

## Alexis de Tocqueville

### Chronicler of the American Democratic Experiment

*We are pleased to add this piece on Alexis de Tocqueville to our series of profiles that began with Frédéric Bastiat and Friedrich von Hayek. Both Bastiat and Hayek were strong and influential proponents of individual liberty and free enterprise. While they approached those topics from a theoretical perspective, Tocqueville's views on early American and French democracy were based on his keen personal observations and historical analysis. Although Tocqueville was Bastiat's contemporary, even serving with him in the French Chamber of Deputies during the great turmoil in post-revolutionary France, he is best known for his travels in the United States, where he observed and studied American democracy in action in the 1830s. The result was his two-volume classic, Democracy in America.*

*We hope this brief biography of the man who painted a vivid portrait of the American people helps students and others better understand the unique character of our democracy and freedom. For a fuller treatment, look up a new book, Tocqueville on American Character, by Michael A. Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute, published by Truman Talley Books.*

—**Bob McTeer**  
President  
Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas

#### The Early Years

Born in Paris in 1805, Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville entered the world in the early and most powerful days of Napoleon's empire. His parents were of the nobility and had taken the historical family name of Tocqueville, which dated from the early 17th century and was a region of France known previously as the Leverrier fief.

Tocqueville's father supported the French monarchy and played no serious role in public affairs until after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo, which followed the restoration of the monarchy under the Bourbon king Louis XVIII in 1814. The elder Tocqueville then served as prefect successively at Metz, Amiens and Versailles. Alexis followed his father in civil employment when, at the age of 21, he was appointed magistrate at Versailles. Alexis had studied rhetoric and philosophy in secondary school and at the College Royale before studying law for three years in Paris.

It was at Versailles that Alexis met Gustave de Beaumont, a deputy public prosecutor, who became both his lifelong friend and his traveling companion to America. Ostensibly, their trip through America was a leave for the two men to study the prison system in the eastern United States. But according to Beaumont, behind that pretext lay an interest in and a desire to study American democracy more generally.

And so, Tocqueville and Beaumont landed in New York on May 10, 1831, and began what became one of history's most famous journeys. The result was two books, both of which would

bring Tocqueville fame and honors. In 1833, about a year after Tocqueville returned to France, the report on American prisons, *The U.S. Penitentiary System and Its Application in France*, was published.

Things in France changed for Beaumont and Tocqueville upon their return after 10 months in America. Both men left the judiciary. Beaumont was officially let go, and Tocqueville resigned in sympathetic protest. Tocqueville then had ample time to work on his masterpiece, *Democracy in America*. Volume 1 was published in 1835. The English translation appeared later that same year to wide European and American acclaim. The more philosophical Volume 2 was published in 1840.

From its first appearance, this work has been considered a masterpiece of observation, speculation, historical writing and sound political theorizing. Its author was elevated to the League of Honor, the Academy of Moral and

#### Is a Democracy Immune from the Despotic Impulse?

I believe that it is easier to establish an absolute and despotic government among a people in which the conditions of society are equal than among any other; and I think that if such a government were once established among such a people, it not only would oppress men, but would eventually strip each of them of several of the highest qualities of humanity. Despotism, therefore, appears to me peculiarly to be dreaded in democratic times.

I should have loved freedom, I believe, at all times, but in the time in which we live, I am ready to worship it. ■

—From *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 322

## An Early Advocate of 'Welfare Reform'

There are two kinds of welfare. One leads each individual according to his means, to alleviate the evils he sees around him. This type is as old as the world; it began with human misfortune. Christianity made a divine virtue of it and called it charity. The other, less instructive, more reasoned, less emotional, and often more powerful, leads society to concern itself with the misfortunes of its members and is ready systematically to alleviate their sufferings. This type is born of Protestantism and has developed only in modern societies. The first type is a private virtue; it escapes social action; the second, on the contrary, is produced and regulated by society. It is therefore with the second that we must be especially concerned.

