was in Baltimore that Beaumont decided to write his book on America, the novel he was to publish under the title, *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*.

From Maryland, Tocqueville and Beaumont returned to Philadelphia, with the aim of pressing on to Ohio. As they travelled, Tocqueville continued to be stirred by the splendor of nature in America — the forests and mountains, rivers and waterfalls. This was an emotion he often felt, but one that sometimes made him somber as well, as he reflected that much of what he saw would someday succumb to the ceaseless activity of man in the new nation:

It is this idea of destruction, this conception of near and inevitable change, which gives so original a character and so touching a beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with melancholy pleasure. One hastens in a way to admire them. The idea of this natural and wild grandeur which is to end mingles with the superb images to which the march of civilization gives rise. One feels proud to be a man, and at the same time one experiences I know not what bitter regret at the power God has given us over nature.

The two friends made their way down the Ohio, to the bustling river port town of Cincinnati, where they stopped for a few days. In the midst of a freezing December, they proceeded down the Mississippi, to Memphis. Here Tocqueville learned something of the strange political ways of democracy on the American frontier. He noted in his diary:

Two years ago the inhabitants of the district of which Memphis sent to Congress an individual named David Crockett, who has had no education, can read with difficulty, has no property, no fixed residence, but passes his life hunting, selling his game to live, and dwelling continuously in the woods.

On board ship, Tocqueville and Beaumont met and conversed at length with a former governor of Tennessee, Sam Houston. By New Year's Day, they were in New Orleans, where they had intended to spend two weeks. But because of mishaps along the way, their time was growing short — they were there just about a day. It took them another three weeks to traverse the southeast, on their way to Washington, where Tocqueville wished to study at close quarters the federal government, so little in evidence so far. There they spent a busy week, meeting prominent statesmen, including the President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, who did not impress them. By now they were being urged by their superiors to return home. After another few days in New York, they finally set sail for France on February 20th, 1832. Their ship was the same one that had brought them to America, the *Havre*.

Back in France, Tocqueville and Beaumont still faced the task of writing the report on American prisons that was supposedly the reason for their journey. Tocqueville had little heart for it, and, although both their names appeared as authors, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France* was largely Beaumont's work.

Meanwhile, the original idea of collaborating on a great book on American society was abandoned; Tocqueville undertook it himself. He began arranging his extensive notes and diaries and continued his reading and researches into everything pertaining to the United States. In 1833, he took some time off to visit England, where he made the acquaintance of a number of distinguished and influential persons. Among these was the great classical economist, Nassau Senior. Many years later, Senior's daughter, Mrs. Simpson, described what had happened:

One day in the year 1833 a knock was heard at the door of the Chambers in which Mr. Senior was sitting at work, and a young man entered who announced himself in these terms: "*Je suis Alexis de Tocqueville, et je viens faire votre connaissance.*" ["I am Alexis de Tocqueville and I come to make your acquaintance."] He had no other introduction.

Alexis de Tocqueville was at that time unknown to fame. His great work on America had not yet appeared.

It was the beginning of another friendship that lasted until Tocqueville's death. Mrs. Simpson, who afterwards collected and translated the conversations and letters between her father and Tocqueville, described the great Frenchman:

In person he was small and delicate. He had very thick and rather long black hair, soft yet brilliant black dark eyes, and a finely marked brow. The upper lip was long and the mouth wide, but sensitive and expressive. His manner was full of kindness and playfulness, and his fellow-countrymen used to say of him that he was a perfect specimen of the "*gentilhomme de l'ancien regime*" ["the gentleman of the old regime"]. Although he had a keen sense of humor, his countenance was sad in repose. Indeed, the "fond" [basis] of his character was sad, partly from sensitiveness, partly from ill-health. The period in which his lot was cast was not calculated to raise his spirits; he foresaw, only too clearly, the troubled future in store for France.

On his return from America, Tocqueville had resumed his many contacts in the French — and especially Parisian — world of politics and letters. He was closest to the group known as the Doctrinaires, led by Guizot and Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, who became a close colleague and mentor. Moderate by temperament, the Doctrinaires sought to avoid the extremes both of revolutionary upheaval and a reactionary blotting out of everything that had happened over the last 40 years. They were men of action as well as thought: through their political activity and journalism, as well as through their books and lectures, they tried to promote their solution for the political problems of France, to consolidate what they considered the gains of the Revolution within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, but with a very restricted suffrage.

The Introduction to *Democracy in America*

IN THE “AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION” TO THE volumes that appeared in 1835, Tocqueville sketches the aim, approach and major themes that will dominate the whole work. Equality of condition was the fact that most impressed him in the United States, he says,

I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.

One might say that, just as some observers go to California, and feel they are witnessing what America will be like in the near future, so Tocqueville felt in regard to America and his native Europe.

I then turned my thoughts to our own hemisphere, and I thought that I discerned there something analogous to the spectacle which the New World presented to me. I observed that equality of condition, though it has not there reached the extreme limit which it seems to have attained in the United States, is constantly approaching

it; and that the democracy which governs the American communities appears to be rapidly rising in power in Europe.

As he was later to tell John Stuart Mill, “America was only the frame — my picture was democracy.”

According to Tocqueville, the eager student of Guizot, the democratic revolution has been underway for centuries. He takes the reader back 700 years, to the 11th century. Then, all power, over the land as well as its inhabitants, lay with a small number of noble families. It was the height of inequality. Since that time, every development has diminished the great and raised up the lowly. Peace and commerce, as well as war and conquest fostered greater equality. The kings of France themselves, Tocqueville points out, “have always been the most active and the most constant of levelers.” Everything seemed to be converging on the same goal — equality of status, or, as Tocqueville puts it here, “democracy.”

The various occurrences of national existence have everywhere turned to the advantage of democracy: all men have aided it by their exertions; both those who have intentionally labored in its cause and those who have served it unwittingly; ... some unknowingly and some despite themselves, all have been blind instruments in the hands of God. The gradual development of the principle of equality is, therefore, a providential fact. It has all the chief characteristics of such a fact: It is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress. ... The whole book that is here offered to the public has been written under the influence of a kind of religious awe produced in the author’s mind by the view of that irresistible revolution ...

Tocqueville makes clear that his aim in writing *Democracy in America* is not a purely abstract or scholarly one. For him, as always, analysis and understanding are the prelude to political action.

The Christian nations of our day seem to me to present a most alarming spectacle; the movement which impels them is already so strong that it cannot be stopped, but it is not yet so rapid that it cannot be *guided*. Their fate is still in their own hands; but very soon they may lose con-

trol. The first of the duties that are at this time imposed upon those who direct our affairs is to educate democracy, to reawaken, if possible, its religious beliefs; to purify its morals; to mold its actions; to substitute a knowledge of statecraft for its inexperience, and an awareness of its true interest for its blind instincts, to adapt its government to time and place, and to modify it according to men and to conditions. A new science of politics is needed for a new world.

This new science of politics is all the more urgently required in view of a menace Tocqueville already sees as besetting democracy. Here he announces one of the great themes of his work: the vast increase of state-power in modern society:

[In the Old Regime] the power of a few of his subjects was an insurmountable barrier to the tyranny of the prince; and the monarch, who felt the almost divine character which he enjoyed in the eyes of the multitude, derived a motive for the just use of his power from the respect which he inspired. ...Custom and usage, moreover, had established certain limits to oppression and founded a sort of law in the very midst of violence. ... But [today] it is the government alone that has inherited all the privileges of which families, guilds, and individuals have been deprived. To the power of a small number of persons, which, if it was sometimes oppressive was often conservative, has succeeded the weakness of the whole community.

What is to be done? Another of the great themes enters. Religion, Tocqueville asserts, is by its nature one of the chief allies of freedom, but because of historical accident it has been unable to play its assigned role. Religion has been opposed to liberty:

Christianity, which has declared that all men are equal in the sight of God, will not refuse to acknowledge that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law. But by a strange coincidence of events, religion has been for a time entangled with those institutions which democracy destroys; and it is not infrequently brought to reject the equality which it loves, and to curse as a foe that cause of liberty whose efforts it might hallow by its alliance.

By the “strange” events that pitted religion against liberty, Tocqueville has in mind the interconnections between the church and the aristocracy, the united front of Throne and Altar, and the hostility toward religious faith on the part of many of the liberal writers of the Enlightenment. If history had made many religious persons suspicious of liberalism, it had had a reciprocal effect on many liberals:

By the side of these religious men I discern others whose thoughts are turned to earth rather than to heaven. These are the partisans of liberty, not only as the source of the noblest virtues, but more especially as the root of all solid advantages; and they sincerely desire to secure its authority, and to impart its blessings to mankind. It is natural that they should hasten to invoke the assistance of religion, for they must know that liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith. But they have seen religion in the ranks of their adversaries and they inquire no further. Some of them attack it openly, and the rest are afraid to defend it.

Tocqueville suggests that the confusion about religion and freedom is linked to a deeper *malaise* in contemporary society — a shattering of the foundations of all lawful order or concept of good and evil.

... Has man always inhabited a world like the present, where all things are not in their proper relationships ... where the love of order is confused with a taste for oppression, and the holy cult of freedom with a contempt of law; where the light thrown by conscience on human actions is dim, and where nothing seems to be any longer forbidden or allowed, honorable or shameful, false or true?

Quickly, however, Tocqueville’s practical sense comes to the rescue, and he puts aside these dark thoughts.

I cannot believe that the Creator made man to leave him in any endless struggle with the intellectual wretchedness that surrounds us. God destines a calmer and a more certain future to the communities of Europe.

He feels that what the future may hold for Europe is, to some degree, pre-figured in America. From the 17th century on, this land had been peopled by emigrants who did not have to contend with any hindrance to the

democratic principle, which has been able, therefore, to flourish in perfect freedom and imprint itself on all aspects of social life. The Europeans have much to learn from the American experience.

It appears to me beyond a doubt that, sooner or later, we shall arrive, like the Americans, at an almost complete equality of condition, But ... I am far from supposing that they have chosen the only form of government which a democracy may adopt. But as the generating cause of laws and manners in the two countries is the same, it is of immense interest for us to know what it has produced in each of them.

Tocqueville claims to be writing free of prejudice either for or against democracy.

I have not even pretended to judge whether the social revolution, which I believe to be irresistible, is advantageous or prejudicial to mankind. I have acknowledged this revolution as a fact already accomplished, or on the eve of its accomplishment; and I have selected the nation, from among those which have undergone it, in which its development has been the most peaceful and the most complete, in order to discern its natural consequences and to find out, if possible, the means of rendering it profitable to mankind.

Tocqueville frequently insisted on his impartiality as between the two systems. In 1837, he wrote to Henry Reeve, his English translator:

People ascribe to me alternately aristocratic and democratic prejudice. If I had been born in another period, or in another country, I might have had either one or the other. But my birth, as it happened, made it easy for me to guard against both. I came into the world at the end of a long revolution, which, after destroying ancient institutions, created none that could last. When I entered life, aristocracy was dead and democracy was yet unborn. My instinct therefore could not lead me blindly to the one or the other.

That, Tocqueville actually did succeed in the virtually impossible task of shedding the values of his family and upbringing, however, is doubtful, as we shall see.

Tocqueville believed that the political institutions of a people are produced by three great causes: their physical circumstances, their laws, and “habits and *moeurs*” — a word that can be translated “mores,” and suggests customs, values, a way of life. Of these three main factors, the last, he thought, was most important. This division into three factors determines the structure of all of Part I of *Democracy in America*.

Democracy in America

Part I

TOCQUEVILLE BEGINS HIS STORY BY DISCUSSING the “Exterior Form of North America,” and in particular, the part that would become the United States. By European standard, it was a vast territory, dominated by the great central valley of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. In the east there were dense forests, to the west seemingly endless prairies. When European man came to the lands of the Caribbean and South America, he found Nature to be generous, a constant delight. Middle America, what would become the United States, was a land made for work. It was sparsely inhabited by a poor and ignorant, yet noble race, given the name “Indians,” who “notions of the great intellectual truths,” Tocqueville states, “were general and simply and philosophical. This race the colonists would inevitably subdue. America was to present a startling opportunity to humanity.

In that land the great experiment of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis was to be made by civilized man. And it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past.

The next chapter — on the “Origin of the Anglo-Americans” — is one of the most important in the whole work. This is because of Tocqueville’s view that, just as the childhood of an individual determines the main features of his character and personality, so the first stages in the life of a people shape and mold the national character and way of life of that people. Tocqueville goes so far as to state that “the readers of this book will find in

the present chapter the germ of all that is to follow and the key to almost the whole work.”

The Englishmen who first colonized the North American shores, Tocqueville maintains, came from a country that had long been agitated by struggles between liberty and power — he has in mind the 17th century battles against the Stuart kings and their absolutist claims, which finally ended with a victory in Parliament. They were therefore “more conversant with the principles of true freedom than the greater part of their European contemporaries.” Democracy was an element in the American makeup from the very start. First, because, by and large, those who came were not from the upper classes but from the segments of society that were looking to better their lot. Second, because an American aristocracy could not get a footing in the new country.

It was soon found that the soil of America was opposed to a territorial aristocracy. It was realized that in order to clear this land, nothing less than the constant and self-interested efforts of the owner himself was essential. The ground prepared, it became evident that its produce was not sufficient to enrich at the same time both an owner and a farmer. ... Land is the basis of an aristocracy, which clings to the soil that supports it. ... A nation may present immense fortunes and extreme wretchedness, but unless those fortunes are territorial, there is no true aristocracy, but simply the class of the rich and that of the poor.

Here it is beginning to become clear that when Tocqueville speaks of “America” he is essentially omitting a very large part of it — namely, the South. The reason for that is the South’s “peculiar institution,” slavery.

