

is an inveterate critic of the NEA, the evidence strongly supports his claim. NEA leaders have stopped representing the interests of their members and of American education. They have taken every opportunity to advocate left-wing social programs which in no way reflect the views of their members. But, most important, they have been uncompromising in struggling to increase their own power at the expense of the power of the NEA rank and file.

What does all this mean for the future? The NEA is down, but it's not out. No union so large can fail to have influence. The Reagan Administration will not remain

in power forever, but there will always be teachers, and the NEA will still be their most powerful voice. The question is, then, can the NEA change? Will its leaders ever develop policies that conform to the wishes and best interests of teachers?

These are questions that NEA members should be asking themselves. Only they can remedy this problem, but it won't be easy. There are two fundamental truths about unions. One is that union members ask only one thing of their leaders: that they keep fighting for "more." The second is that pressures on union leaders invariably come from the Left. NEA members must overcome their passivity. They

showed their dissatisfaction by voting for Reagan and a more conservative Congress, even while they were paying for the campaign of his opponent with their union dues—and for pro-abortion lobbying, anti-defense spending lobbying, anti-nuclear energy lobbying, pro-bilingual education lobbying, anti-testing lobbying, and lobbying on a host of issues about which NEA members simply disagree with NEA leaders. So long as the NEA's ruling oligarchy is allowed to pursue its own political interests and advance its ideology, the NEA membership will never receive the kind of representation they need and American education deserves. □

Delba Winthrop

## THE VOLUNTARY SPIRIT OF TOCQUEVILLE'S AMERICA

One hundred and fifty years after a famous journey, a reminder.

More than a century ago a Frenchman came to America and later wrote a book for his countrymen telling them what he had seen here. He told them that in America when a citizen saw a problem that needed solving, he would cross the street and talk to a neighbor about it and the first thing you know a committee would be formed and before long the problem would be solved.

"And then," he added, "you may not believe this but not a single bureaucrat would ever have been involved."

The Frenchman to whom President Reagan referred is, of course, Alexis de Tocqueville. With his friend Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville came to America a century and a half ago, disembarking at New York in May, 1831, and returning to France in February, 1832. The 26-year-old magistrate and candidate for a Golden Fleece Award had managed to obtain a commission from the French government to study the American penal system. The true reasons for his visit were to escape the political pressures endangering his career in the aftermath of the July Revolution of 1830 and to see "what a great republic is like." During their nine-month stay the travelers did see much of America: the staid intellectual lights of Boston; the decadent bibulous society of Baltimore; the intransigently indolent, though often impecunious, aristocrats of

the South; Eastern entrepreneurs and rough and ready Western adventurers; the "ladies of colour" of New Orleans; the civilized, half-civilized, and uncivilized dwellers at the last outpost of civilization at Saginaw, Michigan; the occupant of the White House, Andrew Jackson (whose state of civilization was a matter of some controversy). And several too many prisons. Having diligently practiced their English, they conversed as well as observed. Their breeding, their natural intelligence and curiosity, and their official letters of introduction—not to mention the "excessive" national pride of the Americans who perceived that these Europeans

wanted to learn something from them—gave Tocqueville and Beaumont immediate entrée into the best social, intellectual, political, and penal circles. The results of their journey, in addition to a more than perfunctory report on American penal theory and practice, were Beaumont's *Marie*, a novel with statistical appendices, now justly fallen into obscurity, and Tocqueville's still-celebrated, two-volume *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840.

I would be tempted to assert that Tocqueville could have written *Democracy in America* without ever having left his study in France were it not for a singular remark in the book:

It is not impossible to conceive the immense freedom enjoyed by the Americans, and one can also form an idea of their extreme equality; *but the political activity prevailing in the United States is something one could never understand unless one had seen it.* [emphasis added]

No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult; a confused clamor rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements. All around you everything is on the move: here the people of a district are assembled to discuss the possibility of building a church; there they are busy choosing a representative; further on, the delegates of a district are hurrying to town to consult about some local improvements; elsewhere it's the village farmers who have left their furrows to discuss the plan for a road or a school. . . . And here is yet another gathering which regards drunkenness as the main source



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of ills in the state and has come to enter into a solemn undertaking to give an example of temperance.

