

Tocqueville's Second Thoughts

"The Third *Democracy*: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840" by Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, in *American Political Science Review* (Aug. 2004), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville's admiring two-volume *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) is widely known and cited. Less known is the fact that in the last decade before his death in 1859, Tocqueville became increasingly disenchanted with the United States.

In his letters to various American friends, never published in English translation, political scientists Craiutu, of Indiana University, Bloomington, and Jennings, of the University of Birmingham, England, find misgivings about "an emerging American imperialism, the excesses of American democracy, the decline of mores and the rise of lawlessness, the revolutionary fervor of American politics, poor political leadership, and the reckless spirit of American capitalism."

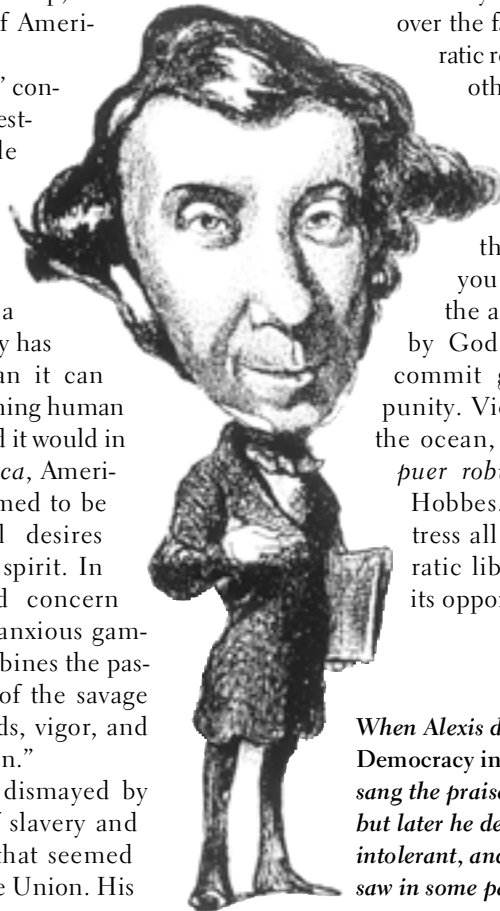
The United States' continuing expansion westward, Tocqueville wrote in 1852, revealed a troubling "spirit of conquest" and was "not a sign of good health for a people which already has more territories than it can fill." Instead of softening human nature, as he'd argued it would in *Democracy in America*, America's abundance seemed to be increasing material desires and the buccaneer spirit. In 1856, he expressed concern about "this race of anxious gamblers . . . which combines the passions and instincts of the savage with the tastes, needs, vigor, and vices of civilized men."

Tocqueville was dismayed by the perpetuation of slavery and the rising conflict that seemed likely to break up the Union. His

doubts flared with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which created the prospect of the introduction of slavery to those two territories, and the 1856 election to the presidency of James Buchanan, who was sympathetic to slavery's extension. It "pained and astonished" him, Tocqueville said in 1856, that "the freest people in the world is, at the present time, almost the only one among civilized and Christian nations which yet maintains personal servitude." Religion, which Tocqueville earlier saw as a vital ingredient in tilting America's new liberties toward virtue, is barely mentioned in these letters.

Craiutu and Jennings speculate that Tocqueville's new skepticism about America was colored by his deep disappointment over the failure of liberal democratic revolutions in France and

other European countries in 1848. "What is certain," Tocqueville told an American correspondent, "is that, for some years now, you have strangely abused the advantages given to you by God which allow you to commit great errors with impunity. Viewed from this side of the ocean, you have become the *puer robustus* [robust boy] of Hobbes. By being so, you distress all the friends of democratic liberty and delight all of its opponents."



When Alexis de Tocqueville completed Democracy in America in 1840, he sang the praises of the young republic, but later he decried the "violent, intolerant, and lawless spirit" he saw in some parts of the country.