This was the fact which was to exert an immense influence on the character, the laws, and the whole future of the South. Slavery, as I shall afterwards show, dishonors labor; it introduces idleness into society, and with idleness, ignorance and pride, luxury and distress. It enervates the powers of the mind and benumbs the activity of man. The influence of slavery, united to the English character, explains the manners and the social condition of the Southern states.

Thus, by “America” Tocqueville basically has in mind the northern, free states, and above all, New England, which he considers the cradle of the American nation:

[In] the New England states, the two or three main ideas that now constitute the basis of the social theory of the United States were first combined. The principles of New England spread at first to the neighboring states; they then passed successively to the more distant ones; and at last they interpenetrated the whole confederation. ... The civilization of New England has been like a beacon lit upon a hill, which, after it has diffused its warmth immediately around it, also tinges the distant horizon with its glow.

The first settlers of New England, Tocqueville points out, were associated with the Puritan strand of English society. Socially, they were more or less equal. Politically, they established institutions by which the adult male citizens exercised, the rights of sovereignty, naming their own magistrates and often directly conducting the business of government. They drew many of their principles of law and often even its content from the religious faith that animated them. Tocqueville notes a salient element in the law-making of these early Puritans:

The chief care of the legislators in this body of penal laws was the maintenance of orderly conduct and good morals in the community. Thus, they constantly invaded the domain of conscience, and there was scarcely a sin which was not subject to magisterial censure. ... In [some] places, the legislator, entirely forgetting the great principles of religious toleration that he had himself demanded in Europe, made attendance on divine service compulsory, and went so far as to visit with severe punishments and even with death Christians who chose to worship God according to a ritual differing from his own. ... It must not be forgotten that these fantastic and oppressive laws were not imposed by authority, but that they were freely voted by all the persons interested in them ...

What Tocqueville does not notice, however, is an opposing strand in early New England society, even in the 17th century — the libertarian component represented by Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, who insisted on freedom of individual choice in matters of religion and per-

sonal morals. In fact, neither Hutchinson's or Williams's name appears in Tocqueville's work. Instead, Tocqueville refers to the formation of the first public schools, whose aim was to instill the prevailing religious and moral doctrines. And he cites an address by John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in which Winthrop gives what Tocqueville qualifies as a "fine definition of liberty."

Concerning liberty, I observe a great mistake in the country about that. There is a twofold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. ... By [natural liberty] man hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good. ... This is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue. The other kind of liberty I call civil or federal. ... It is a liberty to that only which is good, just, and honest. ... This liberty is maintained and exercized in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.

Although Tocqueville had previously referred to the "fantastic and oppressive" laws of the Puritians, here he expresses his admiration for and agreement with Winthrop's defense of those laws. Moreover, he paints early New England — the seedbed of the American character — monochromatically, as the exclusive preserve of those eager to impose their own faith and value-system on others. The beginning of the very speech by Winthrop that Tocqueville cites, however, should have alerted him to the existence of another type of early American — those who, according to Winthrop, commit the "great mistake" of believing in liberty for the individual and an open society.

At any rate, Tocqueville is ready to summarize the foundations of Anglo-American civilization:

It is the result ... of two distinct elements, which in other places have been in frequent disagreement, but which the Americans have succeeded in incorporating to some extent one with the other and combining admirably. I allude to the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty.

He soon adds another element, associated with liberty:

One sees [the Americans] seeking with almost equal eagerness material wealth and moral satisfaction; heaven

in the world beyond and well-being and liberty in this one.

Next Tocqueville goes on to examine the social condition — the habits and mores — of the Anglo-Americans. He begins by indicating his theory of social causation:

Social condition is commonly the result of circumstances, sometimes of laws, oftener still of these causes united. But when once established, it may justly be considered as itself the source of almost all the laws, the usages, and the ideas which regulate the conduct of nations. Whatever it does not produce, it modifies.

The social condition of the Americans, he observes is “eminently democratic.” Even in the South, where a landed elite existed, it was not a true aristocracy, since it possessed no special legal privileges. The American Revolution, as a great popular uprising for independence, strengthened the democratic element. Tocqueville attributes a very powerful — indeed, exaggerated — influence to the laws of inheritance. Primogeniture and entail, to the degree they even existed before, were effectively abolished after the Revolution. The result is a constant circulation of property.

I do not mean that there is any lack of wealthy individuals in the United States; I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property. But wealth circulates with inconceivable rapidity, and experience shows that it is rare to find two succeeding generations in the full enjoyment of it. ... America, then, exhibits in her social state an extraordinary phenomenon. Men are there seen on a greater equality in point of fortune and intellect, or in other words, more equal in their strength, than in any other country of the world, or in any age of which history has preserved the remembrance.

In the equality of social condition that is characteristic of the Americans, Tocqueville perceives a grave potential danger — the possibility of despotism. First of all, despotism may be abetted by a perversion of the love of equality.

There is a manly and lawful passion for equality that incites men to wish all to be powerful and honored ... but there exists also in the human heart a depraved taste for equality, which impels the weak to attempt to lower the powerful to their own level and reduces men to preferring equality in slavery to inequality with freedom.

Secondly, in a state in which men are more or less equal it may be difficult to gather sufficient forces to resist the inroads of a would-be despot. Tocqueville was a life-long student of the great 18th century political thinker, the Baron de Montesquieu. One of Montesquieu's chief concerns was how to avoid despotism, by limiting political power. As he expresses it in *The Spirit of the Laws*, his deep study of history had taught him that

It is an eternal experience that every man who possesses power is led to abuse it. He proceeds until he finds limits. So that no one will abuse the power he has, it is necessary that, by the disposition of things, power checks power.

Tocqueville questions whether a democratic society lends itself to this kind of resistance.

In a state where the citizens are all practically equal, it becomes difficult for them to preserve their independence against the aggressions of power. No one among them being strong enough to engage in the struggle alone with advantage, nothing but general combination can protect their liberty. Now, such a union is not always possible.

This is an issue that would occupy Tocqueville until his very last works. Here he just suggests that the Americans have been able to avoid the temptations of equality in servitude and the difficulties of limiting power through their circumstances, their intelligence, "and especially their morals."

The United States was a land committed to the sovereignty of the people. Tocqueville notes that there had existed hindrances to the people's sovereignty in the early years of the American colonies, in the form of a restricted suffrage and the leading role played by the intellectual elite in New England and the landed proprietors to the south. But the Revolutionary cataclysm — together with changes in the laws of inheritance — put an end to these. The democratic principle won out. Power passed from the various elites to the people at large. Universal manhood suffrage became

the rule. With an eye to the French — and English — governments of his day, which attempted to restrict the right to vote to the upper classes, Tocqueville states:

When a nation begins to modify the elective qualifications, it may easily be foreseen that, sooner or later, that qualification will be entirely abolished. There is no more invariable rule in the history of society. The further electoral rights are extended, the greater is the need of extending them. ... Concession follows concession, and no stop can be made short of universal suffrage.

Tocqueville is again pointing out that the advanced nations of western Europe will, sooner or later, follow in the footsteps of the United States.

Tocqueville summarizes the political condition of the Americans:

The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them.

Tocqueville quite deliberately begins his discussion of popular government in the United States at the basic level — the township, or village. In Boston he had learned that they are, the foundation of American democracy:

Municipal institutions constitute the strength of free nations. Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science. They bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty.

The township system, especially as it developed in New England and spread to other parts of the nation, was where the people learned self-government by practicing it. They either directly administered the various affairs of the community — such as education, roads and other public works, care for the sick and indigent, police, fire departments, and so on — or they elected and oversaw those who did. Democracy at the local level was indispensable condition for democracy at the state and national levels.

Tocqueville links local self-government with the question of limiting the power of the central state. Here he makes an important distinction which supports the view that he was “a liberal of a new kind.”

There are two methods of diminishing the force of authority in a nation. The first is to weaken the supreme power in its very principle, by forbidding or preventing society from acting in its own defense under certain circumstances. To weaken authority in this manner is the European way of establishing freedom. The second manner of diminishing the influence of authority does not consist of stripping society of some of its rights, nor in paralyzing its efforts, but in distributing the exercise of its powers among various hands and in multiplying functionaries, to each of whom is given the degree of power necessary to perform his duty. ... It was never assumed in the United States that the citizen in a free country has a right to do whatever he pleases. On the contrary, more social obligations were there imposed upon him than anywhere else. No idea was ever entertained of attacking the principle or contesting the rights of society; but the exercise of its authority was divided, in order that the office might be powerful and the officer insignificant, and that the community should be at once regulated and free. In no country in the world does the law hold so absolute a language as in America; and in no country is the right of applying it vested in so many hands.

Tocqueville appears to be saying that, while friends of freedom in Europe sought to limit the *extent* of state power — although he uses the term “society,” rather than “state” — in America their concern was simply to distribute state power as widely as possible. If this is his meaning, he is surely mistaken. The Jeffersonian tradition, at least, always insisted in the strongest possible terms that the powers of “society,” in the sense of government, must be few and severely limited. The Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, as well as the various bills of rights in the constitutions of the several states, represented so many fetters on political power *vis-à-vis* the individual citizen. In this passage — as, from time to time, elsewhere in *Democracy in America* and in his other works — Tocqueville seems to give in to the temptation to force the facts to fit his more abstract notions in political philosophy.

Now Tocqueville comes to a concept that is closely intertwined with self-government and democracy and its dangers, and which will, likewise,

occupy him for the rest of his life: centralization. He begins by making another distinction.

There exist two distinct kinds of centralization, which it is necessary to discriminate with accuracy. Certain interests are common to all parts of a nation, such as the enactment of its general laws and the maintenance of its foreign relations. Other interests are peculiar to certain parts of the nation, such, for instance, as the business of the several townships. When the power that directs the former, or general, interests is concentrated in one place or in the same persons, it constitutes a *centralized government*. To concentrate in like manner in one place the direction of the latter, or local, interests, constitutes what may be termed a *centralized administration*.

Centralized government is a benefit to society, as the example of England shows. Indeed, it was the lack of such centralization in the general affairs of society that had produced the chaos of feudalism. Centralized *administration*, however — the direction of all the affairs of society, even those of local concern, by a monolithic state bureaucracy — is one of the great evils of modern times. Tocqueville is well-aware of the arguments that can be made in favor of centralized administration, which make it all the more insidious a danger.

Although such an administration can bring together at a given moment, on a given point, all the disposable resources of a people, it injures the renewal of those resources. It may ensure a victory in the hour of strife, but it gradually relaxes the sinews of strength. It may help admirably the transient greatness of a man, but not the durable prosperity of a nation.

This is another motif to which Tocqueville will continually return, perhaps his deepest concern of all — the varying effects on human character of different social and political arrangements. So destructive is centralization to the kind of independent and resourceful human type Tocqueville hoped to foster, that he adds argument to argument. Interestingly, on point he makes is reminiscent of the case economists have made against government economic planning:

However enlightened and skillful a central power may be, it cannot of itself embrace all the details of the life of a

great nation. Such vigilance exceeds the powers of man. All when it attempts unaided to create and set in motion so many complicated springs, it must submit to a very imperfect result or exhaust itself in bootless efforts.

Centralization by its very nature generates uniformity, which frustrates innovation and progress. Tocqueville concedes that in rejecting centralized power, the Americans must put up with disadvantages often absent in societies that are more carefully monitored and overseen by the authorities.

It is undeniable that the want of those uniform regulations which control the conduct of every inhabitant of France is not infrequently felt in the United States. Gross instances of social indifference and neglect are to be met with, and from time to time disgraceful blemishes are seen, in complete contrast with the surrounding civilization.

But the system, if it has its drawbacks, also offers advantages missing in centralized societies.

In no other country in the world do the citizens make such exertions for the common weal. I know of no people who have established schools so numerous and efficacious, places of public worship better suited to the wants of the inhabitants, or roads kept in better repair. Uniformity or permanence of design, the minute arrangement of details, and the perfection of administrative system must not be sought for in the United States. What we find there is the presence of a power which, if it is somewhat wild, is at least robust, and an existence checkered with accidents, indeed, but full of animation and effort.

Tocqueville contrasts with the American situation the condition prevailing in places where total centralization has become the rule — he is thinking of the Ottoman Empire, and probably of Russia, southern Italy, and other areas as well.

There are countries in Europe where the native considers himself as a kind of settler, indifferent to the fate of the spot which he inhabits. The greatest changes are effected there without his concurrence and, unless chance may have apprised him of the event, without his knowledge.

Nay, more. The condition of his village, the policing of his street, the repairs of his church or the parsonage, do not concern him, for he looks upon all these things as unconnected with himself and as the property of a powerful stranger whom he calls the government. ... When a nation has arrived at this state, it must either change its customs and its laws, or perish, for the source of public virtues is dried up. And though it may contain subjects, it has no citizens.

Ever anxious lest despair paralyze action and the quest for improvement, Tocqueville ends this highly important chapter on a note of hope.

It depends upon the laws to awaken and direct the vague impulse of patriotism, which never abandons the human heart. ... Let it not be said that it is too late to make the experiment, for nations do not grow old as men do, and every fresh generation is a new people ready for the care of the legislator.

“The Legislator;” Tocqueville was a life-long student of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as well, and this echo from the *Social Contract* — on the redemptive role of the Law-Giver — is not the only residue from these studies that we will have occasion to note.

Tocqueville goes on to discuss how dispersion of power among the states and an independent judiciary are further guarantees of freedom. He particularly praises the American system for carrying over from England the principle of the accountability of government functionaries before the common courts:

It is hardly necessary to say that in a free country like America all the citizens have the right of indicting public functionaries before the ordinary tribunals, and that all the judges have the power of convicting public officers. The right granted to the courts of justice of punishing the agents of the executive government when they violate the laws is so natural a one that it cannot be looked upon as an extraordinary privilege.