At first glance, there is no idea that seems more beautiful and grander than that of public charity. Society is continually examining itself, probing its wounds, and undertaking to cure them. At the same time that it assures the rich the enjoyment of their wealth, society guarantees the poor against excessive misery. It asks some to give of their surplus in order to allow others the basic necessities. This is certainly a moving and elevating sight.... Almost two and a half centuries have passed since the principle of legal charity was fully embraced by our neighbors [England], and one may now judge the fatal consequences that flowed from the adoption of this principle.... Since the poor have an absolute right to the help of society, and have a public administration organized to provide it everywhere, one can observe in a Protestant country the immediate rebirth and generalization of all the abuses with which its reformers rightly reproached some Catholic countries. Man, like all socially organized beings, has a natural passion for idleness. There are, however, two incentives to work: the need to live and the desire to improve the conditions of life. Experience has proven that the major-

ity of men can be sufficiently motivated to work only by the first of these incentives. The second is effective only with a small minority. Well, the charitable institution indiscriminately open to all those in need, or a law that gives all the poor a right to public aid, whatever the origin of their poverty, weakens or destroys the first stimulant and leaves only the second intact. The English peasant, like the Spanish peasant, if he does not feel the deep desire to better the position into which he has been born, and to raise himself out of his misery (a feeble desire which is easily crushed in the majority of men)—the peasant of both countries, I maintain, has no interest in working, or, if he works, has no interest in saving. He therefore remains idle or thoughtlessly squanders the fruits of his labors. Both these countries, by different causal patterns, arrive at the same result: the most generous, the most active, the most industrious part of the nation devotes its resources to furnishing the means of existence for those who do nothing or who make bad use of their labor.... Is it possible to escape the fatal consequences of a good principle? For myself I consider them inevitable.... Any measure that establishes legal charity on a permanent basis and gives it an administrative form thereby creates an idle and lazy class, living at the expense of the industrial and working class. This, at least, is its inevitable consequence if not the immediate result. It reproduced all the vices of the monastic system, minus the high ideals of morality and religion that often went along with it. Such a law is a bad seed planted in the legal structure. Circumstances, as in America, can prevent the seed from developing rapidly, but they cannot destroy it, and if the present generation escapes its influence, it will devour the well-being of generations to come. ■

—From *Memoir on Pauperism*, 51–58

Political Sciences and finally, in 1841, to the French Academy. *Democracy in America* was translated into all major languages at the time and sold all over the world.

### The Political Years

Tocqueville ran for the Chamber of Deputies, losing in 1837 but winning in 1839 and then serving continuously until 1848, voting as an independent constitutionalist. He married Mary Mottley in 1835 and, upon his mother's death the following year, inherited the family estates in Tocqueville. After the

revolution of 1848, which Tocqueville alone predicted a month before it occurred, he was elected to the Constituent Assembly in Paris. With Louis-Philippe's abdication, the so-called Second Republic died in 1848.

Although Tocqueville had little love for the departed monarchy, he feared the Parisian revolutionaries because he considered all revolutions a threat to general liberty as they unfolded. (His view, no doubt, was influenced by his own family's tribulations during the French Revolution. His father and mother escaped the guillo-

tine by the narrowest of margins.) He sat on the committee that drafted the new French constitution, but his opinions in support of both separation of powers and bicameralism were rejected by the whole assembly. Tocqueville's effectiveness in the legislature was greatly hampered by his inability to compromise.

Having completed the new constitution by the end of 1848, France then elected its first independent president, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon I. Tocqueville distrusted Louis Napoleon, and his misgivings were shortly borne out.

Tocqueville became a member of the new National Assembly in 1849 and the new government's emissary to Germany. He was named foreign minister as Louis Napoleon sought, without subtlety, to secure Tocqueville's support. But when Louis dissolved the National Assembly in 1851 because under the constitution he could not be re-elected, Tocqueville withdrew his guarded support. Louis staged a military coup. For his vocal opposition to this act of political usurpation, Tocqueville was imprisoned overnight. He wrote an account of his ordeal and a strong criticism of Louis Napoleon's tactics that was smuggled out of France and published in Britain's *London Times*. In general, Tocqueville was more effective as an observer-writer than as a politician.

