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AN AMERICAN JOURNEY

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AN AMERICAN JOURNEY

In 1831, when the US was barely born, the 26 year old Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to pay a visit to see what his country and Europe could learn from their energetic young cousin. Today, the US has grown to more than double its physical size and has matured into the richest and most powerful member in the family of nations. Using my experiences and perspectives gained during the different International Fellows field study trips, I have devised the questions to check in what way de Tocqueville's remarkable observations on America, written down in his classic text, *Democracy In America*¹, still are valid.

MONTANA – July 2001

*“One can assert that a slow, progressive rise in wages is one of the general laws characteristic of democratic societies... If this no longer becomes the case, such a situation is serious and demands the particular attention of the legislators.”*²

Despite sustained economic growth, problems of income distribution within the US are significant. Between 1968 and the late 1990s, the difference in income level between the wealthiest and the poorest Americans grew 22.4 percent. In 1947, the top 5 percent of American families received 15.5 percent of the national income; by 1967 that figure reached 16.4 percent, and by 1998 22.1 percent. Put another way, the data show the inflation-adjusted income of the bottom fifth of working families dropped by 21 percent between 1947 and 1995, while the income of the top fifth rose by 30 percent. As important, real wages for a sizable percentage of

¹ Alexis **de Tocqueville**, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, (New York: Bantam Books, 2000).

² *Ibid.*, volume II, third book, chapter VII, p. 724.

the American population were stagnant for the better part of the last 15 years. According to the US Bureau of Census, more than 31 million American families are living in poverty. A state like Montana is a perfect example of this tendency.³ The share of income of the native population, mainly working in agriculture and the extraction industry, has incrementally decreased during recent decades. At the same time the income of the ‘techno geeks’ and retired, moving in from the West Coast states, has increased, causing an ever-rising income divide. Others factors, such as globalization, the decline of manufacturing jobs, and the expansion of low-wage service jobs - - 46% of the jobs with the most projected growth in America to the year 2005 pay poverty-level wages⁴ -- may also contribute to increasing wage inequality. How will the US deal with the problem of the burgeoning working poor and the rising income gap? Is raising the minimum wage to a living wage an option? Will wider income disparities increase pressures for social service spending, potentially limiting the resources available for other domestic and military programs? How will it affect the social coherence? Will it increase unrest or social fragmentation in American communities? Might the enhancement of education opportunities be a part of the solution?

Memphis, TN – August 2001

“The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on my arrival in the United States...They seem to be a religious people...but to what point does their life conform to their doctrine? What is the true power of

³ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty00.html> and <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income.html>, accessed 28 February 2002.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections, <http://www.bls.gov/emp/>, accessed 26 February 2002. The four jobs with the most growth are cashiers, janitors, retail sales people, and waiters and waitresses.

*the religious principle on their soul? ...Never have I been so conscious of the influence of religion on the morals and the social and political state of a people....*⁵

Seen on a billboard in Memphis, TN: “JESUS OFFERS ETERNAL LIFE. ARE YOU INTERESTED? CALL”

According to a Gallup poll, 99 percent of southerners profess to believe in God. In the nation as a whole, the belief factor is said to be only a smidgen lower, with 94 percent of the population claiming that they believe in God. 40 percent attend church weekly (47 percent in the South).⁶ Religion is exerting an influential role on politics. The best example is the clamor by Republican and Democratic politicians who run for president to publicly trumpet their religious faith. In the 1992 presidential election campaign Bill Clinton, Al Gore, George Bush, and Dan Quayle all attested that they were born-again Christians. In the 2000 presidential primary campaign, Al Gore publicly reasserted his credentials as a born-again Christian, while George W. Bush claimed that Jesus Christ was his favorite philosopher.⁷ Why do they go to such lengths to protest their faith? Do they believe that a simple declaration of their belief in God is vital to their success? And if so, why? Is it because de Tocqueville’s essential insight—that the majority of the Americans regard faith almost as a litmus test of morality—still applies today? What is the relevance of organized religion to American society? What is the interest of the church in social issues? What is the role the church plays in helping the vulnerable, the socially excluded, and the have-nots in society? How does President George W. Bush’ “Compassionate Conservatism” fit into this picture, as one of its main principles is enlarging the role of the church and other faith-

⁵ **de Tocqueville**, volume I, chapter XVII, pp. 350-353.