The case is quite different in France, however, where from the time of Napoleon on a citizen could only bring a public functionary to justice with the consent of the council of state — another branch of the same execu-

tive power that the citizen was indicting. Tocqueville states that he has a hard time making his American and English friends even understand the meaning of this provision, which insulates the state bureaucracy from any accountability for its routine violations of the law and infringements of individual rights.

Tocqueville now tackles the Constitution of the United States. Many European liberals, before and after Tocqueville, have been impressed, even amazed by this document. William Gladstone, the liberal Prime Minister of Great Britain in the later 19th century, referred to the Constitution as the most brilliant work ever set down at one time by the pen of man. Tocqueville is similarly affected:

The assembly which accepted the task of composing the Constitution was small. But George Washington was its President, and it contained the finest minds and the noblest characters that had ever appeared in the New World.

Tocqueville sketches, for the benefit of his European readers, the various organs of the Federal government, the modes of election for the President and the houses of Congress, their respective powers, the jurisdiction of the Federal courts, and the decisive role of the Supreme Court. But the balance of the Constitution, he thinks, lies with the states rather than the Federal government.

The attributes of the Federal government were carefully defined, and all that was not included among them was declared to remain to the governments of the several states. Thus the government of the states has remained the rule, and that of the confederation the exception.

It is the states that have the people's deepest loyalties. This was a major reason, in fact, why toward the end of Part I, Tocqueville doubts the capacity of the Union to survive. Why did he neglect the possibility — in later decades, a reality — that power would shift from the states to the central government? Here Tocqueville may have been misled by the tactics of one of the fathers of the Constitution — Alexander Hamilton. In preparing to write Part I, Tocqueville studied assiduously the copy of *The Federalist* he had picked up on his trip. In Number 17 of *The Federalist*, Hamilton, ever anxious to downplay potential dangers in the new Constitution from massing powers in the national government, stressed the “alleged” tendency of power to drift toward the states:

Upon the same principle that a man is more attached to his family than to his neighborhood, to his neighborhood than to the community at large, the people of each state would be apt to feel a stronger bias towards their local governments than towards to the government of the Union. ... This strong propensity of the human heart would find powerful auxiliaries in the objects of State regulation. ... It will always be far more easy for the State governments to encroach upon the national authorities than for the national authorities to encroach upon the State authorities.

Tocqueville commits a similar mistake in minimizing the role of the President *within* the Federal system:

The President is also the executor of the laws, but he does not really cooperate in making them, since the refusal of his assent does not prevent their passage. He is not, therefore, a part of the sovereign power, but only its agent. He exercises a certain influence on state affairs, but he does not conduct them. The preponderating power is vested in the representatives of the whole nation.

Tocqueville's somewhat disdainful views on the American Presidency were strongly affected by the meeting he and Beaumont had in Washington with the man who then filled that office, Andrew Jackson. The French travellers had not been overwhelmed. Beaumont had written home:

He is an old man of 66 years, well-preserved, and appears to have retained all the vigor of his body and spirit. He is not a man of genius. His great merit is to have won the battle of New Orleans against the English. That victory made him popular and brought it about that he was elected president, so true is it that in every country military glory has a prestige that the masses can't resist, even when the masses are composed of merchants and businessmen. The President of the United States occupies a palace that in Paris would be called a fine private residence. He has no guards watching at the door; and if he has courtiers they are not very attentive to him, for when he entered the salon he was alone. We chatted of things that were insignificant enough. He made us drink a glass

of Madeira wine, and we thanked him, using the word *Monsieur*, like the first guest.

But Tocqueville was perspicacious enough to see the potential for power in the office of the presidency and the changed circumstances that would realize that potential:

It is chiefly in its foreign relations that the executive power of a nation finds occasion to exert its skill and its strength. If the existence of the United States were perpetually threatened, if its chief interests were in daily connection with those of other powerful nations, the executive government would assume an increased importance in proportion to the measures expected of it and to those which it would execute. The President of the United States, it is true, is the commander-in-chief of the army, but the army is composed of only 6,000 men. He commands the fleet, but the fleet reckons but few sail. He conducts the foreign relations of the Union, but the United States is a nation without neighbors. Separated from the rest of the world by the ocean, and too weak as yet to aim at the dominion of the seas, it has no enemies, and its interests rarely come into contact with those of any nation of the globe. ... The President of the United States possesses almost royal prerogatives, which he has no opportunity of exercising. ... The laws allow him to be strong, but circumstances keep him weak.

As things stood then, in an America without military and political entanglements all across the globe, and the wars they inevitably entailed, the balance of the Constitution lay with the states, rather than the Federal government, and, within the central government, with the branch closest to the people — the Congress. But, remarkably enough, Tocqueville was able to judge that this was conditional and foresee the circumstances that would change it in the future.

Tocqueville touches on the advantages that the Americans derive from their federal system. While being members of a large nation, which, he thinks, is conducive to “the more rapid and energetic circulation of ideas” and the progress of the arts and sciences, most of the laws under which they live can be tailored to the conditions and circumstances that

surround them — they are not designed from the center, to be applied uniformly throughout the nation.

Now Tocqueville feels the need to go beyond the skeleton of the political constitution to more fundamental factors.

Thus far I have examined the institutions of the United States, I have passed their legislation in review and have described the present forms of political society. ... But above these institutions and beyond all these characteristic forms, there is a sovereign power, that of the people, which may destroy or modify them at its pleasure. It remains to be shown in what manner this power, superior to the laws, acts; what are its instincts and passions, what the secret springs that retard, accelerate, or direct its irresistible course, what the effects of its unbounded authority, and what the destiny that is reserved for it.

These are the questions that Tocqueville will pursue throughout the rest of *Democracy in America*.

After discussing political parties, which he considers a necessary evil in free governments, Tocqueville turns to freedom of the press. With a touch of aristocratic scorn for the violent language and vulgarity sometimes found in the newspapers of his day, he states:

I confess that I do not entertain that firm and complete attachment to the liberty of the press which is wont to be excited by things that are supremely good in their very nature. I approve of it from a consideration more of the evils it prevents than of the advantage it ensures.

Freedom of the press is crucially important as a check on the abuse of government power. Moreover, in a democracy like the United States, censorship of the press would be absurd.

When the right of every citizen to a share in the government of society is acknowledged, everyone must be presumed to be able to choose between the various opinions of his contemporaries. ... The sovereignty of the people and the liberty of the press may therefore be regarded as correlative ...

Somewhat paradoxically, despite the total freedom of the press that exists in the United States and the often uncontrolled violence of newspaper

attacks on institutions and individuals, the result is not disorder and turmoil, but the reverse.

America is perhaps, at this moment, the country of the whole world that contains the fewest germs of revolution. ... The general principles of the government are more stable and the chief opinions which regulate society are more durable there than in many other countries. ... I attribute this to a cause that may at first sight appear to have an opposite tendency — namely, to the liberty of the press. The nations among whom this liberty exists cling to their opinions as much from pride as from conviction. They cherish them because they hold them to be just and because they chose them of their own free will; and they adhere to them, not only because they are true, but because they are their own.

Tocqueville now veers into one of those by-paths that occur from time to time in *Democracy in America*, and which students have found so fascinating. He sketches the psychological stages of belief in man — beginning with uncritical faith.

A man believes firmly because he adopts a proposition without inquiry. He doubts as soon as objections present themselves. But he frequently succeeds in satisfying these doubts, and then he begins again to believe. This time he has not a dim and casual glimpse of the truth, but sees it clearly before him and advances by the light it gives.

So far, this seems optimistic enough, consistent with the view of 18th century liberals of the Enlightenment and of 19th century ones such as John Start Mill on man's progress towards greater rationality. But immediately, a darker tone is introduced:

It may be doubted, however, whether this rational and self-guiding conviction arouses as much fervor or enthusiastic devotion in men as does their first dogmatical belief.

And Tocqueville concludes on a strangely somber note:

We may rest assured that the majority of mankind will always remain in one of these two states, will either believe they know not wherefore, or will not know what

to believe. Few are those who can ever attain to that other state of rational and independent conviction which true knowledge can produce out of the midst of doubt.

This pessimistic conclusion — that the choice for the great majority of human beings is between uncritical, unreasoning belief on the one hand and paralyzing doubt on the other — will have momentous consequences for Tocqueville's ideas on the importance of religion in social life.

Tocqueville observes the ubiquitousness of associations in America — indeed, elsewhere he considers it to be a mark of the Anglo-Saxon race.

In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America. Besides the permanent associations which are established by law under the names of townships, cities, and counties, a vast number of others are formed and maintained by the agency of private individuals. The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life. He looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety. ... This habit may be traced even in the schools, where the children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined. ... There is no end the human despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.

In the United States, the voluntary, cooperative sector of society flourishes, and the political life is often avoided. Tocqueville remarks on how surprised he was to find how much talent there was among the citizens in America, and how little among the leaders of government — perhaps he is thinking of Jackson again. He finds the reason for this in the engrained commercial spirit of the people.

The pursuit of wealth generally diverts men of great talents and strong passions from the pursuit of power; and it frequently happens that a man does not undertake to direct the fortunes of the state until he has shown himself incompetent to conduct his own.

Unlike a monarchical system, a democracy will rarely have strong leaders, willing to swim against the tide, to stand up against the inclinations of the majority. This tends to accentuate certain weaknesses natural to a democracy, in domestic expenditures for government and in foreign policy. In regard to the first:

As the great majority of those who create the laws have no taxable property, all the money that is spent for the community appears to be spent to their advantage, at no cost of their own ... in countries in which the poor have the exclusive power of making laws, no great economy of public expenditure ought to be expected.

The remedy for this is the widespread distribution of property.

The extravagance of democracy is less to be dreaded in proportion as the people acquire a share of property, because, on the one hand, the contributions of the rich are then less needed, and, on the other, it is more difficult to impose taxes that will not reach the imposers.

Tocqueville's argument is somewhat confusing at this point. He states that in "America ... the great majority of the citizens possess some fortune," yet goes on to claim:

Faithful to its popular origin, the government makes great efforts to satisfy the wants of the lower classes. ... I conclude, therefore, without having recourse to inaccurate statistics, that the democratic government of the Americans is not a cheap government, as is sometimes asserted ...

According to his generalization, however, the American government should be a low-spending one and the American people, since most of them are property-owners to some degree, only lightly taxed. This may be another example of Tocqueville stretching the facts to fit the theory.

A more serious problem with democracy arises in the area of foreign relations. In a democratic society, the people are constantly surrounded by flatterers — there is no one with the authority to chastise the people as a whole, no elite, perhaps more foresighted than the multitude, whose guidance or warnings they respect. Often, like children, they will resent any demand for sacrifice preferring to indulge their momentary desires. Tocqueville takes as an example conscription.

In America, conscription is unknown and men are induced to enlist by bounties. The notions and habits of the people of the United States are so opposed to compulsory recruitment that I do not think it can ever be sanctioned by the laws.

The people, accustomed to pursuing their own affairs, above all the accumulation of wealth, will tend to chafe at taking on burdens such as conscription, and the glory of war means little to them. But such burdens are inevitable in any confrontation with another power. Here lies a potentially fatal danger:

I am of the opinion that a democratic government tends, in the long run, to increase the real strength of society. ... If a democratic country remained during a whole century subject to a republican government, it would probably at the end of that period be richer, more populous, and more prosperous than the neighboring despotic states. But during that century it would often have incurred the risk of being conquered by them.

So far America had avoided the need to impose the sacrifices of war on itself by following a very different foreign policy from that of the European powers — non-intervention, or, as it is sometimes called today, isolationism. Tocqueville cites passages from Washington's Farewell Address, whose theme is given in Washington's words, "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little *political* connection as possible." This policy, and the geographical circumstances of the country, permitted the Americans to enjoy peace for virtually the whole first half century of their history. It remained to be seen whether they could continue to do so. One thing was certain, however:

Almost all the nations that have exercised a powerful influence upon the destinies of the world, by conceiving, following out, and executing vast designs, from the Romans to the English, have been governed by aristocratic institutions.

It is not accidental that Tocqueville mentions peoples noted for their imperialism. As we shall see, imperialistic expansion was by no means repugnant to him. In fact, it was a special example of the quest for glory,

the will to high deeds, that Tocqueville found so sorely lacking in democratic societies.

Throughout his great work, democracy is never a black or white proposition for Tocqueville. While it has its drawbacks, it also has advantages.

The defects and weaknesses of a democratic government may be readily discovered. They can be proved by obvious facts, whereas their healthy influence becomes evident in ways which are not obvious and are so to speak, hidden.

The advantages of democracy are connected with the new world Tocqueville sees in the process of being born. This is one of the most important aspects of Tocqueville's thought. One reason he is considered to be among the first great modern sociologists is that he recognizes and builds on the concept of a *great transition* — between the fading world of the past and new society which is coming into existence before his very eyes. The change can be illustrated by the transformation of the feeling of patriotism. There was an older kind of patriotism, according to Tocqueville:

[It] connects the affections of man with his birthplace. This natural fondness is united with a taste for ancient customs and a reverence for traditions of the past. Those who cherish it love their country as they love the house of their father. ... It is in itself a kind of religion; it does not reason, but it acts from impulse of faith and sentiment.

A few generations afterwards, the great German sociologist Max Weber was to speak of the great transition to modern times as a vast rationalization of all areas of life. Tocqueville already understood this concept very well. As applied to patriotism:

There is another species of attachment to country which is more rational than the one I have been describing. It is perhaps less generous and less ardent, but it is more fruitful and more lasting. ... A man comprehends the influence which the well-being of his country has on his own. He is aware that the laws permit him to contribute to that prosperity, and he labors to promote it, first because it benefits him, and secondly because it is in part his own work.

