

The Prophet De Tocqueville

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THE GIFT of foreseeing in one century the political, economic, and social shape of the next is very sparingly given. But a striking exception to this rule is Alexis de Tocqueville, the liberal conservative French political scientist. His *Democracy in America*, published after a long trip in the United States in the 1830's, is quite as remarkable for its clairvoyant vision of some of the future problems of America and the Western world as for its keen insights into America as it was in the time of Andrew Jackson.

Himself an aristocrat, de Tocqueville saw in democracy the wave of the future. He realized that the sun of absolute monarchs and privileged nobilities was setting. The prospect of the triumph of democracy did not inspire in him either unqualified

enthusiasm or fanatical repulsion. For democracy, as he believed, would be good or bad insofar as it offered adequate safeguards for individual liberty. At a time when most members of his class regarded democracy as portending anarchy and the breakdown of all legitimate authority de Tocqueville anticipated that the real danger to be anticipated from democratic government was not excessive weakness but excessive strength, capable of crushing, or bending and softening the will to freedom of the individual. To Alexis de Tocqueville falls the credit, in an age of hereditary monarchy and *laissez-faire* economics, of apprehending the possibility of the totalitarian state and the welfare society. It was in the collapse or disappearance of tradi-

tional forms of authority without the emergence of solidly based free societies that one finds one of the principal clues to the emergence of Lenins and Stalins, Hitlers and Mussolinis. Here is de Tocqueville's premonition of this danger:

At the present day, when all ranks are more and more confounded, when the individual disappears in the throng, and is easily lost in the midst of a common obscurity, when the honor of monarchy has almost lost its empire without being succeeded by public virtue, and when nothing can enable man to rise above himself, who shall say at what point the exigencies of power and the servility of weakness will stop? . . .

The annals of France furnish nothing analogous to the condition in which that country might then be thrown. But it may more aptly be assimilated to the times of old, and to those hideous eras of Roman oppression, when the manners of the people were corrupted, their traditions obliterated, their habits destroyed, their opinions shaken, and freedom, expelled from the laws, could find no refuge in the land; when nothing protected the citizens and the citizens no longer protected themselves; when human nature was the sport of man, and princes wore out the clemency of Heaven before they exhausted the patience of their subjects.¹

Is this not an excellent preview of the condition of the Russians under Stalin, of the Germans under Hitler, when the tyranny of the plebeian dictator went to far greater lengths than the most oppressive emperors and kings, still subject to some limitations of religion and public opinion, ventured to go in the past?

In one of his most eloquent and precient passages de Tocqueville imagines people being cajoled, not coerced out of the exercise of their rights of free will and free judgment. Raising the question of how

despotism may appear in the world under new forms, he envisages a vast multitude, equal in status and alienated from one another, each concerned with procuring petty pleasures. Then, building up to a crescendo of prophetic vision, he writes:

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, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property and subdivides their inheritances—what remains but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?

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, until each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is sometimes believed with some of the outward forms of freedom; and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people.²

At the time when de Tocqueville composed his classical work *London and Paris*, to the ordinary observer, seemed much closer to the hub of world politics than Washington and St. Petersburg. The United States, under the Monroe Doctrine, had renounced all concern with European quarrels and alliances while posting up a "No Trespassing" sign (with no navy to back it up) for the American continent against the possible predatory designs of European colonialist powers. The young Republic scarcely figured in European diplomatic and military calculations.

As for Russia, it was a great power which shared with England the achievement of Napoleon's downfall. But it was only one of five such powers, the others being Great Britain, France, Prussia, and Austria. Outside the mainstream of European culture, the Empire of the Tsars was not regarded as such a threat as to require a general alliance of other European powers for the purpose of imposing restraints on its aggressive designs. Some twenty years later Great Britain and France were to launch an invasion of Russia in the Crimean peninsula, an enterprise that would be fantastically unimaginable for those two powers today. But de Tocqueville voiced what is perhaps his best known prophecy, and the one which was most conspicuously vindicated after the second World War:

There are, at the present time, two great nations in the world which seem to tend toward the same end, although they started from different points. 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 assumed a most prominent place 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 only to be charged with the maintenance of their power; but these are still in the act of growth. All the others are stopped, or continue to advance with extreme difficulty; these are proceeding with ease and celerity along a path to which the human eye can assign no term. The American struggles against the natural obstacles which oppose him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. The former combats the wilderness and savage life; the latter, civilization, with all its weapons and its arts; the conquests of the one are therefore gained by the plowshare; those of the other by the sword.

The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends, and gives free scope to the unguided exertions and commonsense of the citizens; 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 points are different and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems to be marked out by the will of heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.³

This striking prophecy follows two other judicious observations: that the time will come when 150 million men will be living in North America and that means of intellectual intercourse will unite the most remote parts of the earth. There is less difference, de Tocqueville suggests, between the Europeans and their descendants in the New World than there was between certain towns, separated by only a river, in the thirteenth century. Since that time the trans-Atlantic cable, the airplane, radio and television, the communications satellite have strongly speeded up this process of close communication among the peoples of the world, without, unfortunately, making their governments more friendly.

