

ESSENTIAL CLASSICS OF LIBERAL STUDIES

ALEXIS DE
TOCQUEVILLE

Translated by HENRY REEVE



DEMOCRACY
IN AMERICA I



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Essential Classics of Liberal Studies

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ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1805 -1859) was a French political thinker and historian best known for his *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. In both of these works, he analyzed the rising living standards and social conditions of individuals and their relationship to the market and state in Western societies. *Democracy in America* was published after his travels in the United States, and is today considered an early work of sociology and political science.

Tocqueville was active in French politics, first under the July Monarchy (1830-1848) and then during the Second Republic (1849-1851) which succeeded the February 1848 Revolution.



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INTRODUCTION

Special Introduction by Hon. John T. Morgan

IN the eleven years that separated the Declaration of the Independence of the United States from the completion of that act in the ordination of our written Constitution, the great minds of America were bent upon the study of the principles of government that were essential to the preservation of the liberties which had been won at great cost and with heroic labors and sacrifices. Their studies were conducted in view of the imperfections that experience had developed in the government of the Confederation, and they were, therefore, practical and thorough.

When the Constitution was thus perfected and established, a new form of government was created, but it was neither speculative nor experimental as to the principles on which it was based. If they were true principles, as they were, the government founded upon them was destined to a life and an influence that would continue while the liberties it was intended to preserve should be valued by the human family. Those liberties had been wrung from reluctant monarchs in many contests, in many countries, and were grouped into creeds and established in ordinances sealed with blood, in many great struggles of the people. They were not new to the people. They were consecrated theories, but no government had been previously established for the great purpose of their preservation and enforcement. That which was experimental in our plan of government was the question whether democratic rule could be so organized and conducted that it would not degenerate into license and result in the tyranny of absolutism, without saving to the people the power so often found necessary of repressing or destroying their enemy, when he was found in the person of a single despot.

When, in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville came to study Democracy in America, the trial of nearly a half-century of the working of our system had been made, and it had been proved, by many crucial tests, to be a government of "liberty regulated by law," with such results in the development of strength, in population, wealth, and military and commercial power, as no age had ever witnessed.



De Tocqueville had a special inquiry to prosecute, in his visit to America, in which his generous and faithful soul and the powers of his great intellect were engaged in the patriotic effort to secure to the people of France the blessings that Democracy in America had ordained and established throughout nearly the entire Western Hemisphere. He had read the story of the French Revolution, much of which had been recently written in the blood of men and women of great distinction who were his progenitors; and had witnessed the agitations and terrors of the Restoration and of the Second Republic, fruitful in crime and sacrifice, and barren of any good to mankind.

He had just witnessed the spread of republican government through all the vast continental possessions of Spain in America, and the loss of her great colonies. He had seen that these revolutions were accomplished almost without the shedding of blood, and he was filled with anxiety to learn the causes that had placed republican government, in France, in such contrast with Democracy in America.

De Tocqueville was scarcely thirty years old when he began his studies of Democracy in America. It was a bold effort for one who had no special training in government, or in the study of political economy, but he had the example of Lafayette in establishing the military foundation of these liberties, and of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton, all of whom were young men, in building upon the Independence of the United States that wisest and best plan of general government that was ever devised for a free people.

He found that the American people, through their chosen representatives who were instructed by their wisdom and experience and were supported by their virtues—cultivated, purified and ennobled by self-reliance and the love of God—had matured, in the excellent wisdom of their counsels, a new plan of government, which embraced every security for their liberties and equal rights and privileges to all in the pursuit of happiness. He came as an honest and impartial student and his great commentary, like those of Paul, was written for the benefit of all nations and people and in vindication of truths that will stand for their deliverance from monarchical rule, while time shall last.

A French aristocrat of the purest strain of blood and of the most honorable lineage, whose family influence was coveted by crowned heads; who had no quarrel with the rulers of the nation, and was secure against want by his inherited estates; was moved by the agitations that compelled France to attempt to grasp suddenly the



liberties and happiness we had gained in our revolution and, by his devout love of France, to search out and subject to the test of reason the basic principles of free government that had been embodied in our Constitution. This was the mission of De Tocqueville, and no mission was ever more honorably or justly conducted, or concluded with greater eclat, or better results for the welfare of mankind.

His researches were logical and exhaustive. They included every phase of every question that then seemed to be apposite to the great inquiry he was making.

The judgment of all who have studied his commentaries seems to have been unanimous, that his talents and learning were fully equal to his task. He began with the physical geography of this country, and examined the characteristics of the people, of all races and conditions, their social and religious sentiments, their education and tastes; their industries, their commerce, their local governments, their passions and prejudices, and their ethics and literature; leaving nothing unnoticed that might afford an argument to prove that our plan and form of government was or was not adapted especially to a peculiar people, or that it would be impracticable in any different country, or among any different people.

The pride and comfort that the American people enjoy in the great commentaries of De Tocqueville are far removed from the selfish adulation that comes from a great and singular success. It is the consciousness of victory over a false theory of government which has afflicted mankind for many ages, that gives joy to the true American, as it did to De Tocqueville in his great triumph.

When De Tocqueville wrote, we had lived less than fifty years under our Constitution. In that time no great national commotion had occurred that tested its strength, or its power of resistance to internal strife, such as had converted his beloved France into fields of slaughter torn by tempests of wrath.

He had a strong conviction that no government could be ordained that could resist these internal forces, when, they are directed to its destruction by bad men, or unreasoning mobs, and many then believed, as some yet believe, that our government is unequal to such pressure, when the assault is thoroughly desperate.

Had De Tocqueville lived to examine the history of the United States from 1860 to 1870, his misgivings as to this power of self-preservation would, probably, have been cleared off. He would have seen that, at the end of the most destructive civil war that ever occurred, when