The old, traditional world is lost forever, Tocqueville believes. The worm of skepticism and doubt has subverted all ancient loyalties. The burning

question now is, how are men to be led to continued concern with the fate of their fellow men and their country? To those who are complacent about the trend of society, Tocqueville addresses a cry from the heart:

Do you not see that religious belief is shaken and the divine notion of right is declining, that morality is debased and the notion of moral right is therefore fading away? Argument is substituted for faith, and calculation for the impulses of sentiment. If, in the midst of this general disruption, you do not succeed in connecting the notion of right with that of private interest, which is the only immutable point in the human heart, what means will you have of governing the world except fear?

The democratic approach to patriotism, characteristic of the Americans, still offers a hope.

I maintain that the most powerful and perhaps the only means that we still possess of interesting men in the welfare of their country is to make them partners in the government. ... The lower orders in the United States understand the influence exercised by the general prosperity upon their own welfare. ... They are accustomed to regard this prosperity as the fruit of their own exertions. The citizen looks upon the fortune of the public as his own, and he labors for the good of the state not merely from a sense of pride or duty, but from what I venture to term *cupidity*.

Here Tocqueville is combining two rather different motives that might substitute for the fading, instinctive identification of the individual with his country. The first is participation in the governing process, through institutions of democratic government. The second is the recognition that one's own wellbeing stands or falls with that of the society of which you are a part. Both are democratic, in a sense. They pertain to the new world, which dislodges status, hierarchy, tradition, and sacrifice for a higher good, and puts in their place an apotheosis of the individual and his personal concerns. This is the inevitable tendency of democracy, the polar opposite of aristocracy.

Tocqueville's sharp contrast of aristocratic and democratic patriotism is a good example of his method. As he put it in a note he wrote for himself:

In order to make myself well-understood, I am constantly obliged to portray extreme states, an aristocracy without

a mixture of democracy, a democracy without a mixture of aristocracy, a perfect equality, which is an imaginary state. It happens then that I attribute to one or the other of the two principles more complete effects than those that in general they produce, because in general they are not alone.

Striving to order and arrange the enormously complex phenomena of social evolution — to make sense of them — Tocqueville resorts to what he calls “imaginary states.” Later, Max Weber will use the term *ideal type* — a conceptual construct or *model* that can be used as a reference point for understanding. In his great work, Tocqueville’s major ideal types are aristocracy and democracy. These do not stand merely for contrasting legal systems or social structures — indeed, scholars have commented on the many different ways Tocqueville uses the term “democracy” in his book. Each of the ideal types entails contrasting value-systems, ways of life, even feelings and what Tocqueville called “habits of the heart.” As he operates with these concepts, we begin to see that Aristocratic and Democratic Man are two distinct types of human being. Nowhere does Tocqueville make this clearer than in the chapter under discussion, on the advantages of democracy. With twenty generations of Norman nobility, he describes the aristocratic way of life:

Do you wish to give a certain elevation to the human mind and teach it to regard the things of this world with generous feelings, to inspire men with a scorn of mere temporal advantages, to form and nourish strong convictions and keep alive the spirit of honorable devotedness? Is it your object to refine the habits, embellish the manners, and cultivate the arts, to promote the love of poetry, beauty, and glory? Would you constitute a people fitted to act powerfully upon all other nations, and prepared for those high enterprises which, whatever be their results, will leave a name forever famous in history?

If this is your aim, Tocqueville declares, then avoid democracy, for these are the characteristic marks of aristocratic society. But Tocqueville as a man of the 19th century — and he divined what democracy was bringing in its train:

But if you hold it expedient to divert the moral and intellectual activity of man to the production of comfort

and the promotion of general wellbeing; if a clear understanding be more profitable to man than genius; if your object is not to stimulate the virtues of heroism but the habits of peace ... if, instead of living in the midst of a brilliant society, you are contented to have prosperity around you; if, in short, you are of the opinion that the principal object of government is not to confer the greatest power and glory upon the body of the nation, but to ensure the greatest enjoyment and to avoid the most misery to each of the individuals who compose it — if such be your desire, then equalize the conditions of men and establish democratic institutions.

Although in this passage, Tocqueville, for rhetorical effect, presents the two ideal types as if they were real alternatives for choice, of course he held that democracy was inevitable. Thus, he turns now to the unlimited power that the majority wields in the United States and the factors that — so far — have kept it from being a scourge to American society. He lays down the proposition that it is incorrect to say that the majority has the right to do whatever it wishes:

I hold it to be an impious and detestable maxim that, politically speaking, the people have a right to do anything. ... A general law, which bears the name of justice, has been made and sanctioned, not only by a majority of this or that people, but by a majority of mankind. The rights of every people are therefore confined within the limits of what is just. ... When I refuse to obey an unjust laws, I do not contest the right of the majority to command, but I simply appeal from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of mankind.

Tocqueville does not give any example of any act which “mankind” — the thousands of differing societies that exist and have existed — has agreed to consider unjust when committed by a majority against an individual. He wishes to preserve some sphere of freedom of action to the individual, yet — perhaps because of his admitted distaste for philosophical speculation — is unable or unwilling to suggest any theory of individual rights. In fact, it seems doubtful that rights, in any sense that an American, for instance, would understand them have in fact ever been endorsed by a majority of human societies.

At any rate, this discussion is a prelude to Tocqueville argument that in a democratic society such as the United States, freedom is not threatened by an absolute monarch — but by the people itself. The great danger is the *tyranny of the majority*, a phrase that helped make Part I of *Democracy in America* famous and left a deep impression on John Stuart Mill's essay, *On Liberty*. In modern society, the individual or a minority is threatened not so much by the monarch and his agents, or even by the power of the government itself. The threat comes from the massed power of *all* of society, by the totality of governmental *and* non-governmental institutions. Indeed, the pressures of non-governmental forces can often be stronger and less capable of being resisted than the state-power itself, as Tocqueville had discovered during his trip to the United States.

In Philadelphia Tocqueville encountered Mr. John Jay Smith, a “very respected Quaker,” who explained to him the position of free blacks in the Northern states:

Slavery is abolished in Pennsylvania. The Negroes have the right to vote at elections, but they cannot go to the poll without being ill-treated.

When Tocqueville inquired why the law did not protect them, Smith replied:

The laws have no force with us when public opinion does not support them. Now the people is imbued with very strong prejudices against the Negroes, and the magistrates feel that they have not the strength to enforce laws which are favorable to the latter.

Several weeks later, Tocqueville conversed in Baltimore with Richard Stewart, a distinguished physician, and learned more about the potency of public opinion, this time in enforcing conformity to religious beliefs, at least outwardly. In America, Dr. Stewart said:

Public opinion does with us what the Inquisition could never do. I have known a lot of young people who thought they had discovered that the Christian religion was not true. Carried away by the ardor of youth, they have started loudly proclaiming this opinion. What then? Some have been forced to leave the country or to vegetate miserably there. Others, feeling the struggle unequal, have been constrained to an external religious conformity, or have at least kept quiet. The number who have thus been

suppressed by public opinion is very considerable. Anti-Christian books are never published here, or at least that is very rare.

Tocqueville was so struck by these and similar conversations that he incorporated what he had learned from them in his chapter on “The Unlimited Power of the Majority in the United States.” His unusually harsh language is an indication of how strongly he felt:

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. If America has not yet had any great writers, the reason is given in these facts: there can be no literary genius without freedom of opinion, and *freedom of opinion does not exist in America*. The Inquisition has never been able to prevent a vast number of anti-religious books from circulating in Spain. The empire of the majority succeeds much better in the United States, since it actually removes any wish to publish them.

Tocqueville pondered this dark side of democracy. Since “the very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority,” all legal and political institutions will tend to fall under the majority’s sway. The legislature, local law-enforcement officials, the jury-system itself, and, increasingly, many judges — all were organs of the popular will. Moreover, in a democracy the will of the people exerted a potent, if often subtle, control over the would-be dissident, even in the deepest recesses of his mind. Such a situation filled Tocqueville with anxiety, since it presaged the end of intellectual freedom, of cultural progress, and even of any individual independence. It also provoked his wrath, expressed in both parts of *Democracy in America*, particularly in a passage in Part II that has become justly famous:

If democratic peoples substitute the absolute power of a majority for all the various powers that used excessively to impede the upsurge of individual thought, the evil itself would only have changed its form. Men would by no means have found the way to live in independence; they would only have succeeded in the difficult task of giving slavery a new face. There is matter for deep reflection here. I cannot say this too often for all those who see freedom of the mind as something sacred and who hate not

only despots but also despotism. For myself, if I feel the hand of power heavy on my brow, I am little concerned to know who it is that oppresses me. I am no better inclined to pass my head under the yoke because a million men hold it out for me.

Fortunately, up to now there have been forces at work which have set limits to the absolute sway of the majority. Tocqueville discusses for instance the legal profession, trained to respect precedent and order, which naturally acts as to prevent democratic excesses. But the force to which he devotes the most attention is *religion*.

Religion was a subject that engaged Tocqueville's thinking all of his life. His own personal religious views have been a matter of controversy. Some have claimed that he was a devout Christian, even Catholic. It is true that Tocqueville participated in Catholic worship. This appears, however, to have been more out of sense of the obligations of his position as a nobleman and landowner in his community than out of sincere faith. In a letter written to his friend Arthur de Gobineau, in October, 1843, Tocqueville says:

I am not a believer, which I am far from saying in order to boast, but as much of an unbeliever as I may be, I have never been able to keep from feeling a profound emotion in reading the Gospel.

It seems most likely that Tocqueville was a sort of deist — a believer in God, in a God-given moral code, and in an afterlife, but not in the doctrines of any particular faith. In any case, what concerned him was the functional value of religion. As he states in *Democracy in America*:

If it be of the highest importance to man, as an individual, that his religion should be true, it is not so to society. Society has no future life to hope for or to fear; and provided the citizens profess a religion the peculiar tenets of that religion are of little importance to its interests.

Throughout all of *Democracy in America*, and, indeed, his other works as well, Tocqueville accentuates the value of religion. He realized he was arguing against a tradition of free thought and opposition to religion that was still strong among French liberals. This tradition stemmed from the 18th century Enlightenment, when many of the *philosophes* went beyond attacking religious intolerance, and denounced religion itself. Religious

faith was an obstacle to the progress of thought and the liberation of man from ancient tyrannies. The Marquis de Condorcet, for instance, was a brilliant mathematician, philosopher, and liberal leader, who lived to take an active part in the events of the French Revolution. His most famous work, *Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, was written while he was in hiding, under threat of death from Robespierre's Reign of Terror. In it, Condorcet contrasts the evil and tyrannical past of the human race, under the dominion of superstition and organized religion, with what the future would bring, under the reign of reason, science, and the rights of man.

Following the Revolution, however, the hostility toward religion shown by liberals like Condorcet began to give way to a new appreciation. The outstanding liberal of the time, Benjamin Constant, while condemning religious intolerance, respected faith in a Supreme Being and felt it had a critical role to play in guaranteeing freedom. His close friend, Madame de Stael, agreed, and rejected the opposition of liberty and religion as bogus:

Since the Revolution was made in the name of philosophy, the conclusion has been drawn that one has to be an atheist in order to love freedom. But it was precisely because the French did not unite religion with freedom that their Revolution deviated so quickly from its early course. It is Christianity that truly has brought freedom upon this earth, justice to the oppressed, respect for the unfortunate, and, above all, equality before God, of which equality before the law is only an imperfect image. It is through an intentional confusion of thought with some, through blindness with others, that people have presented the privileges of the nobility and the absolute power of the throne as dogmas of religion. They would thus forbid the noblest sentiment on this earth, the love of liberty, from entering into an alliance with Heaven.

This attitude was shared by the Doctrinaires, Guizot and Royer-Collard — and by Tocqueville. His experiences in America convinced him he had solid evidence for his views. Throughout his stay, he had been struck by the religiosity of the people:

There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than

in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth.

Tocqueville observes that in the United States the clergy keeps its distance from political affairs and partisan politics. Religious influence is more indirect — and more powerful. Religion determines the customs — the basic way of life — of the people. In turn, this acts on political life. One of the greatest influences of religion on society is through the institution of marriage and the family. Americans are extraordinarily devoted to the family, Tocqueville observes. Here he implies that the easy acceptance of the taking of a mistress or a lover that was so often to be found in France would not be, countenanced in the average American community.

When the American retires from the turmoil of public life to the bosom of his family, he finds in it the image of order and of peace. There his pleasures are simple and natural, his joys are innocent and calm; ... he accustoms himself easily to moderate his opinions as well as his tastes.

Another characteristic of the deep-seated religious faith of the Americans, Tocqueville has already noted: fixity in matters of doctrine and morals is a kind of necessary complement to the thrust toward innovation characteristic of a democracy. Moreover, principles of Christian morality and equity act as obstacles to the commission of injustice against the individual:

Hitherto no one in the United States has dared to advance the maxim that everything is permissible for the interests of society, an impious adage which seems to have been invented in an age of freedom to shelter all future tyrants. Thus, while the law permits the Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving and forbids them to commit what is rash or unjust.

So intimately are religion and liberty linked in the United States, that the Americans believe it is impossible to have one without the other, Tocqueville quotes an item from a New York newspaper he had come across on his trip.

The Court of Common Pleas of Chester County a few days since rejected a witness who declared his disbelief in the existence of God. The presiding judge remarked that

he had not before been aware that there was a man living who did not believe in the existence of God; that this belief constituted the sanction of all testimony in a court of justice; and that he knew of no cause in a Christian country where a witness had been permitted to testify without such belief.

This commitment on the part of the whole society is natural, Tocqueville believes.

Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in [a] republic ... than in [a] monarchy. ... How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to a Deity?