### The Final Years

In the spring of 1849, Tocqueville became ill and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. By 1852, he was forced to withdraw from public affairs because he refused to take a loyalty oath to the new regime and also because he was in failing health. He went into "internal exile."<sup>1</sup> But he continued to write until his death at 54 in 1859. His book *Souvenirs* (1851) was a mirror through which he observed himself.<sup>2</sup>

Another celebrated work, *The Ancient Regime and the Origins of the French Revolution* (1856), demon-

## An Amazing Prediction About America and Russia

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, and the world learned their existence and their greatness at almost the same time.

All other nations seem to have nearly reached their natural limits, and they have only to maintain their power; but these are still in the act of growth. All the others 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 former combats the wilderness and savage life; the latter, civilization with all its arms. 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. ■

—From *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, 434

strated that the strongly implied egalitarian leanings of *Democracy in America* had become tempered by an equally intense distrust of popular revolutionary periods.

Tocqueville traveled widely and saw a great deal of political intrigue during his productive middle years, and he left us a rich legacy of early sociological insights.<sup>3</sup> He was an accurate observer, even though he was passionately intense toward all his subjects. Yet, despite his zeal, as a historian and chronicler he managed to remain virtually dispassionate.<sup>4</sup> In this approach, Tocqueville set a standard that modern social scientists and historians would do well to emulate. He

remains one of the most reliable sources on the early history of the United States, for unlike so many of his literary contemporaries, he harbored no animus toward the country and was an honest observer.

Over the years, some commentators have raised questions about Tocqueville's visit to America, mostly centered on its timing and execution. For example, the entire trip lasted 286 days, a short period given the scope of his planned travel and the state of public and private transportation. Of those days, 271 of which were in the United States, 140 were spent in cities—mostly in the North and West—and only 40 were spent in the South. Is Tocqueville's analysis biased by Northern urbanity? Biographer Andre Jardin best sums up this unfortunate, if accidental, allocation of travel time: "It was during these years [specifically, 1836] that Michael Chevalier made the distinction, which has remained classic, between two types of Americans, the Yankee and the Virginian. Tocqueville observed and listened to the first much more than to the second. This was not deliberate—the latter part of their stay was disrupted...and unforeseen incidents forced them to change their plans so that they were not able to remain in Charleston, where they had intended to study Southern society, or to visit James Madison, the former president, now in retirement at Montpelier, his home near Charlottesville, Virginia."<sup>5</sup>

To what extent Tocqueville might have produced a different work had he spent more time in the American South, with its major cultural differences when compared with the industrial North, must remain speculative. But given his time and travel limitations, Tocqueville produced a magnificent account of the "essence of America" as he saw and felt it.

*Democracy in America* is a classic of both historiography and sociology. Tocqueville is much more a 19th century interpreter of America—and its various possible futures—than a detail-oriented diarist on a long field trip. His

## A Timely Reminder About Wealth, Freedom and Public Life, with a Sober Prediction

Thus the men of democratic times require to be free in order to procure more readily those physical enjoyments for which they are always longing. It sometimes happens, however, that the excessive taste they conceive for these same enjoyments makes them surrender to the first master who appears. The passion for worldly welfare then defeats itself and, without their perceiving it, throws the object of their desires to a greater distance. There is, indeed, a most dangerous passage in the history of a democratic people. When the taste for physical gratifications among them has grown more rapidly than their education and their experience of free institutions, the time will come when men are carried away and will lose all self-restraint at the sight of the new possessions that they are about to obtain. In their intense and exclusive anxiety to make a fortune they lose sight of the close connection that exists between the private fortune of each and the prosperity of all. It is not necessary to do violence to such a people in order to strip them of the rights they enjoy; they themselves willingly loosen their hold. The discharge of political duties appears to them to be a troublesome impediment which diverts them from their occupations and business. If they are required to elect representatives, to support the government by personal service, to meet on public business, they think they have no time, they cannot waste their precious hours in useless engagements; such ideal amusements are unsuited to serious men who are engaged with the more important interests of life. These people think they are following the principle of self-interest, but the idea they entertain of that principle is a very crude one; and the better to look after what they call their own business, they neglect their chief business, which is to remain their own masters....By such a nation [a wealthy, self-absorbed one] the despotism of faction is not less to be dreaded than the despotism of an individual. When the bulk of the community are engrossed by private concerns, the smallest parties need not despair of getting the upper hand in public affairs. At such times it is not rare to see on the great stage of the world, as we see in our theaters, a multitude represented by a few players, who alone speak in the name of an absent or inattentive crowd; they alone are in action, while all others are stationary; they regulate everything by their own caprice; they change the laws and tyrannize at will over the manners of the country; and then men wonder to see into how small a number of weak and worthless hands a great people may fall. ■

