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# CLAREMONT

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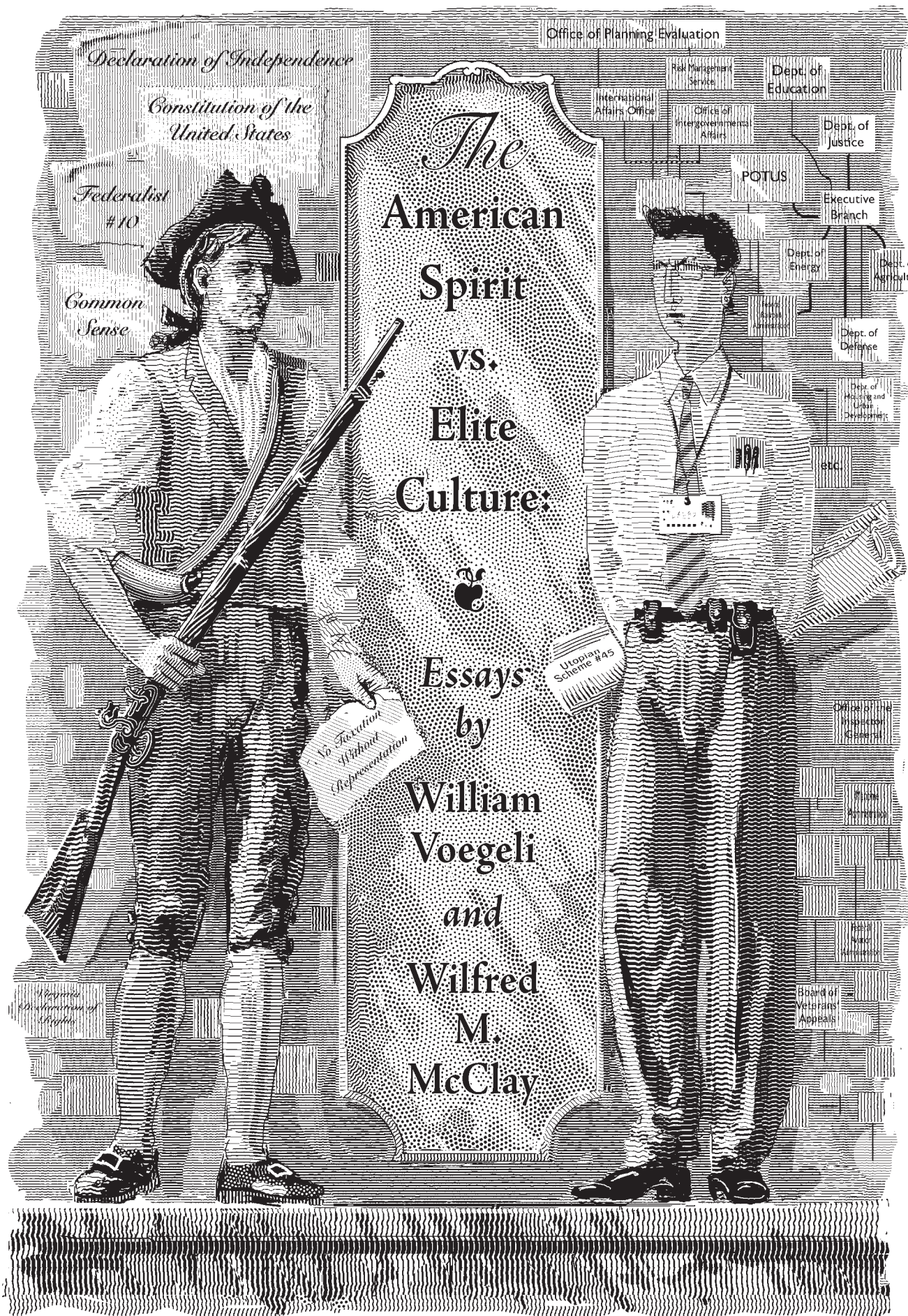
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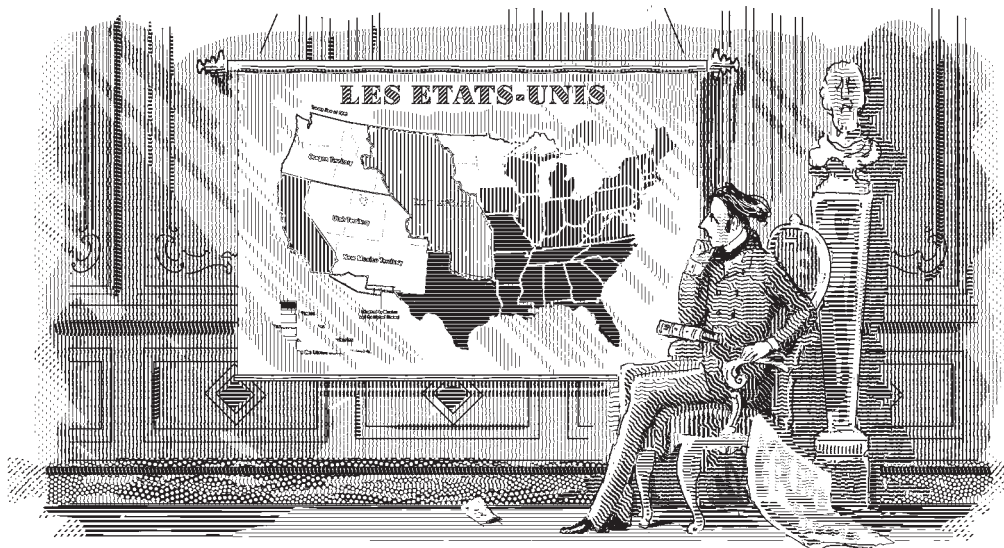
Essays by  
William Voegeli  
and  
Wilfred M. McClay