As for the *philosophes* who looked forward to religion dying out as freedom and enlightenment advanced, the example of America shows they were wrong. The reason, Tocqueville maintains, is that religious belief is inherent in human nature. Lack of faith is the exception, a kind of moral abnormality. And the anti-religious writers made another grave mistake. They considered a temporary and accidental condition — the united front of religious authorities with reactionary political powers — to be necessary and permanent.

The unbelievers of Europe attack the Christians as their political opponents rather than as their religious adversaries. They hate the Christian religion as the opinion of a party much more than as an error of belief; and they reject the clergy less because they are representatives of the Deity than because they are the allies of government.

The answer, then, is to sever the bond between the Christian churches and the last-ditch supporters of the Old Regime, whose cause, in any case, is doomed. In that way, faith can flourish again and act as a bulwark of the free society, as it does in America.

The whole last section of the work that appeared in 1835, about 1/5 of it, is devoted to “The Present and Probable Future Condition of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States.” The American situation in regard to race must have appeared unprecedented to a Frenchman

like Tocqueville. Here was a land which fate seemed to have destined as the home of three distinct races of mankind, the Indians, or Native Americans; the Negroes; and the whites. This had created unparalleled problems. The question was open whether the Americans would be able to deal with them successfully.

Tocqueville was a pronounced opponent of race-hatred and racial discrimination. Nothing distressed him as much in what he had seen in America as the treatment of the two subjugated races by the whites:

If we reason from what passes in the world, we should almost say that the European is to the other races of mankind what man himself is to the lower animals: he makes them subservient to his use, and when he cannot subdue them, he destroys them.

The Indians were forced to retreat before the advancing Europeans from the days of the first settlements. They were not equal to the competition, and the aggressions, of the whites. Tocqueville compares the *ethos*, the system of values of the Indian, to that of the feudal lord in the Middle Ages — war and hunting were viewed as the only worthwhile occupations. The Indians were shut up within compounds that grew narrower and narrower. Some of them, Tocqueville notes, proved their capacity for what is called civilization. He mentions the Cherokees, who not only invented a written language, but even set up a newspaper! But their progress in assimilating the ways of the white man did not lead to their being spared.

By a remarkable coincidence, while Tocqueville was in the United States he was able to witness personally an egregious example of the maltreatment meted out by the more advanced of the original inhabitants of the country. December 1831 found him and Beaumont at Memphis, Tennessee, anxiously seeking for some means of transportation down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Finally, a steamboat appeared, and as Tocqueville and his party were negotiating with the captain, a great troop of Indians emerged from the forest — men, women, children, old people, together with horses and dogs. They were Choctaws, and, along with the Cherokees, the Creeks, and the other so-called civilized tribes, they had been forced from their lands in the southeast, in Georgia and Alabama. This was a result of the policy of “Indian Removal,” executed by the government of Andrew Jackson. As Jackson expressed it in a message to Congress:

Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country, and Philanthropy has been long busily

employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth.

Now Tocqueville was seeing with his own eyes a portion of the infamous “Trail of Tears” that led to the lands beyond the Mississippi. In a letter dated Christmas day, he wrote to his mother in France of how the Americans had approached “the Indian question”:

... rational and unprejudiced people, moreover, great philanthropists, [they] supposed, like the Spanish, that God had given them the new world and its inhabitants as complete property. ... The Spanish, truly brutal, loose their dogs on the Indians as on ferocious beasts; they kill, burn, massacre, pillage, the new world as one would take a city by assault, without pity as without discrimination. But one cannot destroy everything; fury has a limit. The rest of the Indian population ultimately becomes mixed with its conquerors, takes on their mores, their religion. ... The Americans of the United States, more humane, more moderate, more respectful of law and legality, never bloodthirsty, are profoundly more destructive. ... The poor Indians take their old parents in their arms; the women load their children on their shoulders; the nation finally puts itself on the march. ... It abandons forever the soil on which, perhaps for a thousand years, its fathers have lived, in order to go settle in a wilderness where the whites will not leave them ten years in peace.

Tocqueville observed the masses of Indians, freezing, sick, some dying, board the steamboat and was profoundly moved:

There was, in the whole of this spectacle, an air of ruin and destruction, something that savored of a farewell that was final and with no return ... the Indians were calm, but somber and taciturn. ... We will deposit them tomorrow in the solitudes of Arkansas. It has to be confessed that this is a singular accident that made us come to Memphis to witness the expulsion, one might say the dissolution, of one of the most celebrated and most ancient American nations. But this enough on the savages. It is time to return to civilized people.

This episode made a profound impression on Tocqueville and colors his whole discussion of the fate of the Native Americans. He mentions that Indian leaders arise from time to time who try to unite all the the nations against the European invaders to no avail. It was their misfortune to confront a “civilized people,” Tocqueville says, “who are also the most grasping nation on the globe.”

I believe that the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish, and that whenever the Europeans shall be established on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, that race of men will have ceased to exist.

According to Tocqueville, the most formidable danger that threatens the future of the United States is the problem of the blacks. Slavery has degraded the Negro.

Having been told from infancy that his race is naturally inferior to that of the whites, he assents to the proposition and is ashamed of his own nature. In each of his features he discovers a trace of slavery, and if it were in his power he would willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is.

Not the least of the harm produced by slavery is the prejudice it leaves behind even after it is removed. Free Negroes, in the North, suffer from the disdain of their fellow citizens no less than enslaved Negroes in the South. Tocqueville was thus one of the first of a long line of foreign observers to comment on the prevalence of racism in the United States.

Tocqueville had gathered his views on slavery and the South from many sources. One of those that affected him most was the former president, John Quincy Adams. Tocqueville met him at a dinner party in Boston, and was seated next to him at the table. The French traveller plied his famous dinner-companion with questions — he later noted that Adams spoke a fluent and elegant French especially on slavery. Adams did not hesitate to state his strong opinions:

It is in slavery that are to be found almost all the embarrassments of the present and fears of the future. Slavery has modified the whole state of society in the South. Every white man in the south is a being equally privileged, whose destiny is to make the Negroes work without working himself. We cannot conceive how far the idea that work is dishonorable has entered the spirit of the

Americans of the south. From this laziness in which the southern Whites live great differences in character result. They devote themselves to bodily exercise, to hunting, to racing; they are vigorously constituted, brave, full of honor; what is called the point of honor is more delicate there than anywhere else; duels are frequent.

According to Adams, then, what the South was producing was a kind of aristocratic type of personality. But Tocqueville felt no admiration at all for these simulations of the European nobility. What he retained from the Adams and his other sources was that slavery was a blight not only on those held in bondage, but on the rest of society as well. In *Democracy in America*, he makes his point

The stream that the Indians had distinguished by the name of Ohio, or the Beautiful River, waters one of the most magnificent valleys which have ever been made the abode of man. ... [The state] which follows the numerous windings of the Ohio upon the left is called Kentucky; that upon the right bears the name of the river. These two states differ in only a single respect: Kentucky has admitted slavery, but the state of Ohio has prohibited [it]. ... Upon the left bank of the stream the population is sparse; from time to time one descries a troop of slaves loitering in the half-desert fields; the primeval forest reappears at every turn; society seems to be asleep, man to be idle. ... From the right bank, on the contrary, a confused hum is heard, which proclaims the presence of industry; the fields are covered with abundant harvests ... and man appears to be in the enjoyment of that wealth and contentment which is the reward of labor.

Slavery caused economic stagnation in society, which ultimately hurt everyone — a society of freemen is vastly more productive than a society dependent on slaves. The use of such a pragmatic and utilitarian argument is characteristic of Tocqueville on this issue. Around 1840, when he was a member of the Chamber of Deputies, he made the issue of abolishing slavery in France's West Indian colonies one of his prime concerns. Tocqueville was an unequivocal abolitionist, and he did point out the immorality of slavery. But he was also well aware that previous attempts to abolish slavery in French territories had relied exclusively on the moral

argument and had ultimately foundered. The English antislavery movement, on the other hand, had used both sorts of arguments, and had been victorious. Concerned as he was not simply to make a rhetorical point but to ensure that slavery was wiped out, Tocqueville made use of the sort of pragmatic appeal that would achieve that end.

Tocqueville was pessimistic on the future of race relations in the United States. He felt that “the Negroes and the whites must either wholly part or wholly mingle,” since there seemed to be no possibility of a bi-racial society where both races were on an equal footing. But the English, of all the European peoples, have been the most averse to mixing with other races. What was to be the final outcome? A great conflict between the black and white inhabitants of the South, at least. Tocqueville did not blame the white Southerners:

When I see the order of nature overthrown, and when I hear the cry of humanity in its vain struggle against the laws, my indignation does not light upon the men of our own time who are the instruments of these outrages; but I reserve my execration for those who, after a thousand years of freedom, brought slavery into the world once more.

Will the Union endure? Tocqueville seems to have been of two minds on the question. In his notes, he refers to the dissolution of the Union as “something *certain* in time.” But this prediction does not appear in the published text, where he speaks of forces pulling in both directions. Much later, in 1856, as the issue of slavery in the United States was becoming more acute, Tocqueville wrote to Nassau Senior:

I cannot desire, as many persons do, [the dismemberment of America]. Such an event would inflict a great wound on the whole human race; for it would introduce war into a great continent from whence it has been banished for more than a century. The breaking up of the American Union will be a solemn moment in the history of the world. I never met an American who did not feel this, and I believe that it will not be rashly or easily undertaken. There will, before actual rupture, be always a last interval, in which one or both parties will draw back. Has not this occurred twice?

But Tocqueville was certain that the Anglo-Americans would retain their republican institutions, and that some kind of extraordinary destiny waited this new people. The two volumes of *Democracy in America* that appeared in 1835 end with his astonishing and celebrated prophecy:

There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans. Both of them have grown up unnoticed; and while the attention of mankind was directed elsewhere, they have suddenly placed themselves in the front rank among the nations. ... All the other [nations] have stopped, or continue to advance with extreme difficulty; these alone are proceeding with ease and celerity along a path to which no limit can be perceived. The American struggles against the obstacles that nature opposes to him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. ... The conquests of the American are therefore gained by the plowshare; those of the Russian by the sword. The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all the authority of society in a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting-point is different and their courses are not the same. Yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.

The reaction to the first part of *Democracy in America* was overwhelming; it was hailed as an instant classic of political thought, and Tocqueville was praised as a modern master of the field. The writer he was most often compared to was Montesquieu, the eighteenth century writer who, in his *Spirit of the Laws*, bolstered his conclusions with wide-ranging historical observations. One reviewer, who devoted a long essay to the book, was a noted English liberal, John Stuart Mill:

[*Democracy in America*] has at once taken its rank among the most remarkable productions of our time; it is a book with which, both for its facts and its speculations, all who would understand, or who are called upon to exercise influence over their age, are bound to be familiar. It will contribute to give to the political speculations of our time

a new character. ... Monsieur de Tocqueville ... has set the example of analyzing democracy; of distinguishing one of its features, one of its tendencies, from another; of showing which of these tendencies is good, and which bad, in itself; how far each is necessarily connected with the rest, and to what extent any of them may be counteracted or modified. ... The author's mind, except that it is of a soberer character, seems to us to resemble Montesquieu most among the great French writers. The book is such as Montesquieu might have written, if to his genius he had superadded good sense, and the lights which mankind have since gained from the experiences of a period in which they may be said to have lived centuries in fifty years.

Mill's review was not simply effusive — it was a detailed analysis and discussion of the important issues raised by *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville was grateful for Mill's insightfulness:

Of all my reviewers, you are perhaps the only one who has thoroughly understood me; who has taken a general, bird's-eye view of my ideas; who sees their ulterior aim and yet has preserved a clear perception of the details. I wanted this testimony to console me for all the false conclusions that are drawn from my book. I am constantly meeting people who want to persuade me of opinions that I proclaim, or who pretend to share with me opinions that I do not hold.

This was the beginning of an amicable association between the two great thinkers. Mill's own thought, as later works, especially his famous essay, *On Liberty*, show, was decisively affected by Tocqueville's ideas on the danger of a tyranny of the majority. It was only when Tocqueville's nationalistic feelings got the better of his liberalism — in Mill's view — that their friendship cooled.

Praise for Part I was universal, in France, in England, and in the United States itself. Tocqueville was something bemused by it all. He wrote to a friend:

I feel like a certain lady of the court of Napoleon, whom the Emperor once took it into his head to make a duchess. That evening, as she heard herself announced by her

new title when she arrived at court, she forgot to whom it belonged, and she ranged herself to one side to let the noble lady pass whose name had just been called. I assure you this is exactly my case. I ask myself if it be I that they are talking about? I infer that the world must consist of a poor set of people, since a book of my making, the limitations of which I know so well, has had the effect this appears to produce.

Tocqueville went to visit England again, where he was celebrated and befriended on all sides. The cream of British intellectual society — especially among the liberals — rushed to congratulate him. Harriet Grote was the wife of a leading liberal, George Grote, the distinguished author of a history of ancient Greece; a shrewd and sociable woman, she was also an intellectual luminary in her own right. She wrote of Tocqueville at this time:

He is a small and delicate-looking young man and a most engaging person. Full of intelligence and knowledge, free from boasting and self-sufficiency, of gentle manners and handsome countenance. In conversing he displays a candid and unprejudiced mind. About thirty-two years of age, of a noble race in Normandy, and unmarried.

This last omission Tocqueville soon made good. Several years before he had made the acquaintance of an Englishwoman a few years older than himself. Mary Mottley, who was living with an aunt in Versailles, was a commoner, from a not particularly affluent background. Tocqueville's family and many of his friends disapproved of their plan to marry. Finally, literary success assured, Tocqueville went ahead, defying his family's wishes, and made Mary his wife. Their union proved generally a happy one, though clouded by the fact that they never had children.