Significantly, in this passage Tocqueville does not remark on another kind of activity he observed the Americans feverishly engaging in: the business of making money. More curious still is that there is no evidence that Tocqueville himself really did see the kind of political activity of which he writes here. Rather, it was described to him. He never saw a New England town meeting, much less the spontaneous formation of a committee of neighbors to remove an obstacle from the road. He learned of these things in the parlors and dining rooms of Boston from, most notably, a "Cambridge University" president, a Massachusetts state senator, and a German intellectual exiled for his liberalism. What Tocqueville saw in his travels were not America's best features, but many of her worst: not only the sordid business of crime and punishment, but the political successes of vulgar demagogues like Andrew Jackson and Davy Crockett (who were barely a cut above the Ohio politicians given to campaigning in taverns), and Indians lying on the road drunk from the white man's spirits, ignored by red man and white alike. Perhaps Tocqueville's countrymen could readily have believed these things of a democratic republic without seeing them. The fact remains that Tocqueville chose to write at length of a finer aspect of American democracy, what Reagan has called her spirit of "volunteerism." It also remains to understand what Tocqueville meant to teach the readers of *Democracy* by calling their attention to this spirit.

Tocqueville's notes of his journey suggest that he thought he had found the heart of the New World when he reached Ohio in December 1831:

In Ohio everyone has come to make money. No one has been born there; no one wants to stay there; there is not a *single* man of leisure, not a single speculative mind. Everyone has his work, to which he devotes himself ardently. . . .

Tocqueville had been warned while still aboard ship that the American vice was "avidity to get rich," and he noted this fact, if not its viciousness, when he recorded his first impressions, gleaned in New York, of American society. But Ohio was Sin City itself. America was constant change and seemingly perpetual motion, and Americans immersed in the flux tended to assume, not altogether unreasonably, that change was always for the better. Men changed careers as often as homes in their continuous push upward and westward. Builders built their ships to last for no more than a few years, not because they were incapable of building better, but because they expected them to be obsolete by then anyway. All were smitten with the promise of perfection or,

as Tocqueville reformulates it, the idea of the indefinite perfectibility of man.

The settler moving westward, Tocqueville was told, had no option but ardent devotion to work. Before the onset of his first winter he had to have a home built, fields cleared, and crops planted and harvested. And while land and wood were cheap, labor was dear. Thus, it seems the new arrival received no assistance he could not pay for. However admirable Tocqueville found the commercial spirit that animated the Americans—and he did learn to appreciate its tendency "to keep the mind in a sort of feverish agitation which wonderfully disposes it toward every type of exertion and keeps it . . . above the common level of humanity"—the avidity to get rich revealed its vicious aspect as well. There was virtually no society in the West; the adventurers populating it did not even know one another. Life at the frontier was both rugged and individualistic. Tocqueville was not convinced that rugged individualism would remain rugged, or that even if it did, individualism had much to do with human perfection.

However materialistic the Americans were, Tocqueville did not think them philosophic materialists. They were philosophic individualists. In response to a friend's query about his first impressions of American beliefs, Tocqueville ironically described the dogmas of republicanism and human perfectibility. The fundamental premise of the New World was that "the individual is the best and only judge of his own interest and that society has no right to direct his behavior unless it feels harmed by him or unless it needs his concurrence." The individual is to bow to *no* authority and submit to no judge; his judgment might be bettered, or perfected by enlightenment, but never bested. Moreover, since each individual judges his interest better than anyone else, all must

be considered equally good judges of some interest. From this assumption republicanism follows, though not simply logically; for the argument must be that since each individual can look after himself as well as the next and perhaps even well enough, matters of common or public concern are properly looked after by each individual in common, as if there were no difference between private and public matters. From the assumption can also follow, again somewhat illogically, what Tocqueville deems the "erroneous judgment" of individualism: that the sphere of one's own interest is very large, if not all-inclusive.

Individualism leads at best to grudging cooperation as necessity dictates. The western settler who fancied himself a self-sufficient whole could count on no more than having the wherewithal to buy the services of others as needed and on others' needing or desiring to sell their services. As Tocqueville anticipated and as contemporary radical critics of modern industrial society reiterate, the "voluntary" associations of economic man do not bind him to others or engender any enduring interest in their well-being. Since no spirit of camaraderie is likely to develop under such circumstances, individuals do not become accustomed to turning to one another in friendship when someone is in need. At the same time, the impersonality of modern corporations and government welfare bureaucracies (both of which Tocqueville clearly foresaw) makes it possible to acknowledge one's necessities without being humiliated, because one is not thereby made dependent on another citizen who is a theoretical equal. The assistance of a neighbor that is neither expected nor altogether welcome becomes as unnecessary as the virtue of generosity or charity. Thus an ever-increasing dependence is coupled with an illusion of continued freedom and dignity. Indeed,



today the citizen has a "right" to have his needs provided for by the government, and how better does he exhibit his freedom than by asserting his rights?