⁶ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/tb/religValue/>, accessed 02 March 2002.

⁷ **Berke**, *New York Times*, December 15, 1999, “Religion Center Stage in Presidential Race,” p. A20.

based organizations, for example by assuming more responsibility for helping the poor in stead of the Government?

University of Illinois, Champaign, IL – October 2001 and New York City, NY – December 2001.

“Education will guarantee the future of equality and democracy....The American system of universal public education is a symbol of the enlightenment of American society because it manages to advance equality of opportunity and hence both the good of the individual and the good of the society at the same time.”- Equality of education - “Almost all Americans enjoy easy circumstances and can so easily acquire the basis elements of human knowledge...Education has taught them the utility of instruction.”⁸

In the eight years from 1990 to 1998, despite a 10 percent increase in total student enrollment, the New York City budget for public schools was cut by \$2.7 billion. This amounted to cuts of \$2,520 per child, or \$75,000 per class. When the wave of immigration from Third World countries hit in the late 1970s, the white middle class - - fearing they would be swamped by people of color - - abandoned the public schools. This resulted in the sharp decline in per-pupil funding, as the white population started voting against increased taxes to raise spending on a public education system they no longer felt served them.⁹ Similar trends are observed in most of the major cities and continue to happen.¹⁰

While the US ranks first among the industrialized countries in the size, scope, and excellence of its undergraduate and graduate education, at the same time, below the university level education

⁸ **de Tocqueville**, volume I, chapter III, pp. 57-58 and chapter XVII, pp. 301-303.

⁹ Anemona **Hartocollis**, *New York Times*, June 9, 1999, “Citywide Reading and Math Scores Fall Sharply,” pp. A1 and B6.

¹⁰ Mayor Bloomberg of the City of New York asked the City Board of Education on February 13, 2002 to cut 7% of what it receives from the city tax levy funds – <http://www.nycent.edu/news/press/menu.html>, accessed on 02 March 2002.

compares poorly with that of other countries in several key aspects, such as hard sciences, mathematics and engineering. As education will become even more critical to maintain economic competitiveness, technological ingenuity, military strength, and for ensuring the vitality of the core institutions, what commitments will the US make to maintain its edge or to remedy the shortcomings in this field? Is a partnership with private organizations and companies an option? Is a redistribution of the competences of the federal, state, and local level necessary? Does the Administration intend to undertake actions in the related fields of science and technology? How will the US Government guarantee the equality of education, i.e. equal opportunities to equal quality schooling? In other words, how does the Government want to avoid a “segregated” education system, in which the affordability of the choice of school might become the dividing line between the haves and the have-nots?

San Francisco, CA - November 2001

“...In all uncertainty of the future, one event is at least sure. At a period which we may call near, for we are speaking of the life of nations, the Anglo-Americans alone will cover the whole of the immense area between the polar ice and the tropics, extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific coast.”¹¹

How wrong was de Tocqueville! Nowhere is the browning of America more evident than in California, the prime portal of choice for new immigrants arriving in the US. Today, whites make up just 50.5 percent of California’s population, according to US Census Bureau figures, and first-generation immigrants comprise a quarter of the populace.¹² Within a couple of years, as the Hispanic population (presently 30 percent) continues to soar, due to both higher birth rates

¹¹ **de Tocqueville**, volume I, chapter XVIII, p. 395 and p. 425.