But Tocqueville still had to complete his great work. This was proving more difficult than he had imagined. He wrote to Henry Reeve:

I have never worked on anything with as much enthusiasm. I think of my subject night and day. I would never have imagined that a subject that I have already revolved [in my head] so many ways could present itself to me with so many new faces.

Democracy in America

Part II

IN FACT, FIVE YEARS WOULD ELAPSE between the appearance of the two parts of *Democracy in America*. Part II, again in two volumes, would only be published in 1840. In those years, Tocqueville read very widely and deeply in many fields, above all the history of political thought. He had his favorites. He wrote a friend that there were three men he lived with every day: Montesquieu; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century philosopher and subtle dissector of the human soul and heart.

Finally, Part II appeared. A guide to the work can be found in a note Tocqueville wrote to himself during its composition:

Point out — to myself as well — that I was led in the second work to take up once again some of the subjects already touched on in the first, or to modify some opinions expressed therein. Necessary result of such a large work done in two stages. The first book more American than democratic. This one more democratic than American.

In fact, Tocqueville does deal with many of the same ideas and themes found in Part I. But now the treatment is more general, more abstract. Developments in Europe are drawn in more and more; the author tries harder to peer into the future, to discern dangers and cause for hope. As we shall see, one particular, overwhelming threat begins to take shape

before his eyes. And throughout the emphasis is on the *kind of human being* democracy will produce.

In Part I, Tocqueville had concentrated on the political institutions of democratic society, and the causes that produced and conditioned them. Here his field is as wide as the culture itself. He ranges from science and literature to domestic life to personal demeanor. His tracings of cause and effect, if sometimes strained, are usually fascinating. Americans, he finds, have a strong preference for practical, as against theoretical ideas and sciences — altogether natural, given the never-ending bustle of a society where everyone feels he can get ahead. Even literature becomes a trade, and there is little of the aristocratic fastidiousness of taste. In one major area of life — affecting everyone — however, democracy has brought about a vast improvement. That is the family.

In aristocratic societies, children tend to view their parents — especially the father — with awe, even with fear. Their conduct is based on a rigid formalism and readiness to obey. Among the children, the first-born son has pride of place, since he will usually inherit everything and will eventually take his father's place as the chief custodian of the family name and traditions. As democratic conditions and the democratic mentality begin to penetrate into the life of the family, however, stiff formality towards the parents is replaced by the bonds of natural affection, and, since the firstborn son no longer has a privileged position, jealousy and rancor among the children gives way to love.

What Tocqueville is describing here is what social historians have called the *bourgeois* or *middle-class* family, built on the natural ties of love and the commitment of the family members to each other. With time, this ideal has penetrated into all social classes — most Americans would find it hard even to imagine another kind of family-life. Tocqueville, himself raised in an aristocratic environment, found it totally appealing. In his chapter on “The Influence of Democracy on the Family,” there is none of his habitual ambivalence, of his balancing of gains against losses.

Such is the charm of these democratic manners that even the partisans of aristocracy are attracted to it, and after having experienced it for some time, they are by no means tempted to revert to the respectful and frigid observances of aristocratic families.

But Tocqueville's ultimate purpose is not simply to analyze the mores of a democratic society, as fascinating as that may be. His design is to show

how they bear upon the great political issue of the coming age — the menace of despotism. The way is paved for despotism by a new and peculiar *feeling* which gains ground in democratic society — individualism.

Today the term “individualism” generally has favorable overtones, especially in the United States. When it was first coined, however, in France in the early nineteenth century, it was used in a pejorative sense. Both conservative and socialist writers — enemies of the new liberal and capitalist order based on recognition of individual rights — used the term to designate a self-seeking attitude riding roughshod over the claims of brotherhood and the rights of society. It suggested an exclusive concentration on one’s personal affairs, to the exclusion of the good of society. Tocqueville’s usage is derived from this earlier, negative meaning.

In Part I, Tocqueville had referred to individualism as “the rust of society.” It was a problem that continued to engage him. In the summer of 1838, he was at the family’s old castle in Normandy, pondering the sequel to the first part of *Democracy in America*. He also pondered the character of the local people he came into contact with. He wrote his friend Royer-Collard:

I am attached to this population, without, all the same, concealing its faults, which are great. These people here are honest, intelligent, religious enough, passably moral, very steady. But they have scarcely any disinterestedness.

It is true that egoism in this region does not resemble that of Paris, so violent and often so cruel. It is a mild, calm, and tenacious love of private interests, which bit by bit absorbs all other sentiments of the heart and dries up nearly all sources of enthusiasm there. They join to this egoism a certain number of private virtues and domestic qualities which, as a whole, form respectable men and poor citizens.

Royer-Collard’s reply may well have encouraged Tocqueville in placing the theme at the center of Part II of his work:

You are irritated by the country where you live. But your Normans — they are France, they are *the world*. This prudent and intelligent egoism, it is [the character] of the honest folk of our time, trait for trait.

Here was something else that had accompanied democracy into the world, and in Part II, Tocqueville tries to delineate the features of this new mentality:

Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with *selfishness*. Selfishness is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.

Selfishness originates in blind instinct; individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment. ... Selfishness is a vice as old as the world ... individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of condition.

The underlying cause of this new mentality is the ongoing decay of the social structure of traditional society. In former times, an acknowledged and enforced hierarchy had existed, from the lowest to the highest members of the community. Aristocratic society had also created innumerable smaller groups, which cohered precisely because of the distinctive privileges granted to them. Towns, provinces, social classes, occupational categories, religious bodies — all enjoyed special rights, which created a sense of solidarity among their members, a feeling of identification with the others. Democracy tears the whole fabric of aristocratic society to shreds. It cuts every man off from his ancestors and descendants beyond one or two degrees. Professional, religious, and other corporate bodies vanish, and so do the bonds between a lord and his vassals, between a land-owner and his “people.” Now the individual is regarded as the ultimate social unit, with the total right of self-determination. No longer is he part of any permanent larger group; there is nothing to link him to groups and causes in the wider society. He retires into his own immediate circle — democracy has even made his family environment a greater comfort to him. Why should he ever concern himself with the fate of society?

Tocqueville thinks individualism can be combated. If local liberties are in place — if citizens enjoy the right to decide on public affairs in their own communities — they will tend to be drawn into a wider concern for society at large. The right of free association should be granted, as it is in the United States — unlike France, for instance, where the authorities restrict it for fear of revolution. Only in association with his fellows will the individual feel strong enough to resist the encroachments of power. And, since they foster associations and combinations of all kinds, newspapers should likewise be allowed to flourish.

But the Americans have discovered something even more effective in counteracting individualism — they fight it with the principle of self-interest itself: *rightly-understood* self-interest.

I do not think, on the whole, that there is more selfishness among us than in America. The only difference is that there it is enlightened, here it is not. Each American knows when to sacrifice some of his private interests to save the rest. The principle of rightly-understood self-interest is as often asserted by the poor man as by the rich. The Americans are fond of explaining almost all their actions by this principle. They show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state.

In America, the individual understands that his own interest is bound up with that of his fellows and of society as a whole. He realizes that he will prosper if the laws are upheld and freedom respected — that he will suffer, in the most direct and personal way, from the breakdown of order or despotic government.

The principle of rightly understood self-interest is not a lofty one, but it is clear and sure. As it lies within the reach of all capacities, everyone can without difficulty learn and retain it. By its admirable conformity to human weaknesses it easily obtains great dominion; nor is that dominion precarious, since the principle checks one personal interest by another, and uses, to direct the passions, the very same instrument that excites them.

Tocqueville calls enlightened self-interest “the chief remaining security” that democratic people have against themselves. And yet, he does not appear to be so sure. In the very next chapter, he hastens to add that this principle must be understood as applying both to life on earth and — the afterlife. That is, the individual restrains his actions — he obeys the law and he respects the rights of others — not only because he realizes that this serves his enlightened, long-range interests here and now, but because of rewards and punishments in the hereafter. This was not, however, how the doctrine of enlightened self-interest had been traditionally understood; thus, Tocqueville seems to be betraying a certain lack of confidence in the idea.

That Tocqueville was uneasy with the claim that self-interest can be turned into a buttress for the free society is shown by the next section. Here the emphasis is on the drive for physical gratification and material possessions, which has become the chief passion of the Americans — a middle-class obsession that has penetrated into all classes. What worries Tocqueville is not that this love of comfort and things will lead people to debauchery and political upheaval. On the contrary: it results in a preference for calmness and tranquility more conducive to acquiring and enjoying. The danger lies elsewhere.

To physical gratifications the heart, the imagination, and life itself are unreservedly given up, till, in snatching at these lesser gifts, men lose sight of those more precious possessions which constitute the glory and the greatness of mankind. By these means a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world, which would not corrupt but enervate the soul, and noiselessly unbend its springs of action.

In the United States the never-ending race for riches and for possessions that will distinguish a man from his neighbors results in a restlessness, sometimes an inner emptiness. Fortunately, however, the Americans are educated and politically sophisticated enough to understand the connection between what they want — wealth — and a free government.

The Americans believe their freedom to be the best instrument and surest safeguard of their welfare; they are attached to the one by the other. They by no means think that they are not called on to take part in public affairs. On the contrary, they believe that their chief business is

to secure for themselves a government which will allow them to acquire the things they covet and which will not debar them from the peaceful enjoyment of those possessions which they have already acquired.

The Americans take an active part in governing themselves — not simply by voting at election time, but by carrying out and scrupulously overseeing the functions of government, especially in their own communities. But what happens if a people is seized by the democratic drive to gain riches, but does not see the connection with good government? Tocqueville is doubtless thinking of France, and other countries in the process of becoming democratized. That he says is the critical moment when they may lose their freedom.

Men who are possessed by the passion for physical gratification generally find out that the turmoil of freedom disturbs their welfare before they discover how freedom itself serves to promote it. The fear of anarchy perpetually haunts them, and they always ready to fling away their freedom at the first disturbance.

But self-interest, even when enlightened, and thus no threat to freedom, still has its drawbacks: Above all, Tocqueville's old *bete noir*, the lowering of aspirations and a brutalization of the personality. The remedy for this is, again, religion. Should the state therefore establish a religion? By no means. The best support that politicians could give to religion, Tocqueville says, is to act as if they believed in it and act morally themselves.

Tocqueville very briefly touches on a momentous subject: is there a possibility that the new industrial system will generate its own aristocracy in the form of a class of capitalists? Throughout his life, Tocqueville was never particularly interested in economics, business or technology. Indeed, scholars have remarked on how little mention there is even of the railroads in his study of America. Nonetheless, he had picked up various views through casual observation and some reading. On the subject of the division of labor in the factory, he repeats ideas that are at least as old as *The Wealth of Nations*: production may be increased, but the worker is restricted and narrowed in his mind and character. The new elite of capitalists does not show the solicitude for the workers' welfare that his own class had often displayed in the past, Tocqueville feels. Still, the capitalists are not attached to the land; they have no permanent body of followers —

in this way, they differ decisively from the true aristocratic caste of former centuries, Tocqueville sums up:

I am of the opinion, on the whole, that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest that, ever existed in the world; but at the same time it is one of the most confined and least dangerous. Nevertheless, the friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction: for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrates into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter.

This, however, is a diversion from Tocqueville's main argument. It will soon become evident that this is not where he perceives the danger to lie.

Meanwhile, he returns to the fight against brutish materialism and the seeking after gratifications, and the "individualism" they promote.

In the chapter titled "Why Democratic Nations Naturally Desire Peace, and Democratic Armies, War," Tocqueville argues for a surprising remedy to pernicious individualism. The chapter also illustrates some of the problems with his approach to political science. His proposition that democratic societies favor peace appeals to common sense. The great majority of people are engrossed by the pursuit of their private interests, above all their material interests. War interferes with this, generating uncertainty in economic life and demanding manifold sacrifices. But the proposition that *armies* in democratic societies desire war is bolstered only by the claim that democracy multiplies the number of individuals who feel they have a right to a commission; since officers' commissions are limited in peacetime, there will be a pressure to wage war to increase them. Tocqueville presents no empirical evidence to support his theory, however, and the history of the United States up to his time would appear to disprove it.

The much more surprising part of Tocqueville's analysis comes when he asserts:

I do not wish to speak ill of war. War almost always enlarges the mind of a people and raises its character. In some cases, it is the only check on the excessive growth of certain propensities that naturally spring out of the equality of conditions, and it must be considered as a necessary corrective to certain inveterate diseases to which democratic communities are liable. War has great advantages ...

War as a “*necessary corrective*”? Here a Tocqueville begins to be revealed who is rather different from the saint of ordered liberty so often portrayed. But this Tocqueville is just as real as the other. What could have led the great French liberal to idolize war? The yearning to do great deeds was deeply rooted in Tocqueville’s heart. In 1834 he spent a few weeks in the country, something he had not done since he was a child. He wrote to Kergolay:

I do not know what I will become, but I feel very strongly that it would be easier for me to leave for China, to enlist as a soldier, or to gamble my life in I know not what hazardous and poorly conceived venture, than to condemn myself to leading the life of a potato, like the decent people I have just seen.

A few months later he wrote again to Kergolay, in the same vein:

Oh, how I wish that Providence would present me with some opportunity to make use in order to accomplish good and grand things, whatever dangers Providence might attach to them — of this internal flame I feel within me that does not know where to find what feeds it.

