

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE
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The August Bulletin carried an abstracted article on how lawyers in this country have come to dominate American society, and in it were some observations and predications of Alexis de Tocqueville. In spite of the frequent mention of his name as an authority of reference, most of us are unbelievably ignorant about who he was, what he wrote, when he wrote and why he wrote. Someone has remarked that Tocqueville has: "attained peculiarly modern state of intellectual eminence, where he is frequently quoted but seldom read." Now, the 200th year of our democracy, seems like a good time to become more familiar with him.

Alexis Charles Henri Maurice Claret de Tocqueville, a great-grandson of the French minister, Malesherbes, and nephew of the controversial author and politician Chateaubriand was born in 1805, the third son of Comte Herve de Tocqueville. He was educated in the manner of the nobility and at 18 went to study law in Paris. Three years later he began a career as a magistrate in the court of Versailles.

In 1831, at the age of 26, he arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, for a nine-month tour of the United States. Although he was a lawyer and not a journalist, his extensive report, "Democracy in America" (the first part of which appeared in 1835) should classify him as one of the first, and finest, investigative reporters of modern times. Tocqueville's work remains the most exhaustive and penetrating study of the United States ever published. Written in the most lucid of literary styles, the book is still considered the comprehensive model of an impartial and systematic study of American institutions.

Tocqueville came with a young friend and fellow lawyer, Gustave de Beaumont, primarily to get out of France for a while following the July Revolution, which replaced the Bourbons and endangered the status of royalist nobility once again. Officially, he had wrangled his government's approval to come (though at his own expense) and study the new American prison reforms. He carried out his assignment with diligence; however, after the first month of his visit, his interest became more and more centered on the country itself, its geography and its peoples and their character, customs and politics.

In 1831 when Tocqueville arrived in America, our Constitution had been in effect almost fifty years. There were twenty-four states in the Union; the population was almost 13,000,000 and just beginning to spread west of the Mississippi. Louisiana and Missouri had just been admitted as states, and there was still a great deal of Indian Territory in the southern states of Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Florida. General Andrew Jackson was in his first term as President.

Starting from New York State, Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled west to Detroit and from there to wilderness outposts, even reaching Green Bay on the western shore of Lake Michigan. Returning to Buffalo and Niagara Falls, the two journeyed north to Montreal and Quebec in French Canada, then down by way of Albany to Boston. After a stay in the northeast, they headed south to Baltimore and Philadelphia, then westward to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati and from there followed the Ohio-to-Louisville-and-Cairo route through Mississippi, Alabama (Montgomery), Georgia probably (LaGrange) and on up through the Carolinas to Norfolk. They proceeded up the Chesapeake to Washington in late January 1832 and finally sailed from New York to return home the next month.

Theirs was a monumental tour, considering the transportation difficulties of the time; but, on foot and by horseback, stagecoach, canoe and boat, they accomplished the journey with no recorded disasters or disappointments. On occasion, Tocqueville would complain mildly about primitive lodgings, uncomfortable coaches with no springs and mosquito swarms in the Michigan wilderness, but the red-carpet treatment received in all the civilized centers apparently more than made up for any traveling inconveniences.

Both Tocqueville and Beaumont were ideal—if not usual—tourists. They were young, intelligent, superbly educated, and possessed of unbounded energy and curiosity. Their tact and understanding were such that they were welcomed everywhere with enthusiasm and, in spite of their youth and questionable official status, as important emissaries from France—much to their astonishment and amusement. They met and talked with an incredible number of people, some by design and some by chance, including Ex-President John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, Robert Poinsett and even President Jackson.

It is difficult to summarize the whole of Tocqueville writings on American democracy as he covered every facet in voluminous detail. His resolve was to determine the results of democracy on a people and to divine its natural consequences. His was a philosophical and speculative study of the effects of popular government upon a whole society, and he wrote, primarily, to acquaint Europeans with what was going on in the New World. His work persuaded the liberals of the 19th century that aristocracy was finished, and that Europe would move inescapably toward democracy and social equality. However, he also pointed out that democratic self-government was not necessarily the best government, nor even, perhaps, the desirable one. Actually, he preferred, for Europe at least, some form of constitutional monarchy—because he felt that raising the lower classes to a share in power and responsibility would bring dangers as well as opportunities. He warned that once all classes and privileged groups were leveled, the obstacles to anarchy and despotism would also be removed. He was a passionate believer

in liberty but considered it incompatible with total equality.

Tocqueville made interesting comments and predictions about the race problems in America. The Indian, he felt, would never submit to civilization and could never, because of his pride, his indolence and his preference for the life of the hunter, which considered manual labor not merely an evil, but a disgrace, be assimilated or successfully Europeanized. It was his opinion that: "Whenever the European shall be established on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, that race of men will be no more."

The Negro, he said, had been deprived through slavery of all privileges. He had been sold by his own people and repulsed by his adopted ones; he had no remembrance of his own country and had forgotten his own language and customs. The habit of servitude had given him the thoughts and desires of a slave; he admired his masters more than he hated them and took pride in imitating those who oppressed him. "If he becomes free, he finds that independence is a heavier burden than slavery. While slavery brutalized him, liberty destroyed him." Another of Tocqueville observations was: "The prejudice of race appears stronger in the states which have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known."

Contrasting the Indian with the Negro, he wrote: "The Negro, who earnestly desires to mingle his race with that of the European, cannot effect it; while the Indian, who might succeed in doing so to a certain extent, disdains to make the attempt. The servility of one dooms him to slavery, the pride of the other to death." Tocqueville concluded: "The most formidable of all ills which threaten the future existence of the Union arises from the presence of a black population on its territory."

Apart from the race problems, Tocqueville warned of the danger of increasing the central authority to the point where the government would become "the controlling shepherd." He was convinced that the basis of democracy's success in America lay in its stress on local self-government and that its strength derived from the three-way division of national authority; but he cautioned that if ever one of these should become strengthened or weakened at the expense of the other, danger would follow. He believed in the right of private property and warned of attempting to sacrifice the rights of the individual to the general execution of a central government's design.

Tocqueville felt that the basic Puritan character of the New England settlers (independence, middle class aggressiveness, thrift, religion, energy and adventurous spirit) set the tone for American character. He considered American society as a society of middle-class values (as contrasted to aristocracy and peasant class) interested in

business and making money. He felt that the first real test of American democracy would come after the continent had entirely filled up and when it would experience the destructiveness of competition and begin to feel the pressures of population on its resources.

Not long after his work was published, and partly as a result of the widespread acclaim with which it was received, Tocqueville entered politics and served for many years in the French Parliament. Later, after another coup d'état and the advent of Louis Napoleon, he was imprisoned briefly and, soon after that, in 1852, withdrew from public life to spend his remaining years traveling and writing. He died at Cannes at the age of 54 in 1859.

In this year of our Bicentennial, and particularly with a choice soon to be made between differing presidential philosophies, it is interesting to read and digest what Tocqueville wrote about us almost 150 years ago. In spite of his birth and aristocratic sympathies, he was one of the least biased, most rational, and shrewdest (if more pessimistic) political observers of his century. One wonders what Tocqueville would think of American democracy today. At any rate, it might be helpful if the ghost of Alexis de Tocqueville could reappear on our shore today to study and analyze impartially what goes on and point our way to the future.

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