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Alexis de Tocqueville – II

Lead: After touring America for nine months in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville returned to France and wrote one of the most influential books ever written on American society and politics.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's most famous book, was published in two parts in 1835 and 1840. He believed the spread of democracy was inevitable. He hoped his story would help his French

countrymen understand the democratic system. The book was based on Tocqueville's interviews, observations, and personal thoughts. His was a brutally honest account acknowledging both good and bad parts of American democracy.

He praised America for self government and the deep involvement of its citizens in the local affairs. He believed that wide political participation fostered an equality of class wealth. Tocqueville warned, however, that rule by an unrestrained majority could encourage conformity, could be oppressive, and could threaten individual liberty and freedom. For example, he witnessed the malignant power of white

supremacy which defended the ill-treatment of black slaves and Native-Americans and the exclusion of women from the political process. He correctly predicted that the problem of nullification and slavery would lead to a civil war.

Today, over 150 years after *Democracy in America* was first published, it is still considered among the most perceptive works on American society and politics. Tocqueville correctly described one of the great themes of U.S. history: the constantly changing balance between individual freedom and the need for government to exercise power and authority in the preservation of order and stability and the rule of law.

Reflecting on his experience Alexis de Tocqueville said, *I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought 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.*

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

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