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## A FRIEND OF AMERICA AND LIBERTY

*Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*, edited and translated by Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings.  
Cambridge University Press, 576 pages, \$95 (cloth), \$32.99 (paper)



**T**OCQUEVILLE ON AMERICA AFTER 1840 is a remarkable volume that includes everything the French political thinker and statesman wrote on the United States or American-related themes after the publication of the second volume of *Democracy in America* in 1840 until his death in 1859. Most of the material has previously appeared in French in the authoritative version of his *Oeuvres complètes*, but the vast majority is available in English for the first time—even some of the hand written letters to Tocqueville from his American interlocutors were transcribed for this volume. It is thus a treasure trove for students of Tocqueville and American democracy.

It has been proposed, most recently by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop in the penetrating Introduction to their translation of *Democracy in America*, that Tocqueville wrote the greatest book on America and on democracy. That claim, with which I broadly concur, is of course open to dispute. As Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings point out in their intelligent, well-informed Interpretive Essay, Tocqueville has had his share of French and American detractors, starting with the publication in 1835 of the first volume of *Democracy in America* and continuing to this day. Of course, not all criticisms are created equal. Some have accused him of getting his facts wrong, others of conflating things American and democratic. Some critics treat the book as a mere travelogue—a guide to Jacksonian America—or downplay its philosophical dimensions, and then criticize Tocqueville for

his supposed mistakes. Others lament that he is increasingly treated in some circles—though not in any serious ones I know of—as an oracle whose insights are beyond reproach.

Whatever the merits of these criticisms, it is impossible to think seriously about America or democracy without studying Tocqueville. And thanks to the scholarly revolution of the last two generations, readers now have at their disposal the full range of his letters, speeches, and writings in authoritative editions in French and in English; new and competing English-language translations of *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*; at least two first-rate biographies—André Jardin's *Alexis de Tocqueville* (1988) and Hugh Brogan's *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life* (2007); not to mention scores of commentaries on his work. What is so welcome about *Tocqueville on America after 1840* is that it combines the requisite scholarly seriousness—its editors are among the top specialists on French political thought writing today—with a recognition that the study of Tocqueville finally belongs to all those who wish to come to terms with the intersection of American democracy and what Tocqueville himself did not hesitate to call “the cause of humanity”—the great cause of human liberty and dignity.

**T**HE EDITORS' 39-PAGE INTERPRETIVE ESSAY (accompanied by 14 small-print pages of notes) is an invaluable guide to Tocqueville's engagement with America over a 30-year period, from his nine-month trip with

Gustave de Beaumont to the United States in 1831–32 until his renewed attentiveness to things American in the final decade of his life. Impressive as it is, the Interpretive Essay goes too far when it suggests that developments in the 1850s—the deterioration of American mores, a growing spirit of conquest and adventurism abroad, and most importantly and ominously, the spread of slavery in the territories—led Tocqueville “to the stark conclusion that America no longer held out hope for the friends of liberty around the world.”