Tocqueville never found such an opportunity for heroism. He pursued a rather mediocre political career and wrote great books. But throughout these books — and in his letters — he expresses his profound admiration, even awe, for heroic and, above all, energetic and passionate characters. The spectacle of *grandeur* in human personality and action evoked is praise. In the Preface to his *Old Regime and the Revolution*, he confesses that he has made a point of “throwing into relief” virtues such as “a healthy independence, high ambitions, faith in oneself, and in a cause.” Later in that work he speaks with feeling of many of the figures of that earlier time:

This spirit of independence [which] kept alive in many individuals their sense of personality and encouraged them to retain their color and relief. More than this, it fostered a healthy self-respect and often an overmastering desire to make a name for themselves. This is why we find in 18th century France so many outstanding personalities, those men of genius, proud and greatly daring, who made the Revolution what it was: at once the admiration and the terror of succeeding generations.

Tocqueville respected and revered men of energy and force to an extent regardless of the good or evil they produced, an attitude sometimes associated with the Italian Renaissance. When Gobineau suggested in a letter that France was a nation in decline, Tocqueville was indignant:

As if, above all, we had not produced a constant stream of great writers during the past three centuries, stirring and moving the spirit of mankind most powerfully — whether in the right or the wrong direction may be arguable, but their power one cannot doubt. ... Strong hatreds, ardent passions, high hopes and powerful convictions are — all — necessary to make human minds move. ... Right now nothing is strongly believed, nothing is loved, nothing is hated, and people wish for nothing but a quick profit on the stock exchange.

Notice that Tocqueville contrasts the heroic personality with the kind of man produced by modern society, relentlessly pursuing wealth and abandoned to individualism. Despite his protestations of impartiality, it is clear enough which human type Tocqueville favored. Early in Part II of *Democracy in America* he draws a picture of the aristocratic posture in which it is not difficult to see strong traces of his own:

Aristocracies often commit very tyrannical and inhuman actions, but they rarely entertain grovelling thoughts, and they show a kind of haughty contempt of little pleasures even while they indulge in them. The effect is to raise greatly the general pitch of society. In aristocratic ages, vast ideas are commonly entertained of the dignity, the power, and the greatness of man.

This aspect of Tocqueville's thought is obviously linked to many of his idealistic concerns — his insistence on the need to arouse pride in modern-day man, for example, and his horror of all theories suggesting that man is a mere pawn in the hands of fate. But it is linked also to his ardor for the imperialism of the European states and his fondness for war.

Tocqueville was excited by the prospect of Europe's conquering much of the rest of the world, which he foresaw occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century. Gobineau, who was a student of Oriental history, had written Tocqueville predicting the eventual decline of the West. Tocqueville fired back a reply.

You say that one day we shall resemble your Eastern mobs: perhaps. But before that happens, we shall be their masters. A few million men who, a few centuries ago, lived nearly shirtless in the forests and in the marshes of Europe will, within a hundred years, have transformed the globe and dominated the other races. Seldom has Providence shown us an aspect of the future so clearly. The European races are often the greatest rogues, but at least they are rogues to whom God gave will and power and whom he seems to have destined for some time to be at the head of mankind.

Tocqueville favored imperialism for its civilizing work, but even more for the glory it brought the imperial power. He was particularly stirred by the Raj — British dominion over India. In 1857, the Sepoy Rebellion — the mutiny of the native troops in India — broke out, with appalling massacres on both sides.

Nassau Senior was a representative of the “Little England,” or anti-imperialist position, which was standard among British liberals. In the summer of 1858, Senior wrote Tocqueville:

The world, I think, is gradually coming over to an opinion which, when I maintained it thirty years ago, was treated as a ridiculous paradox — that India is and always has been a great misfortune to us; and that, if it were possible to get quit of it, we should be richer and stronger.

Tocqueville did not directly contradict his old friend’s views. But in a letter he had written earlier to another English correspondent, Lady Teresa Lewis, he was adamant. It made no difference if India cost the British much more than gained from it. That was not the point. The writer who had traced the settlement of America by a free people found it possible to say:

There has never been anything under the sun as extraordinary as the conquest — and, above all, the government — of India by the English, anything which from every corner of the globe more attracts the imagination of men to that small island of whose very name the Greeks were unaware. Do you believe, Madame, that a people can, after having filled this immense space in the imagination of the human species, withdraw from it with impunity?

Tocqueville was a practical, not just a theoretical, proponent of imperialism. As a member of the Chamber of Deputies, he concerned himself with the “pacification” of France’s latest colony, Algeria, and even visited that country to see for himself how the war and colonization were going. He urged massive French settlement, entailing widespread expropriation of the native inhabitants. In Algeria the French could, he thought, play the same role the English had played in North America. Nowhere does he display the kind of sympathy for the native Arabs that he had shown for the American Indians. The French generals Bugeaud and Moriciere, whose brutality in crushing the Algerians became notorious, found a champion in Tocqueville.

In his speeches in the Chamber, he demonstrated that he was not averse to risking war on a much greater scale. In 1840, France came into conflict with England and other powers over affairs between Egypt and the Turkish Empire. Tocqueville proclaimed that, sooner than make concessions and lose face, France should threaten to make war. This annoyed and provoked his English friends, especially John Stuart Mill and Nassau Senior. As good classical liberals, they could not comprehend how Tocqueville could suggest war — with all its attendant horrors — for such a trivial reason. Mill pointed out that true national greatness consisted in “love of liberty, of progress, even of material prosperity.” Nassau Senior wrote, chiding his friend:

The speech which you addressed to the French Chamber would have been utterly ruinous to any English statesman. What! (it would have been said). To think of going to war merely to prevent our being excluded from taking part in the affairs of Syria or Egypt? Or to show that we were not unable to go to war? In the English [Parliament] we should consider such proposals as scarcely deserving a serious answer. The passage which you *struck out* of the address — namely, that *if you were attacked* you would resist, forms the groundwork of all English feeling on peace and war.

Tocqueville was not moved by the chastisements of his friends. It is not that he was unaware of the grave dangers to liberty that arise from war. In one of his notebooks he had written:

In order to make war, it is necessary to create a very energetic and almost tyrannical central power. It is necessary

to permit it many acts of violence and arbitrariness. War can result in delivering over to this power the liberty of a nation.

This was no mere fleeting thought; it found its way into Part II of *Democracy in America*:

The democratic tendency that leads men unceasingly to multiply the privileges of the state and to circumscribe the right of private persons is much more rapid and constant among those nations that are exposed by their position to great and frequent wars than among all others.

Thus, despite this great — possibly mortal — threat to freedom, Tocqueville believed that imperialism and war should be pursued by statesmen. What can explain this? As we have seen, Tocqueville scorned the small-minded preference for pleasure over greatness of character and achievement. War is the least self-indulgent, the least hedonistic of activities — at least as waged by modern armies, which are seldom out for plunder or booty. Thus, it goes against the current of modern society, since it represents the ultimate in self-sacrifice. At the same time, it nurtures parts of the personality — like a feeling of comradeship and a sense of honor — that also raise the individual above himself. These are “necessary correctives” in democratic society. As he says in Part II:

What is to be dreaded most is that in the midst of the small, incessant occupations of private life, ambition should lose its vigor and its greatness; that the passions of man should abate, but at the same time be lowered; so that the march of society should every day become more tranquil and less aspiring.

I think that the leaders of modern society would be wrong to seek to lull the community by a state of too uniform and too peaceful happiness, and that it is well to expose it from time to time to matters of difficulty and danger in order to raise ambition and give it a field of action.

Tocqueville was committed to energy, passion, and grandeur as values independent of liberty, and he believed deeply that sometimes liberty had to be risked for the sake of his aesthetic ideal of human personality.

Tocqueville's Conclusions and Insights

IN PART I OF *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*, Tocqueville had glimpsed the potential for modern tyranny in several different directions. If despotism came, it might be in the form of an all-powerful legislature, or control of an omnipresent majority, or even a military dictator. He had also mentioned the possibility of centralization of power in the state-apparatus itself, the bureaucracy. In Part II, this becomes his overriding fear.

Tocqueville was well aware that government activity was expanding everywhere in Europe, but the situation in his own country preoccupied him:

I assert that there is no country in Europe where the public administration has become not only more centralized, but more inquisitive and more minute [than in France]; everywhere it interferes in private concerns more than it did; it regulates more undertakings, and undertakings of a lesser kind; and it gains a firmer footing ever day, about, above, and around all private persons, to assist, to advise, and to coerce them.

Everywhere the central government seemed to be absorbing the life of society — in education, in charitable endeavors, even in religious affairs. And, in recent years, another whole field had been opened up to government encroachment — the new world of industry.

Although Tocqueville had no great interest in economics, beginning in the late 1830s, industrial developments came to the fore in French

politics, and, as a deputy, Tocqueville was made aware of the vast potential for abuse in this field. He wrote to Royer-Collard:

In the present century, to deliver over to the government the direction of industry is to surrender to it the very heart of the next generation. It is one more great link added to the long chain that already envelops and presses the individual on all sides.

Tocqueville saw that industry would count for more and more as time went on, and the specter of economic control being added to *political* domination almost filled him with despair. As he expresses it in Part II:

Governments appropriate to themselves and put to their own use the greater part of the new force which industry has created in the world of our time. Industry leads us along, and they lead industry.

The beneficiaries of government aggrandizement of all areas of life was the carried on the government's business — that *incarnated* the state more than any nominal ruler: the bureaucracy.

In proportion as the functions of the central power are augmented, the number of public offices representing that power must also increase. They form a nation within each nation; and as they share the stability of the government, they more and more fill up the place of an aristocracy.

Tocqueville was well aware of the connections between growing centralization and the bureaucratic class.

Centralized government had been refined and consummated by Napoleon, but his way had been paved by the Revolution. Under the Old Regime, the king used to send out officials — called *intendants* — who were in charge of the various provinces. But these *intendants* had to confront the different privileged groups and assemblies of the complex system that had been built up through the centuries — groups like the provincial estates, judges who *owned* their offices because they had bought or inherited them, towns with special chartered rights, and so on. All these the Revolution swept away. Now, under the Napoleonic regime, when an official (now called a *prefect*) was put in charge of one of the departments which the territory of France had been divided into, he encountered no resistance or rivalry. One of Napoleon's followers exultantly described the system:

The prefect, essentially charged with the execution of orders from Paris, transmits these orders to the sub-prefect; from him they are passed on to the mayors of the cities, towns, and villages. In this manner, the chain of execution descends uninterruptedly from the minister to the administered and transmits the law and the orders of the government to the last branchings of the social order with the rapidity of an electric flow.

After his trip to America, when he was wrestling with his great themes, he wrote to his father, asking for his opinion on the prospects for decentralization in France. After all, its advantages for America — in the vitality of the nation and the citizen's education for public affairs — were indisputable. As a prefect under the Restoration, Hervé de Tocqueville was well acquainted with administration in France. He replied that the kind of federation possessed by the Americans was unsuitable for France, surrounded by powerful neighbors. Still, it was hardly necessary to shunt every local affair, down to the smallest, to a ministry in Paris. Would there ever be a revival of local liberties? Tocqueville's father doubted it, and his reason is interesting:

There exist too many persons for whom centralization is profitable, or who hold a position in the central bureaucracy that they would seek in vain elsewhere, for these abuses to be uprooted for a long time. These people have established it as an article of faith that nothing is done well except by the government itself, and they will defend this dogma with obstinacy.

Tocqueville gathered the same view from other sources as well. In England, he spoke with the liberal reformer John Bowring, who was proud of the decentralized system England enjoyed at that time. Of France, however, Bowring said:

You will never be able to decentralize. Centralization is too good a bait for the greed of the rulers. Even those who once preached decentralization always abandon their doctrines on coming to power. You can be sure of that.

Tocqueville's experiences while serving in the Chamber confirmed this view. And he was able to identify the social base of this bureaucratic Leviathan: it derives from the *middle class*. In his *Recollections*, written when his

political career was over, he indicts this middle-class, or bourgeoisie, that had come to power under the monarchy of Louis Philippe:

It entrenched itself in every vacant government position, prodigiously augmented the number of such positions, and accustomed itself to living almost as much upon the public treasury as upon its own efforts.

What occurs in the course of the development of the modern State is a cancerous growth of government functionaries, largely drawn from the educated middle-class. Rather than finding productive occupations in the voluntary, market-sector of society, more and more members of this class prefer to snare a niche for themselves in the bureaucracy. In his later years, Tocqueville continued his study of this social pathology, adding a wider historical perspective. The growth of the state-apparatus, he found, had been proceeding for centuries.

Now, given this relentlessly spreading central government absorbing more and more of the life of society, given the obsession with material pleasures and self-advancement that foster individualism and turn people away from the affairs of their society, Tocqueville is ready to depict the great danger he sees in the future. It is something new in the world, and, since he cannot give it a name, he will describe it:

I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observer is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike. ... Each exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country.

Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon it upon itself to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, it prepared men for manhood. But it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood. It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry. ... What remains but to spare them all the care of thinking and all trouble of living?

It is not too difficult to see why Tocqueville has been referred to as “a prophet,” the “prophet of mass society.” To some commentators, he was able to foresee, in the midst of the age of liberalism, the rise of totalitarian government. To others, what Tocqueville seems to be tracing is the modern Welfare State, which offers the people cradle-to-grave security and, Tocqueville would say, asks for nothing in return but their freedom.

Some will be astonished by what appears to be Tocqueville’s intuition in foreseeing the rise of an all-powerful government. After all, wasn’t his own time, the mid-nineteenth century, the age of next to no government, of the triumph of the *laissez-faire* philosophy restricting the state behind the most severe barriers possible? But the fact is that the steady growth of the government — of the social functions it claimed competence over and especially of its bureaucracy — was almost a cliché of political thought of the time. From classical liberals like Thomas Macaulay and Frédéric Bastiat to anarchists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Michael Bakunin, the warning was sounded of the rise of the kind of state that would monopolize all of the activities of society. Such a warning was also issued by a man many would hardly expect it from — Karl Marx. In 1852, he described the French government as he saw it:

This executive power, with its enormous bureaucracy and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy. [Succeeding regimes] added [to it]. ... Every common interest was straightway severed from society ... snatched from the activity of society’s members themselves, and made an object of government activity, from a bridge, a schoolhouse ... to the railways, the national wealth, and the national university of France. ... All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it. ... As against civil society, the state machine has consolidated its position ... thoroughly.