¹² <http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.php>, accessed 03 March 2001.

and immigration, California is destined to become a plurality, with no single racial group forming a statistical majority. Within a couple of decades, America is predicted to look like California today. The proportion of the population of the non-Hispanic white category will fall from 72 percent to 62 percent in 2025. The US Census Bureau projects that by 2050 the national population shares will be 52 percent White, 24 percent Hispanic, 15 percent African-American, and 9 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.¹³ How will this change of America's racial and ethnic composition affect the social harmony? Will it have political implications too? For the Latino immigrants—who tend to be socially conservative, predominantly Catholic, poor, and as yet politically uncommitted—might become the new swing voters. As the aging white population will become increasingly dependent on the goodwill and good governance of the so-called ethnic minorities in the next decades, will they seek some sort of retribution? How will they, for example, regard the Social Security arrangements of the white elderly—who are none other than today's young adult voters—in 2030? Will the future ethnic balance affect the distribution of wealth, as the Hispanic families nowadays are largely low-income households? And if so, will this income divide be mirrored by an equally severe education and digital divide?

New York City, NY– December 2001 (The New York Times) and Atlanta, GA – February 2002 (CNN)

"The influence of the press In America is immense. It causes political life to circulate through all the parts of that vast territory... Its eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders

¹³ Philip **Martin** and Elizabeth **Midgley**, "Immigration to the United States," Population Bulletin, Vol. 54, N°2, June 1999.

of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion...To suppose that they only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance: they maintain civilization.”¹⁴

40 years ago, newspapers were struggling to defend their influence and future viability to meet the challenge of television. In that earlier struggle, newspapers had reshaped their contents and taken advantage of the drawbacks of television—its relative lack of portability and its inability to make any serious dent in the market of classified ads—in order to stay in business and retain their important voice in public affairs. This time around, both television and the print press are viewing the rise of the Internet with some trepidation and trying to find ways to coexist with a medium that is increasingly becoming a primary source of information. Already, every major newspaper and television network has its own website, which it updates throughout the day with news and information. Internet sites have begun to have an impact on concepts of news dissemination; they may soon force us to update our understanding of the ways in which public opinion is formed and expressed. It is in the US that the influence of the Internet is greatest, and the rest of the world will closely watch what happens there. What impact will these ongoing changes in the collection and dissemination of information have in American society? Will they raise roadblocks of inequality that may be detrimental to democracy in the long run? How will the changes affect political debate in the US? Are we going to move toward more direct democracy?

Dallas-Fort Worth, TX – January 2002

“When a democratic people engages in war after a long peace, it incurs much more risk of defeat than any other nation...mainly as a result of the growing distance between the military and the democratic population in

¹⁴ de Tocqueville, volume I, chapter XI, p. 207.

peacetime.... and the military tends to become progressively demoralized. Once an external threat has arisen, however, there is a secret connection between the military character and the character of democracies, which war brings to light....This kind of patriotism...may save the State in critical circumstances...As the American participates in all that is done in his country, he thinks himself obliged to defend whatever may be censured; for it is not only his country which is attacked upon these occasions, but it is himself. The consequence is, that his national pride resorts to a thousand artifices.”¹⁵

Americans have demonstrated historically that they possess a strong collective identity and that they rise to challenges when necessary. September 11 has been the most recent example of this attitude. However, American society has become substantially fragmented along ethnic, racial, and sectarian lines. In this view, the growing cultural emphasis on the multicultural facets of American society might lead to a growing inclination for many Americans to think of themselves as members of social subgroups, resulting into a shift toward celebrating differences, rather than commonalities. The unrestrained assertion of differences could push a benign impulse toward pluralism into fragmentation, undermining the sense of a shared national purpose. The aforementioned demographic evolutions could only reinforce this phenomenon. Similar changes in attitudes are noticed within younger generations. The members of Generation X, for example, are exhibiting a cynical individualism and a strong reluctance to participate in civic activities. Taking into account these tendencies, the question is this: when the US is challenged in the future, will its social cohesion endure or will it erode? Can American democracy sustain a serious global engagement when its use of force is increasingly applied in remote actions that the public does not perceive as responding to a direct threat or motivated by a grand cause? And more in particular, will the support for the war on terrorism continue when operation Enduring

¹⁵ **de Tocqueville**, volume I, chapter XIV, pp. 279-281.

