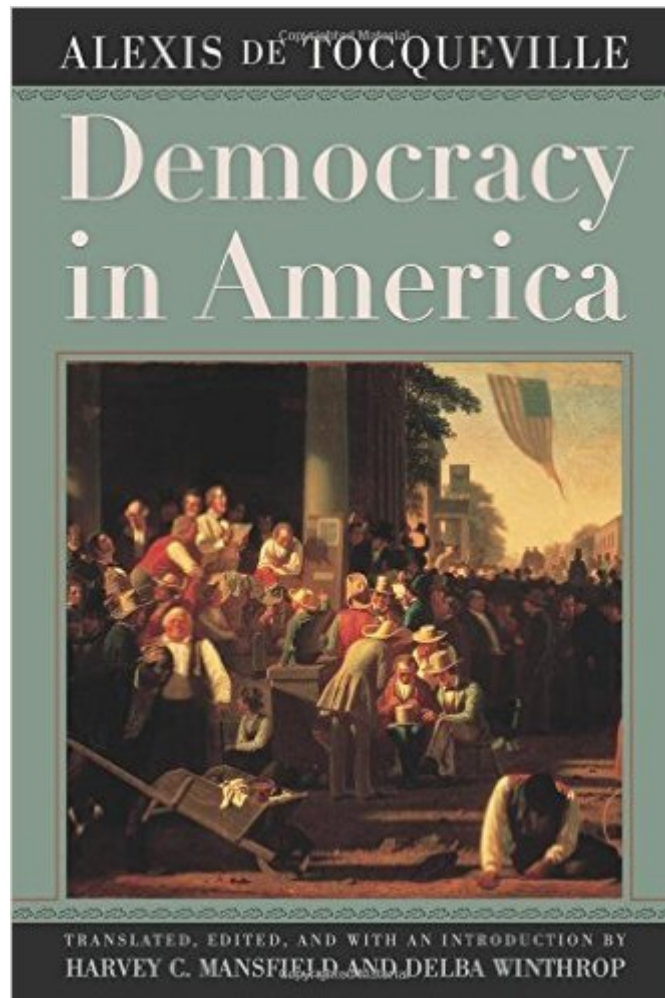


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Democracy In America



Synopsis

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) came to America in 1831 to see what a great republic was like. What struck him most was the country's equality of conditions, its democracy. The book he wrote on his return to France, *Democracy in America*, is both the best ever written on democracy and the best ever written on America. It remains the most often quoted book about the United States, not only because it has something to interest and please everyone, but also because it has something to teach everyone. When it was published in 2000, Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop's new translation of *Democracy in America* "only the third since the original two-volume work was published in 1835 and 1840" was lauded in all quarters as the finest and most definitive edition of Tocqueville's classic thus far. Mansfield and Winthrop have restored the nuances of Tocqueville's language, with the expressed goal "to convey Tocqueville's thought as he held it rather than to restate it in comparable terms of today." The result is a translation with minimal interpretation, but with impeccable annotations of unfamiliar references and a masterful introduction placing the work and its author in the broader contexts of political philosophy and statesmanship.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It has been said that this is the best book about the US and the best book about democracy. Having

just read it, I can say it is even more. Tocqueville reflects not only on the US or on democracy, but his comparative approach sheds light on the Europe of his times and before, on the nature of aristocracy and the inevitable democratic revolution which was on its way across the civilized world. Tocqueville was a realistic aristocrat, sometimes nostalgic for the "greatness" of yesterday, but bearing no illusions whatsoever about the feasibility of stopping democratic change. So, he sets to find out what is it about democracy that can work, and what its inherent risks are. And he decides to tour the grandest democratic experiment ever attempted by Man: the United States. What Tocqueville finds is a unique nation. Unlike most other nascent states in history, the English who moved to America found a huge land, practically devoid of people (and in those cases where it was inhabited, they were easily killed), where everybody could be a landowner. This, plus the particular ethics of the Puritans, the glorification of hard work, thrift and virtuosity, provided for a prosperous, practical people (not necessarily tolerant, especially in religious affairs). Far away from kings and emperors, Americans developed a communal democracy. So far so good, Tocqueville really admires the basic qualities of the US. But this book is not a long eulogy of democracy. Tocqueville admits democracy is the best way to govern a modern society, but that does not mean he thinks it's perfect or endlessly beneficial. Democracy DOES pose risks: among others, the tyranny of the majority, the mediocrity towards which it impels mores; the loneliness of the individual, lost amidst an endless, faceless crowd.

Tocqueville's classic study of America has become such a staple of the western canon that it is hard to believe it was written by a man in his late twenties and early thirties after only one visit of approximately nine months to the United States, from 1831-1832. The greatest part of that time was spent in three large eastern cities - on a mission that was to some extent pretextual, namely, examining American penal institutions. (Interestingly, it was also in 1831 that another youthful and well-born European, Charles Darwin, took to the sea and made of his observations from that journey the basis for a life's work, also attended by substantial renown.) Tocqueville had a particularly useful background for such an undertaking: his father was a government official and an aristocrat. Tocqueville himself was trained as a lawyer. He also had a splendid intellect, a sensitive disposition, a knack for finding and interviewing people who would become important later on, and an aptitude for listening carefully and recording his impressions in detail. Moreover, he was - like Darwin - profoundly thoughtful when it came to analyzing and distilling the materials he collected, a process he underwent twice - once for each of the two volumes that comprise this work. It bears mention that he was highly ambitious, as befitted his lineage, and yearned for fame, which he obtained

largely because of this book, as opposed to fortune, which he already had. During a trip that led them to Ohio, Niagara Falls, Canada and New Orleans, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia and Boston, as well as the nation's capital, Tocqueville and his friend Gustav de Beaumont encountered the travails of travel by wagon, stagecoach, canoe and steamboat, sometimes with hair-raising results.

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