This is not to detract from Tocqueville’s contribution, however. What he showed was that the growing state power was bound up with the rise of democratic society and, particularly, with the provision of “gratifications” to the people. The New Despotism, if it came, would be insidious, he pointed out, because it would be a *mild* and *benevolent* one. Was there

then no hope for the survival of freedom in democratic societies? Tocqueville was far from believing that. True to his deep belief that democracy always shows conflicting and clashing tendencies, he now directs attention to democratic values that will help the ongoing struggle for freedom:

The men who live in the democratic ages upon which we are entering have naturally a taste for independence: they are naturally impatient of regulation. ... They are fond of power, but they are prone to despise and hate those who wield it. ... These propensities will always manifest themselves, because they originate in the groundwork of society. For a long time they will prevent the establishment of any despotism, and they will furnish fresh weapons to each succeeding generation that struggles in favor of the liberty of mankind. Let us, then, look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart.

In the last few paragraphs of his great work, Tocqueville takes on one of the most intractable problems of the philosophy of history. Do men have the freedom to decide their own destiny, or are they merely the unknowing agents of some deeper forces? He himself seemed to have pointed to the second conclusion at the very beginning of his work, when he wrote of the advance of equality as a “Providential fact” — that is, as something willed by God. Now his position seems to be more complex:

I am aware that many of my contemporaries maintain that nations are never their own masters here below, and that they necessarily obey some insurmountable and unintelligible power, arising from anterior events, from their race, or from the soil and climate of their country. Such principles are false and cowardly; such principles can never produce aught but feeble men and pusillanimous nations. Providence has not created mankind entirely independent or entirely free. It is true that around every man a fatal circle is traced beyond which he cannot pass. But within the wide verge of that circle he is powerful and free. As it is with man, so with communities.

And Tocqueville concludes with a statement that reveals his ultimate aim in undertaking to analyze democracy in America and in his age:

The nations of our time cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal, but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness.

Publication and Its Aftermath

THE RESPONSE OF REVIEWERS AND PUBLIC to Part II of *Democracy in America* was much less enthusiastic than it had been to Part I. They seemed to find Tocqueville's use of "ideal types" and his depictions of the future too speculative and confusing. Tocqueville was hurt by the general reaction, and led to moments of self-doubt: If he really had any merit as a thinker, how could he have spent four years of his life writing a book of such little merit? But his friends reassured him, and John Stuart Mill's enthusiastic review filled him with joy. In 1841, he was elected to the French Academy — "the forty immortals," as they are called — the peak of the French intellectual world.

In any case, Tocqueville was aiming now for distinction in a career of politics. This was, in a way, the logical conclusion of his book. Now he would try to do what a statesman could to channel the forces of democracy in the right direction.

Tocqueville was never able to become a political leader, however, although he served in the Chamber of Deputies and in the assembly that followed the Revolution of 1848. In part, this was because of his scruples and unwillingness to compromise. Beaumont, who served as a Deputy with Tocqueville and was a political ally, afterwards put it this way:

Tocqueville was ambitious — he wished for power. So did I. We would gladly have become ministers. But nothing would have tempted us to sit in a cabinet in which we were constantly outvoted, or to defend, as Guizot did in

the Chamber, conduct which we had disapproved in the Council.

Nassau Senior stressed other reasons for Tocqueville's lack of success:

His talents and knowledge, and courage and character seem to point him out for a leader. But, in the first place, he wants physical strength. As a consequence of this want, he has never practiced the constant debating which is required of the head of a party. And, secondly, he is intolerant of mediocrity. He will not court, or talk over, or even listen to, the commonplace men who form the rank and file of every assembly. He scarcely knows their names.

Tocqueville was active in the colonization of Algeria, as we have seen, and, perhaps more in keeping with his liberal principles, in the fight to abolish slavery in the French overseas colonies, a campaign that met with failure.

As the years passed, Tocqueville grew more disgusted with French society under the July Monarchy. Public-spiritedness, the will to work for the public good and the maintenance of freedom — for anything beyond personal gain by any and all means — seemed to have vanished. The lust for wealth to the exclusion of all else was noted by other observers, including the cynic and famous novelist, Honoré de Balzac:

It is a mistake to believe that it is King Louis-Philippe who reigns, and he himself is not deceived on this point. He knows, just as we do, that above the Constitution stands the holy, venerable, solid, amiable, gracious, beautiful, noble, young, all-powerful five-franc piece.

Tocqueville saw the intimate links between the scuffling for material gain and the political system of the July monarchy. He wrote to Nassau Senior in 1847:

The system of administration that has been practiced for seventeen years has so perverted the middle class, by making a constant appeal to the individual cupidities of its members, that this class is gradually becoming, for the rest of the nation, a little corrupt and vulgar aristocracy. But how to prevent the government from corrupting, when the elective regime naturally gives it so much occasion to do so, and centralization so many means?

For some while, Tocqueville had seen violence coming. In January, 1848, he warned his complacent colleagues in the Chamber that they were sitting on a volcano, that an upheaval was imminent, and now the issue would be, not aristocratic privilege, but property itself. In February, the dissatisfaction with Louis Philippe's regime that had smouldered for years broke out in revolution. A Republic was proclaimed — the Second Republic — but while socialist influence was strong in Paris, the provinces were heavily conservative. For a while, there was an uneasy truce. When elections brought a conservative assembly to power, socialist intellectuals led the Parisian workers in an uprising — the June Days. Tocqueville, who was in Paris at the time, wrote frantic letters to his friends in other towns, urging the provinces to hurl themselves at Paris. The insurrection was bloodily suppressed, but everywhere class-hatred was palpable. In the aftermath of the June Days, Tocqueville, a well-known member of the Assembly and enemy of the “Reds,” as they were called, had reason to fear for his life. Harriet Grote later reported on an incident related to her by Tocqueville:

He had occasion to stay out somewhat late, returning to his dwelling some time after the inmates of the hotel had retired to rest. ... The concierge [or hotel-keeper] accosted him thus: “Do you know, M. de Tocqueville, that I am very much alarmed at some unaccountable noises, which seem to proceed from a building at the farther end of our court? ... If Monsieur would be so good as to come with me, I should like to know from whence these odd noises proceed.” M. de Tocqueville instantly saw that this was a pretext to entice him to a lonesome spot. ... “Allons,” cried he, “do you march first, because you carry the light.” ... At this particular period he habitually carried in his breast pocket a small loaded pistol, and, as he followed the concierge up this long silent entry, he kept his right hand upon the weapon. Alexis de Tocqueville probably owed his escape from the designs of the “Red” to his insisting on the latter preceding. He never once suffered the concierge to get near to or behind him, and the latter probably guessed M. de Tocqueville to be ready for him by his keeping his hand on his bosom.

Tocqueville was shocked — and frightened as well — by the June Days. Still, he rejected the view of those conservatives who held that the insurrectionists were nothing but “social scum,” avid for plunder. In reality,

they suffered a “prodigious ignorance” of economics, and they were easily persuaded that state control of production would bring them affluence. Beyond that, they had their own ideals. Tocqueville wrote as friend:

In the June uprising, there was something other than bad propensities: there were false ideas. Many of these men, who were marching toward the overthrow of the most sacred rights, were led by a sort of mistaken notion of right. They sincerely believed that society was founded on injustice, and they wanted to give it another basis. It is this kind of *revolutionary religion* that our bayonets and our cannons will not destroy.

Ideas, Tocqueville believed, had to be fought with ideas.

In the elections for President of the Republic, the people, to Tocqueville’s chagrin, turned to a candidate they imagined to be a strong man — Louis Napoleon, nephew of the emperor and Bonapartist pretender to the throne. Tocqueville continued in the Assembly, and served briefly as foreign minister. Louis Napoleon was not content to remain a mere president under the conditions of the constitution that had been established, however. In December, 1851, he took control through a coup d’état — Tocqueville and scores of other liberal deputies were purged. A year later, Louis Napoleon declared himself emperor. Tocqueville was enraged by the turn of events. As he had predicted in Part II of *Democracy in America*, the fear of revolutionary disturbances had thrown the people into the arms of a despot. Now, filled with great bitterness, Tocqueville already foresaw the downfall of the new Napoleon and his Second Empire. He wrote to Henry Reeve:

We know this only too well in France: governments never escape the law of their origins. This one, which arrives by means of the army, which finds its popularity in the memories of military glory, this government will be dragged fatally into wanting territorial expansion, spheres of influence, in other words, war. In war it will surely find death, but perhaps then its death will cost us very dearly.

The Second Empire did, indeed, involve France in military conflicts and adventures. Finally, in 1870, 18 years after Tocqueville had written these lines and eleven years after his death, Napoleon III embroiled his country in war with Prussia and the other German states — the Franco-Prussian War. France quickly succumbed, Napoleon III was overthrown, and, in the

peace treaty, the new German Reich annexed the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, a major cause of the First World War.

Tocqueville was growing disillusioned with politics. At times, considering the prospects for social stability, he was close to despair. In his *Recollections*, written around this time, but not meant for publication, he wrote:

Shall we ever attain a more complete and far-reaching social transformation than our forefathers foresaw and desired, or are we not destined simply to end in a condition of intermittant anarchy, the well-known, chronic, and incurable complaint of old nations? As for me, I am unable to say. I do not know when this long voyage will be ended. I am weary of seeing the shore in each successive mirage, and I often ask myself whether the terra firma we are seeking does really exist, or whether we are not doomed to rove upon the seas forever.

With active politics now closed to him, Tocqueville began to entertain the idea of another great literary work. The subject would have to have direct bearing on the contemporary world — nothing else could engage his interest and powers. He comforted himself with the thought that, when all was said and done, political figures rarely advance the good of mankind to any discernible degree anyway. He wrote with a new excitement to Nassau Senior:

Now, on the contrary, what a vast effect a *writer* can produce, when he possesses the requisite knowledge and endowments! In his study, his thoughts collected, his ideas well arranged, he may hope to imprint indelible traces on the line of human progress. What orator, what brilliant patriot of the tribune, could ever effect the vast agitation of a whole nation's feelings achieved by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques?

The subject Tocqueville selected was one that was worthy of his talents: the French Revolution itself. Others had written extensively before him. An early historian of the Revolution was Madame de Stael, who wrote from a liberal perspective. Later, Jules Michelet took up the topic from a democratic point of view, Louis Blanc from a socialist one; and there were others. Tocqueville's work was more analytical, some would say, more sociological. He delved into the provincial archives, into the records of the

Old Regime, in order to discover what difference the Revolution had actually made. His conclusion: much less than had been supposed. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, published in 1856, Tocqueville showed that the process of concentration of power had been going on for centuries; the Revolution and Napoleon simply continued the work of the French kings. All in all, Tocqueville's book is filled with such insight and finesse in judgment that it has become a classic; it is constantly referred to by historians of the Revolutionary period.

Just as with *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville had an ulterior aim in composing *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, and it was the same one: "to show men," as he explained to a friend, "how to escape tyranny." In his Foreward to the book, Tocqueville expresses many of his familiar misgivings on the future of liberty. The great problem is still "individualism," which is encouraged — he has in mind Napoleon III, although he does not name him — because it plays so well into his hands. But now Tocqueville doubts that religious faith as a bulwark against tyranny. He had observed with disgust the fervent support the Catholic Church was giving to the Second Empire. In the Foreward, he observes dryly that "the patrimony of the Christian is not of this world" — here, Tocqueville approaches Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim that the devout Christian makes a bad citizen. The only hope lies in public spiritedness and citizen participation in government, but how this is to be brought about Tocqueville does not say. He ends with a strike at Napoleon III and his fellow tyrants through the ages:

Even despots do not deny the merits of freedom, only they wish to keep it for themselves, claiming that no one else is worthy of it. Thus our quarrel is not about the value of freedom per se, but stems from our opinion of our fellow men. It is no exaggeration to say that a man's admiration of absolute government is proportionate to the contempt he feels for those around him. I trust I may be allowed to wait a little longer before being converted to such a view of my fellow countrymen.

Tocqueville was never to finish his work on the French Revolution, although numerous notes and drafts survive. His health was never good, and now it began to falter. More and more, he opened his mind to the assuagements of the religion of his fathers. He also tried to grasp the deepest meaning of his life. He wrote to Madame Swetchine:

I believe that my sentiments and my desires are in access of my capacities. I believe that God has given me a natural taste for great actions and great virtues, and that despair at never being able to lay hold on the grand vision that floats before my eyes, the sadness of living in a world and an epoch that answers so little to that ideal creation in which my spirit loves to dwell — I believe, I say, that these impressions which age does nothing to weaken, are among the chief causes of this interior *malaise* of which I have never been able to get the better. But to how many less reputable causes must I not attribute them also?

Tocqueville died in 1859; the loss was felt and lamented throughout the western intellectual world. What might he not have discovered of the depths and hidden recesses of modern society in another fifteen or twenty years? His friends mourned also the passing of a unique spirit. Mrs. Simpson ended her book on the long years of correspondence and conversation of her father, Nassau Senior, with Tocqueville, by describing a visit to Normandy:

One day my father and I visited the little green churchyard on a cliff near the sea where Tocqueville is buried. There is a plain gray slab — on it a cross is cut in bas-relief, with these words only:

Here rests Alexis de Tocqueville, born the 24th
of February 1805, died the 16th of April 1859.

My father laid a wreath of immortelles on the tomb.