The editors contrast the “relatively optimistic image of American institutions” and the U.S. Constitution in the first volume of *Democracy* with the second volume's concerns about democratic individualism—the atomizing effects of democratic equality and the concomitant erosion of civic spirit and high human aspirations and achievement. Nevertheless, they argue that even the second volume “did not call into question the viability and maturity of American democracy.” Craiutu and Jennings see a real difference between Tocqueville's forebodings in *Democracy in America* about the unfolding “democratic revolution” and the much more pessimistic evaluation he *would* have written if the portrait of America in his later correspondence had given rise to a third volume.

The editors accurately convey Tocqueville's disenchantment with the broad direction of American democracy in the 1850s. But the letters, speeches, and writings they have compiled do not show their author radically departing from his analysis in *Democracy*. To begin with,



as the editors acknowledge, Tocqueville's growing pessimism during the 1850s had as much to do with the erosion of liberty in France during Napoleon III's quasi-despotic reign as it did with his renewed attention to America. What's more, Tocqueville was never quite as "optimistic" about democracy, even American democracy, as Craiutu and Jennings suggest. To be sure, he placed considerable hopes in the "great experiment of Self Government that is currently taking place in America," as he put it in a letter to Edward Vernon Childe in 1857. This experiment elevated democracy and was inseparable from its moral promise. Its failure, he told Childe, would "be the end of political liberty on earth." There is no evidence that Tocqueville ever *despaired* about America and her prospects. One can grant that a hypothetical third volume of *Democracy* might have gone further in emphasizing peril rather than promise, but the evils of democratic despotism, the possibility of unprecedented democratic forms of human degradation, and heartfelt warnings about the incompatibility of slavery with Christian morality and democratic self-government were already essential themes of the first two volumes.

**N**OT ONLY DOES *TOCQUEVILLE ON AMERICA after 1840* convey in multiple ways his rich and varied reflection on America and democracy, it also allows us to better appreciate the humanity of an authentically great man. Readers clearly hear the voice of a self-described "half Yankee" who valued his American friendships and sustained them over a long period of time. These friendships read like a who's who of the American political and intellectual scene, and provide a window on a world where heartfelt friendship coexisted with shared moral and intellectual concerns and a certain reserve about the expression of personal feelings. It was a world, now largely lost, where democracy and gentlemanliness coexisted.

Tocqueville's interlocutors included his American editor and anti-Masonic politician John Spencer, the lawyer and legal theorist Theodore Sedgwick, the international businessman N.W. Beckwith (who in his correspondence with Tocqueville articulated eloquent and humane democratic sentiments), and Harvard University president Jared Sparks, former editor of the *North American Review*. The Frenchman also exchanged respectful, substantive letters with the most distinguished political scientist of the day, Francis Lieber; the historian and diplomat George Bancroft; the anti-slavery Senator Charles Sumner, who was caned on the Senate floor by the pro-slavery congressman Preston Brooks; and Edward Everett, the scholar and Whig politician from Massachusetts who is best remembered today as the "other speaker" at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863.

In addition to exchanges about the great intellectual and political concerns of the day, we also see Tocqueville concerning himself with the practical sides of intellectual life: for example, arranging the American publication of *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, and in turn promoting the publication of his American friends abroad. From time to time he discretely inquired about his American railroad investments, which he feared (wrongly it turns out) had been wiped out by the terrible economic downturn of 1857. One of his most striking letters is to the young Edward Lee Childe, the son of Edward Vernon Childe and Mildred Childe, herself the younger sister of Robert E. Lee. She was a close friend of Tocqueville's and ran a celebrated salon in Paris. With a sympathetic and firm hand, Tocqueville wrote to the young Childe after his mother's death to encourage him to settle down and find a vocation for himself since self-respect and a sense of purpose were inseparable from a job well done. The Norman aristocrat knew the value of work and the dangers of aristocracy wrongly understood.

**T**HE WRITINGS IN THIS VOLUME DO INDEED reflect Tocqueville's growing disillusionment with the United States in the final years of his life. But it was not always so. During the contentious political and constitutional debates that followed the 1848 French revolution—debates that had as their stake the kind of republic France would become—Tocqueville appealed to America as the contemporary model of a moderate democracy built on the firm foundation of the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the sturdy mores of a self-governing people. *Tocqueville in America after 1840* includes several key texts from this period that amply demonstrate his admiration for American constitutional democracy. In an impromptu campaign speech to a Popular Banquet at Cherbourg in Normandy on March 19, 1848, Tocqueville toasted "to the union of the two greatest republics that exist on the earth today." He added that "no other country in the world can furnish us [the French] with such useful examples and suggest such legitimate hopes." In his Preface to the 12th edition of *Democracy in America* published in the wake of the 1848 revolution, Tocqueville posed the "terrible question" whether the new French republic would be "a liberal republic or an oppressive republic, a republic that threatens the sacred rights of property and family or a republic that recognizes and consecrates them." The example of America provided inestimable help in recognizing those principles—"order, balance of powers, true liberty, sincere and deep respect for law"—that "are indispensable to all republics and must be common to all of them."

