



Democracy in America

by Alexis De Tocqueville



De Tocqueville

Originally published in 1835, 1840. Edited and abridged by Richard D. Heffner in 1955.

Frenchman Alexis De Tocqueville arrived in the United States in May, 1831, and left to return to France in February, 1832, only nine months later. Tocqueville's goal was to discover the general principles of democracy in America - and for applying them to his native France. His writings endowed his study with a timelessness and a philosophical scope that make it as important for our own period as it was for his.

Introduction by R. Heffner:

"First published in 1835 and 1840, Democracy in America remains pre-eminently a tract for our times." "Born in Paris on July 29, 1805, Tocqueville was descended from a proud old Norman family that for long generations had been considered among the petite noblesse. Thus it required no particular devotion to the villainies of the ancient regime to make Tocqueville initially suspicious of majority rule. The leveling doctrines of the French Revolution had already taken a heavy toll within his own family and circle of friends. During the Revolution his parents had been jailed, his maternal grandfather, the Marquis of Rosambo, had been guillotined in the name of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." And though his father was ultimately returned to rank and position after the fall of Napoleon, Tocqueville's own childhood had been overshadowed by memories of these earlier popular excesses. In so many ways, then, he was both by birth and by circumstance ideally suited to the role of hostile critic of democracy in America."

"As Tocqueville himself wrote; 'It is not, then, merely to satisfy a legitimate curiosity that I have examined America; my wish has been to find there instruction by which we [France] may ourselves profit... I confess that, in America, I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions in order to learn what we have to fear or hope from its progress.'"

Tocqueville was born in 1805. He died from tuberculosis on April 16, 1859. He was buried in the Tocqueville cemetery in Normandy.

Quotes by the Author, Alexis De Tocqueville;

"Nothing is more striking to a European traveller in the United states than the absence of what we term the government."

"The conditions of men are more equal in Christian countries at the present day than they have been at any previous time, or in any part of the world; so that the magnitude of what already has been done prevents us from foreseeing what is yet to be accomplished."

"The tie of language is, perhaps, the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind."

"I have said enough to put the character of Anglo-American civilization in its true light. It is the result of two distinct elements, which in other places have been in frequent hostility, but which in America have been admirable incorporated and combined with one another. I allude to the spirit of Religion and the spirit of Liberty."

"Liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles and its triumphs, - as the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law, and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom...."

“If we would become acquainted with the legislation and the manners of a nation, therefore, we must begin by the study of its social condition.”

“In America, there are but few wealthy persons; nearly all Americans have to take a profession. Now, every profession requires an apprenticeship. ...At fifteen, they enter upon their calling, and thus their education generally ends at the age when ours begins. Whatever is done afterwards is with a view to some special and lucrative object; . . . and the only branch of it which is attended to is such as admits of an immediate practical application.”

“The gifts of intellect proceed directly from God, and man cannot prevent their unequal distribution. But it is at least a consequence of what we have just said, that although the capacities of men are different, as the Creator intended they should be, Americans find the means of putting them to use are equal.”

“Zealous Christians are still found amongst us, whose minds are nurtured on the thoughts which pertain to a future life, and who readily espouse the cause of human liberty as the source of all moral greatness. 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 eye of the law

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.”

“In former ages, slavery was advocated by the venal and slavish-minded, whilst the independent and the warm-hearted were struggling without hope to save the liberties of mankind. But men of high and generous characters are now to be met with, whose opinions are at variance with their inclinations, and who praise that servility which they have themselves never known.”

“In America, the aristocratic element has always been feeble from its birth; and if at the present day it is not actually destroyed, it is at any rate so completely disabled, that we can scarcely assign to it any degree of influence on the course of affairs.”

“They have been allowed by their circumstances, their origin, their intelligence, and especially by their morals, to establish and maintain the sovereignty of the people.”

“In some countries, a power exists which, though it is in a degree foreign to the social body, directs it, and forces it to pursue a certain track. In others, the ruling force is divided, being partly within and partly without the ranks of the people. But nothing of the kind is to be seen in the United States; there society governs itself for itself.” . . . The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe.”

“The principle of the sovereignty of the people governs the whole political system of the Anglo-Americans. Every page of this book will afford new applications of the same doctrine. In the nations by which the sovereignty of the people is recognized, every individual has an equal share of power, and participates equally in the government of the state. Why, then, does he obey the government, and what are the natural limits of this obedience? . . . He obeys the government, not because he is inferior to those who conduct . . . but because he acknowledges the utility of an association with his fellow-men, and he knows that no such association can exist without a regulating force.”

“. . . power has been disseminated with admirable skill, for the purpose of interesting the greatest possible number of persons in the common weal. Independently of the voters, who are from time to time called into action, the power is divided among innumerable functionaries and officers, who all, in their several spheres, represent the powerful community in whose name they act.”