De Tocqueville's anticipation of Amer-

ica's future stature as a world power grows naturally out of the process which he had seen at first hand, the build-up of a continent by a pioneer population. What led him to his insight about Russia, the future partner of the United States in world domination, is not so clear. Perhaps he was a premature geo-politician, reckoning that the enormous spaces of Russia created opportunities for a growing population that were lacking in the closely settled lands of Western Europe. At any rate, more than a century before Yalta and Potsdam, this French political scientist offered a blueprint of a world oriented toward America and Russia, the kind of prediction that is rarely fulfilled more than a century after it is made. De Tocqueville also sensed the ideological contrast between the Russian and "Anglo-American" systems in his remark that the instrument of one is servitude, of the other, freedom.

At the time of de Tocqueville's visit the personal income tax was unknown in the United States and taxation in general was light, compared with what is now taken for granted. He notes that high government officials are sparingly remunerated, by European standards, but that "enormous sums are lavished to meet the exigencies or to facilitate the enjoyments of the people." He foresees the shape of things to come in America and registers another of his uncannily accurate prophecies of what may be expected in future generations when he writes:

Whenever the poor direct public affairs and dispose of the natural resources, it appears certain that, as they profit by the expenditure of the state, they are apt to augment that expenditure.

I conclude, therefore. . .that the democratic government of the Americans is not a cheap government, as is sometimes asserted. And I have no hesitation in predicting that, if the people of the

United States is ever involved in serious difficulties, its taxation will speedily be increased to the rate of that which prevails in the greater part of the aristocracies and monarchies of Europe.⁴

It would have been impossible for anyone in the early nineteenth century to foresee the precise nature of the "serious difficulties" in which the American people became involved in the twentieth, two world wars and a major depression, plus a situation between war and peace at the end of the second World War. Yet the prediction stands up remarkably well, fortified by the shrewd observation that, as a result of universal suffrage, with more votes at the disposal of the poor than of the well-to-do, taxation might be expected to assume a more and more levelling character. Which, of course, is exactly what has happened.

Surveying the new institutions of the young American Republic, de Tocqueville assigned key importance to the Supreme Court.⁵ The peace, the prosperity, and the very existence of the Union, he believes, are vested in the hands of its judges. The President, who exercises a limited power (here, to be sure, he may have overlooked the immense unspecified power of the Chief Executive as commander-in-chief) may err without causing great mischief in the state. Congress may decide wrongly without destroying the Union, because Congress is subject to change by action of the voters. But, he continues, "if the Supreme Court is ever composed of imprudent men or bad citizens, the Union may be plunged into anarchy or civil war."

Recent decisions of the Court in such fields as school integration, compulsory reapportionment of legislative districts, and other subjects indicate the possibility that this body, when composed of judges who are inclined to decree what they regard as reform rather than construe the wording

of the Constitution strictly, may tend, perhaps unconsciously, to assume the functions of what Judge Learned Hand referred to as a third legislative chamber, or Platonic guardians.

De Tocqueville, although not in principle opposed to democracy and favorably impressed by much that he saw in the United States (especially by the tendency, which has abated in modern times, of the individual citizen to rely on himself, or on cooperative effort, not on the central government, for the carrying out of economic enterprises) did not believe that a democracy was well qualified for the conduct of foreign affairs.

Foreign politics demand scarcely any of those qualities which a democracy possesses; and they require, on the contrary, the perfect use of almost all those faculties in which it is deficient . . . A democracy is unable to regulate the details of an important undertaking, to persevere in a design, and to work out its execution in the presence of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy, and it will not await their consequences with patience.⁶

The contrast between military success and political failure in two world wars seems to confirm the justice of de Tocqueville's comments on the inability of a democracy to conduct foreign policy with wisdom, foresight, and discretion. Fifteen years after the United States had thrown itself enthusiastically into Woodrow Wilson's crusade to "make the world safe for democracy" the average American would have found considerable difficulty in defining what had been achieved by this reckless abandonment of the Monroe Doctrine principle that, as European powers should keep hands off the American continent, the United States would refuse to involve itself in the quarrels and alliances of Europe.

Obviously the world was not made safe for democracy; communism and fascism were the emergent forces of the war's aftermath. Wilson's Fourteen Points, put forward as prerequisites of a just peace, had been so distorted and repudiated in the postwar settlements that a European sour joke represented Wilson as receiving the Nobel Prize for mathematics—for having made fourteen equal zero.

Technically the war broke out because the German submarine war caused the loss of American lives (almost all of them from the sinking of allied ships), threatened American trade with Great Britain and France and the security of private loans to these belligerent governments. But in the thirties the American people were so fed up with the disillusioning sequel to their crusade that they were ready and eager to pass legislation renouncing in advance the alleged rights which had served as the pretext for involvement in World War I.