In Tocqueville's opinion, demanding or accepting the protection of such a government is hardly more dignified than praying to be the lucky beneficiary of the benevolence of an omniscient, omnipotent deity. Rather, freedom is acquired by enrolling in a political association, one of the "great free schools." Unlike economic associations, which are constituted only when citizens who think themselves on the whole self-sufficient "chance" to have a common interest, political associations are formed almost naturally, because no one can for a minute suppose himself self-sufficient in politics. Yet political associations are the voluntary associations that economic associations can only pretend to be. Personal risk is not as great as in economic ventures, so the freedom which is the benefit of these schools comes free of charge as well. And when striving "to make some political opinion triumph, to get some politician into government," any natural disinclination to working in common with others is overcome. Will or ambition is aroused and at the same time taught to submit to reason for the sake of a common end. The essence of a political association is passionate articulation and communication of a shared doctrine. One learns in these schools to convert individualism into partisanship and to connect self-interest to the interests of other selves by becoming interested in a cause.

Political associations unite the power of many weak individuals, thereby creating a

bulwark against the tyranny of one or of the majority. They accustom citizens to associating for ends other than political— industrial and commercial, moral and intellectual; and these "civil" associations mitigate bureaucratic despotism. But Tocqueville stresses that associations can do more than help secure liberty. They help preserve "several of the chief attributes of humanity," and civilization itself is said to depend on development of the "science of association."

The sole example in *Democracy* of an association for moral or intellectual ends is the temperance society. If Tocqueville thought that a temperance society of 100,000 members must be a joke (why not savor water's bouquet of self-righteousness in the privacy of one's own home?), we in turn might be rather amused at the suggestion that a temperance society is an intellectual association. But inebriation reminds us of the erroneous judgment of individualism, or of thinking of oneself as alone and complete in the world. An "individual" no less than a drunk is drunk with his sense of power. His failing can be said to be intellectual as well as moral. Common action is in fact necessary, and by refusing to act in common he not only shirks his responsibility to help meet man's immediate needs, but denies himself and the rest of mankind the perfection of capacities given him. His intellectual error lies in underestimating the importance in democracy of the "art" and "science" of association. Associations are humanly created artifices formed by neither immediate recognition of necessity nor mere habit. They require an act of will to create and sustain them and the choice of an end for which to associate. Because choice is essential, voluntary associations

are always moral and intellectual, or "political," in nature.

When Tocqueville described the "political" activity in America one must see to understand, he listed very diverse activities, which do, however, have one thing in common: In each case the real activity taking place, for whatever end, is speaking or deliberating in common. The art of association so effectively practiced by the Americans is the pursuit in common of the object of a common, or shared, desire. Deliberation about an object's pursuit often results in a refinement of desire. The science of association becomes possible when the full range of human sentiments and ideas is brought to light by associations. Then sober reflection on the variety of sentiments and ideas and a determination of which are worthy of pursuit become possible. Voluntary associations are necessary above all to reveal what human nature is and what is possible for it, so that all might see for what perfection to strive. "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another."

Tocqueville may not have thought much of the planned obsolescence of American ships, and he did criticize as excessive the American faith in the indefinite perfectibility of man. But, undeniably, he was concerned with human excellence. Ultimately, he judged politics less with a view of justice and more to whether it precluded, promoted, or permitted human excellence of some sort. When he came to America he learned in friendly, sober conversation that the American proclivity to use voluntary associations was one of the few features of the political and social state of the New World that promoted the excellences enabling human beings to be free and proud of themselves.

President Reagan recalled Tocqueville's observation when he defended his proposal for further budget cuts, especially cuts in social programs. The President wanted to reassure liberals that there is an alternative to relying on government welfare bureaucracies to alleviate the plight of the unfortunate and elderly. He needed to remind conservatives and others that everyone has vital interests of his own in making the alternative work: not so much reduction of taxes, but preservation of a liberty threatened by administrative centralization and resuscitation of virtues suffocated by government paternalism. One does not have to be an advocate of Reagan's policies to grant that Tocqueville would have been pleased by the way Americans now remember him: as the Frenchman who visited America 150 years ago to appreciate what makes a republic great and who wrote a book to inspire and inform "the true friends of liberty and human dignity" with its image. □