“The Revolution of the United States was the result of a nature and reflecting preference of freedom, and not of a vague or ill-defined craving for independence. It contracted no alliance with the turbulent passions of anarchy; but its course was marked, on the contrary, by a love of order and law. It was never assumed in the United States, that the citizen of 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 officer insignificant, and that the community should be at once regulated and free.”

“The partisans of centralization in Europe are wont to maintain that the government can administer the affairs of each locality better than the citizens could do it for themselves.”

“In America, then, it may be said that no one renders obedience to man, but to justice and to law.”

“Yet I believe that in no country does crime more rarely elude punishment. The reason is, that every one conceives himself to be interested in furnishing evidence of the crime, and in seizing the delinquent. During my stay in the United States, I witness the spontaneous formation of committees in a country for the pursuit and prosecution of a man who had committed a great crime. In Europe, a criminal is an unhappy man who is struggling for his life against the agents of power, whilst the people are merely a spectator of the conflict: In America, he is looked upon as an enemy of the human race, and the whole of mankind is against him.”

“. . . the Americans have acknowledged the right of the judges to found their decision on the Constitution rather than on the laws. In other words, they have not permitted them to apply such laws as may appear to them to be unconstitutional.”

“When the inadequacy of the first constitution [the Articles of Confederation] was discovered, America had the double advantage of that calm which had succeeded the effervescence of the Revolution, and of the aid of those great men whom the revolution had created. The assembly which accepted the task of composing the second constitution [in 1787] was small; but George Washington was its President, and it contained the finest minds and the noblest characters which had ever appeared in the New World. This national convention, after long and mature deliberation, offered to the acceptance of the people the body of general laws which still rules the Union.”

(On the likelihood of the US going to war with Mexico)

“To the south, the Union has a point of contact with the empire of Mexico; and it is thence that serious hostilities may one day be expected to arise. But for a long while to come, the uncivilized state of the Mexican people, the depravity of their morals, and their extreme poverty, will prevent that country from ranking high amongst nations.”

“In the United States, there is no religious animosity, because all religion is respected, and no sect is predominant; there is no jealousy of rank, because the people are everything, and none can contest their authority.”

“. . . But it is owing to the laws of the Union that there are no licenses to be granted to printers, no securities demanded from editors, as in France, and no stamp duty, as in France and England. The consequence is, that nothing is easier than to set up a newspaper, as a small number of subscribers suffices to defray the expenses. Hence the number of periodical and semi-periodical publications in the United States is almost incredibly large.”

“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. 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. . . . In the United States, associations are established to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion. There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.”

“The most natural privilege of man, next to the right of acting for himself, is that of combining his exertions with those of his fellow-creatures, and of acting in common with them.”

“The defects and weaknesses of a democratic government may readily be discovered; they are demonstrated by flagrant instances A glance suffices to detect its faults, but its good qualities can be discerned only by long observation. The laws of the American democracy are frequently defective or incomplete; they sometimes attack vested rights, or sanction others which are dangerous to the community; and even if they were good, their frequency would still be a great evil. How comes it, then, that the American republics prosper and continue?”

Democratic laws generally tend to promote the welfare of the greatest possible number; for they emanate from the majority of the citizens, who are subject to error, but who cannot have an interest opposed to their own advantage. The laws of an aristocracy tend, on the contrary, to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the minority; because an aristocracy, by its very nature, constitutes a minority.”

“But I maintain that the most powerful, and perhaps the only, means which we still possess of interesting men in the welfare of their country, is to make them partakers in the government.”

“Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word, equality. But notice the difference: While democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and servitude.”

“How happens it that in the United States, where the inhabitants arrived but as yesterday upon the soil which they now occupy, and brought neither customs nor traditions with them. . . how happens it that every one takes as zealous an interest in the affairs of his township, his country, and the whole State, as if they were his own? It is because every one, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.”

“After the general idea of virtue, I know no higher principle than that of right; or rather these two ideas are united in one. The idea of right is simply that of virtue introduced into the political world. It was the idea of right which enabled men to define anarchy and tyranny; and which taught them how to be independent without arrogance, and to obey without servility. . . There are no great men without virtue; and there are no great nations, - it may almost be added, there would be no society, - without respect for right; for what is a union of rational and intelligent beings who are held together only by the bond of force?”

“The government of the democracy brings the notion of political rights to the level of the humblest citizens, just as the dissemination of wealth brings the notion of property within the reach of all men.”

“It cannot be repeated too often, that nothing is more fertile in prodigies than the art of being free; but there is nothing more arduous than the apprenticeship of liberty. It is not so with despotism: Despotism often promises to make amends for a thousand previous ills; it supports the right, it protects the oppressed, and it maintains public order. The nation is lulled by the temporary prosperity which it produces, until it is roused to a sense of its misery. Liberty, on the contrary, is generally established with difficulty in the midst of storms; it is perfected by civil discord; and its benefits cannot be appreciated until it is already old.”

Suggested follow up reading: The Foundations of America