Nor has the sequel to World War II been an impressive testimonial to democratic ability to make foreign policy wisely, consistently, and effectively. The positive ideals of this conflict, set forth in the so-called Atlantic Charter, were trampled under foot even more flagrantly and brutally than Wilson's Fourteen Points. Roosevelt's foreign policy, so far as it possessed any coherent pattern, was based on the assumption that Germany and Japan should be stripped of all political and military power.

This would have made sense only on the reckoning that the Soviet Union cherished no aggressive designs against the vacuum that was created in Europe and Asia by the elimination of Germany and Japan. But such a reckoning was quite unwarranted in the light of Russia's record as an expansionist power in the past, aggravated by the unlimited ambition of com-

munism as a world revolutionary faith. Equally absurd and unworkable was the conception of the peace-keeping machinery in the United Nations which would have been workable only if there had been a close community of interest between Washington and Moscow.

De Tocqueville's case for the ineptness of democracy in foreign affairs has been strengthened by a development which he sensed, but of which he could not foresee the full scope: the war-time propaganda potentialities of modern means of communication. It was the absence, in the past, of organized war propaganda that made it easier for the diplomats at the Congress of Vienna to work out a fairly reasonable peace settlement, one that did not contain the seeds of future wars.

De Tocqueville foresaw as two negative consequences of democracy excessive materialism and a new kind of tyranny, oppression by the majority. In one of his most brilliant passages he describes the restless accumulative instinct which he found in the United States and which impressed him more strongly because he was a citizen of a country where ancestral roots are usually deep:

A native of the United States clings to this world's goods as if he were certain never to die; and he is so hasty in grasping at all within his reach that one would suppose he was constantly afraid of not living long enough to enjoy them. He clutches everything, he holds nothing fast, but soon loosens his grasp to pursue fresh gratifications.

In the United States a man builds a house to spend his later years in it, and he sells it before the roof is on; he plants a garden and lets it just when the trees are beginning to bear; he brings a field into cultivation and leaves other men to gather the crops. He embraces a profession and gives it

up. He settles in a place, which he soon afterward leaves, to carry his changeable longings elsewhere. . . . Death at length overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of the futile chase of that complete happiness which is forever on the wing.⁷

Still more deeply thoughtful, and prophetic, is his fear of the tyranny of the majority that is latent in a democracy without checks and balances. The marked trend in the United States in the twentieth century to dispense with these checks and balances, indirect election of United States Senators, for instance, and allowance in state legislatures for factors apart from arithmetical proportionality, and abolition of literacy tests for voters, lends an especially topical quality to de Tocqueville's reflections on this subject:

I can never willingly invest any number of my fellow creatures with that unlimited authority which I should refuse to any one of them. . . . I am of the opinion that some one social power must always be made to predominate over the others; but I think that liberty is endangered when this power is checked by no obstacles which may retard its course, and force it to moderate its own vehemence.

No power upon earth is so worthy of honor for itself, or of reverential obedience to the rights which it represents that I would consent to admit its uncontrolled and all-predominant authority. When I see that the right and the means of absolute command are conferred on a people or upon a king, upon an aristocracy or a democracy, a monarchy or a republic, I recognize the germ of tyranny, and I journey onward to a land of more hopeful institutions.⁸

Both fascism, now obsolete in theory and practice, and the more permanent tyr-

anny of communism are perversions of democracy. Both of these systems achieve power by abuse of the freedom of speech, press, and propaganda which, once in power, they deny to all dissenters. It would be impossible to say with accuracy what proportion of the Russians approved the Bolshevik take-over in November, 1917, or how many Italians sympathized with Mussolini's March on Rome, or what percentage of Germans favored Hitler's grasp for power. What is certain is that neither Russians nor Italians nor Germans had anything to say about their own destiny after the three dictatorships had been established.

Even where there is no question of creating an outright totalitarian state it is a danger signal when a democracy begins to scrap all the brakes on the functioning of its governmental power. It is one of many of de Tocqueville's merits as a profound and prophetic thinker that he recognized this danger signal at a time when democracy was, in the main, a prospect of the future.

At the time of the second World War there was an obsession, especially in

France, with the rhymed predictions of a sixteenth-century French astrologer named Nostradamus. People professed to see in these ambiguous forecasts of the shape of things to come precise references to what was happening in Europe four centuries later. The difficulty with this theory was that the obscure pronouncements of Nostradamus could be interpreted in scores of ways. He has long gone out of fashion.

But Alexis de Tocqueville's claim to be considered a major prophet rests on a far surer foundation. Lord Acton said of him: "He is always right, always wise and as just as Aristides."⁹

The striking number of his predictions that have been realized is not a result of accident or lucky guesswork or inspirational intuition. It is a natural consequence of a powerful, creative mind, enlarged by vast erudition and a sensitive understanding of the nature of man and society, projecting the lessons of the past and the present to illuminate the future. His *Democracy in America* is one of the few truly Great Books, a work to be read and reread with ever renewed appreciation of its insights and visions.

¹*Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 218, 219.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 489-91.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 242, 243.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 86, 87.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 344, 345.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162

⁹Lord Acton, *Lectures on The French Revolution*, p. 357.