Tocqueville never repudiated these fundamental convictions. As he wrote in 1855, America's cause "remains the old good cause and it will...remain so for as long as I shall live." He did have concerns about the direction of American democracy and he articulated these in a series of remarkably candid letters to some of his most trusted American interlocutors. In one to Sedgwick in 1852, Tocqueville reiterates the concerns that he—"half an American citizen"—had about the "spirit of conquest, and even plunder, which has manifested itself among you for several years now." He adds—with reference to the threat of an ill-advised imperial adventure directed at Cuba—that this spirit of conquest "is not a sign of good health for a people that already has more territories than it can fill."

**T**ODAY, CERTAIN LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORISTS have made something of a cottage industry out of trying to discredit Tocqueville because of his alleged fondness for imperialism. It is true that he was not opposed in principle to imperialism—whether that of the British in India or the French in Algeria, though he could be extremely critical of colonial abuses in both countries. He was open to the "greatness" of a humane, civilizing empire, which could act as a corrective, however problematic, to bourgeois democracy's individualist, materialist preoccupations. But he was adamantly opposed to slavery and in 1839 sponsored a bill in the Chamber of Deputies for its abolition in the French colonies. Tocqueville's letters to his American friends express serious reservations about colonialism *as an end in itself*, and ought to give pause to those "post-colonial" theorists committed to dismissing him as a single-minded partisan of imperial domination. In a letter to Sparks written a week after the one to Sedgwick, Tocqueville argued that America "has nothing to fear but from itself, from the excesses of democracy, the spirit of adventure and conquest, the sentiment of and the excessive pride in its strength, and the passions of youth." He counsels "moderation," which he insists is needed in nations "no less than individuals." In other letters, he expressed his concern that Americans were in the process of becoming like Hobbes's *puer robustus*—"robust children" who lacked the moderation and maturity to exercise their power in a responsible way.

Tocqueville's letters from this period suggest a series of related concerns that together reinforced his anxiety about the future of American democracy. He worried, and in retrospect inordinately so, about the massive influx of German immigrants to the United States. In his view they lacked the habits of self-government necessary to sustain liberty. He was also profoundly worried about what he perceived as a decline in American mores. He was convinced that the



“spirit of adventurism” was dramatically at odds with the sound, sturdy character and respect for law he had heralded in *Democracy in America*. He lamented, too, the absence of real statesmen on the American scene and wondered if the sober common sense of the American people was enough to avoid impending disaster.

**Y**ET ALL OF THESE CONCERNS PALE BESIDE his greatest preoccupation during this period: the threat that the expansion of slavery posed to America’s moral integrity, self-respect, and international prestige. For the most part, Tocqueville scholars (Craiutu and Jennings included) haven’t noticed that their subject’s positions on Union, liberty, abolitionism, and the expansion of slavery are in decisive respects the same as Abraham Lincoln’s (though there is no evidence that the Frenchman ever commented on or even heard of him). Tocqueville articulates essentially Lincolnian judgments about these matters without ever appealing to—or even mentioning anywhere in his writings!—Lincoln’s “glorious” Declaration of Independence. What accounts for this remarkable convergence between the sympathetic French commentator on America’s unfolding tragedy and the statesman-poet who would so eloquently summon Americans back to the “better angels of our nature”?

For Tocqueville and Lincoln the heart of the matter was the same: the repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the extension of slavery to new states and territories entailed a betrayal of America’s moral promise. Both men affirmed blacks’ humanity and intrinsic dignity. Both used their considerable intellectual and rhetorical powers to attack the dangerous conflation of self-government with the right to own and trade in human beings. But principle needed to be guided by prudence. Tocqueville, like Lincoln, was opposed to the abolitionists “as far as that party wanted to bring forth the premature and dangerous abolition of slavery in those districts where this abominable institution has always existed.” He considered the spread of this “horrible plague onto a large portion of the earth which has been free from it until now” to be nothing less than a “crime against mankind,” one that was “both dreadful and unpardonable.”