Freedom lasts several years, expands to dozens of other countries, and counts many American casualties?

Marietta, GA – February 2002 (Lockheed Martin) and Chicago, IL - October 2001 (Boeing Co)

“No protracted war can fail to endanger the freedom of a democratic country....the danger is of another kind. War does not always give over democratic communities to military government, but it must invariably and immeasurably increase the powers of civil government; it must almost compulsory concentrate the direction of all men and the management of all things in the hands of the administration. If it lead not to despotism by sudden violence, it prepares men for it more gently by their habits”¹⁶

In his farewell address in 1961, President Eisenhower warned his countrymen with a similar message. He stated a dilemma: how to reconcile the exigencies of national defense with the claims of domestic economy – how to reconcile democracy’s disposition to the pacific pursuit of prosperity with the martial virtues that inspire fighters and count trade for less than the production of arms. In other words, how to guard against the influence and abuse of power of the military-industrial complex? America’s investment in arms outnumbers already since decades that of any other country by far. The DoD budget increased substantially after September 11 and it is projected to increase further the next five years. The defense industry is characterized by a unique economic structure: the federal government is the one and only customer of countless private contractors. The interdependence of contractors, and of sub-contractors, is bewildering complex. It has spawned a hybrid system in which private business interlocks with government and that undoubtedly is laced by waste and corruption. In what way is this an issue for concern?

¹⁶ de Tocqueville, volume II, third book, chapter XXII, p. 814.

How should the vicissitudes of the military-industrial complex be addressed? How to prevent the defense industries for exercising undue influence on national politics? Haven't the by the previous Administrations supported large-scale mergers in the defense industry facilitated an unhealthy interconnectedness between the Government and these new mega companies? And doesn't this phenomenon prevent the necessary competition?

Washington, DC – 2001-2002

“It frequently happens that the members of the community promote the influence of the central power without intending to...Such persons will admit, as a general principle, that the public authority ought not to interfere in private concerns; but, by an exception to that rule, each of them craves its assistance in the particular concern on which he is engaged and seeks to draw upon the influence of the government for his own benefit, although he would restrict it on other occasions. If a large number of men applies this particular exception to a great variety of different purposes, the sphere of the central power extends itself imperceptibly in all directions, although everyone wishes it to be circumscribed.”¹⁷

Interest groups defend their own interests, this being their reason of existence. Some groups defend their interests more successfully than others, often with the help of lobbyists, and do so to the disadvantage of other interest groups. People support the people who support their causes and hold their positions. In many ways, interest groups and lobbyists enhance the process of democracy. However, this phenomenon has a flip side too. Take for example the American foreign policy. In the US, domestic politics affects foreign policy making more conclusively than in any other country. American foreign policy *is* often popular foreign policy. Probably in no other country is the influence of private associations on the conduct of foreign policy as great and as direct as in the US. To a large extent, American public opinion is the final maker of

¹⁷ de Tocqueville, volume II, Fourth book, chapter III, p. 843.

American foreign policy, if only because the American lobbyist knows he ultimately must bring the American people around to his viewpoint if he is to secure any sustained foreign policy.

Thus, a consensus of public opinion is the precondition for the making of foreign policies. But, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, public opinion is not the mere summation of private opinions. Can the US, under these conditions, conduct a rational foreign policy? Or do the processes of domestic politics, extended to issues of global politics, prevent American diplomacy from the rational pursuit of national goals? Is there a need for mitigating the influence of interest groups and lobbyists? And if so, how can it be done? Can the improvement of the accessibility and transparency of governmental bureaucracies be a part of the solution to decrease the role of interest groups?