—From *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 140–42

work elucidates why he admired America but doesn't omit those aspects he didn't admire. He lists in detail some of his fears for the new nation's possible future. Americans can still profit immensely from his discourses on the problematic nature of pure, majority-driven power, a fear shared by the founders who wrote the U.S. Constitution.

Like Lafayette before him, Tocqueville left America the better for having been here. His body rests today on his old estate in the village of Tocqueville, near modern-day Normandy. ■

— Robert L. Formaini  
Senior Economist

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jardin (1988), Part V.
- <sup>2</sup> Jardin (1988), 453.
- <sup>3</sup> Barzun (2000), 538.
- <sup>4</sup> Barzun (2000), 537.
- <sup>5</sup> Jardin (1988), 107.

## References

Barzun, Jacques (2000), *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: Harper Collins).

Jardin, Andre (1988), *Tocqueville: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Tocqueville, Alexis de (1990), *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books), orig. pub. 1835.

——— (1990), *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books), orig. pub. 1840.

——— (1997), *Memoir on Pauperism* (Chicago: Ivan Dee), orig. pub. 1835.

*Economic Insights* is a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Federal Reserve System.

Please address all correspondence to  
*Economic Insights*  
Public Affairs Department  
Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas  
P.O. Box 655906  
Dallas, TX 75265-5906  
Visit our web site at [www.dallasfed.org](http://www.dallasfed.org).

## A New and Unique Despotism—Democratic Bureaucracy

I think, then, that the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything that ever before existed in the world; our contemporaries will find no prototype of it in their memories. I seek in vain for an expression that will accurately convey the whole of the idea I have formed of it; the old words *despotism* and *tyranny* are inappropriate: the thing itself is new, and since I cannot name, I must attempt to define it.

I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he 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 itself alone 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, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided

they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and the trouble of living?...

After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd....

Our contemporaries are constantly excited by two conflicting passions: **they want to be led and they wish to remain free.** [Emphasis added] ■

—From *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 318–19

## Why Does Democratic Government Always Grow?

In democratic communities nothing but the central power has any stability in its position or any permanence in its undertakings. All the citizens are in ceaseless stir and transformation. Now, it is in the nature of all governments to seek constantly to enlarge their sphere of action; hence it is almost impossible that such a government should not ultimately succeed, because it acts with a fixed principle and a constant will upon men whose position, ideas, and desires are constantly changing.

It frequently happens that the members of the community promote the influence of the central power without intending to. Democratic eras are periods of experiment, innovation and adventure. There is always a multitude of men engaged in difficult or novel undertakings, which they follow by themselves without shackling themselves to their fellows. Such persons will admit, as a general principle, that the public authority ought not to interfere in private concerns; but, by an exception to that rule, each of them craves its assistance in the particular concern on which he is engaged and seeks to draw upon the influence of the government for

his own benefit, although he would restrict it on all other occasions. If a large number of men applies this particular exception to a great variety of different purposes, the sphere of the central power extends itself imperceptibly in all directions, although everyone wishes it to be circumscribed.

Thus a democratic government increases its power simply by the fact of its permanence. Time is on its side; every incident befriends it; the passions of individuals unconsciously promote it; and it may be asserted that the older a democratic community is, the more centralized will its government become.... The foremost or indeed the sole condition required in order to succeed in centralizing the supreme power in a democratic community is to love equality, or to get men to believe you love it. Thus the science of despotism, which was once so complex, is simplified, and reduced, as it were, to a single principle. ■

—From *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 294 and 302