In another letter, Tocqueville expressed himself in similar terms: “the extension of this horrible evil beyond the already too extensive limits within which it is confined” was “one of the greatest crimes that human beings could commit against the general cause of humanity.” It filled him—a 50-year old Frenchman who had “seen four or five revolutions”—with “powerful political passions.” The same might be said of Lincoln, who came out of political retirement with his 1854 Peoria speech, assailing the Kansas-Nebraska Act in order to recall Americans

to “our ancient faith.” This faith did not demand slavery’s immediate abolition but it did require vigorous opposition to its expansion, as well as a renewed commitment to the bedrock truth that “all men are created equal.”

In the Peoria speech Lincoln appealed to a “moral sense” argument by criticizing the reduction of some human beings to the status of animals, the equivalent of “wild horses, wild buffaloes, or wild bears.” He pointed out that Americans had outlawed the slave trade in 1820 on punishment of death; they did “not so treat the man who deals in corn, cattle, or tobacco.” What Stephen A. Douglas liked to call “the sacred right of self-government” could not include, Lincoln argued, the right to “govern another man *without that other’s consent*.” To do so would violate the moral law as well as that “sheet anchor of American republicanism, Our Declaration of Independence.” Of course, everything stood or fell with the recognition of blacks’ humanity, a recognition that Lincoln argued was grudgingly acknowledged even by the partisans of slavery when they and their children shunned those who traded in slaves.

**T**OCQUEVILLE’S OWN CASE AGAINST SLAVERY closely resembled Lincoln’s. In 1855, at the request of the abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman, he composed a short, eloquent, and moving “Testimony Against Slavery” that appeared the following year in the anti-slavery journal *The Liberty Bell*. As a “persevering enemy of despotism everywhere” and “an old and sincere friend of America,” Tocqueville expressed his chagrin 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.” He was “uneasy” at “seeing Slavery retard her progress, tarnish her glory, furnish arms to her detractors, compromise the future career of the Union.” He went on to speak about being “moved at the spectacle of man’s degradation by man.” Without explicitly appealing to either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, he expressed his “hope” that he will “see the day when the law will grant equal civil liberty to all the inhabitants of the same empire, as God accords the freedom of the will, without distinction, to the dwellers upon earth.” The call to “equal civil liberty” anticipated Lincoln’s own noble call for “a new birth of freedom” in the Gettysburg address.

Tocqueville appealed to the decency, self-respect, and honor of a free, Christian, self-governing people. A free people cannot be a slave-owning people without compromising its soul or risking the loss of its liberty. Tocqueville’s “silence” about the Declaration in both *Democracy in America* and in his later writings and letters about America has nothing to do with ne-

glect for the affirmation of “common humanity” that undergirds it. As a Frenchman who had lived through the ravages of the French Revolution (and of subsequent French revolutions that appealed to its authority), Tocqueville had an understandable suspicion of “abstract” appeals to the “rights of man.” In Europe, they had been used to undermine traditions and institutions that were necessary to the continuity of civilization and the moral foundations of representative government. In *Democracy in America*, with the French context ever in mind, Tocqueville emphasized the Americans’ Puritan “point of departure.” However “barbarous” some of their laws, the Puritans managed to successfully weave together the “spirit of liberty” and the “spirit of religion.” And without losing sight of the great truth that “all men are created equal,” Tocqueville emphasized the U.S. Constitution as a supreme act of moral and political prudence. It is a mistake to consult Tocqueville for an exhaustive account of the American Founding. Rather, we should turn to him for an unusually discerning account of American institutions and mores and for a penetrating description of the effects—all the effects—of modernity’s unrelenting “democratic revolution.” As this volume so richly demonstrates, the Norman aristocrat fully deserves his self-characterization as “half Yankee” and a “friend of America and liberty.”

**I**HIGHLY RECOMMEND *TOCQUEVILLE ON AMERICA after 1840* to anyone who wants to understand how one of the best friends this nation ever had responded to the moral and political crisis that led to the Civil War. It shows that Tocqueville remained America’s steadfast friend, even if an increasingly frustrated and disappointed one. Reflecting on the fascinating materials that Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings have so ably assembled and translated for us, I am struck by the underlying continuity of Tocqueville’s judgments on modern democracy, and especially American democracy. It is true that the emerging crisis of the 1850s led him to question the extent to which America could serve as a model for friends of liberty and human dignity everywhere. But the great French political thinker and statesman never lost his faith in “the old good cause,” and 150 years after his death he continues to serve as a wise and instructive bridge between the Old World and the New.

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