

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

from Democracy in America

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

In the early 1830s, the French aristocrat and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) traveled to the United States to study American prisons and penitentiaries, but instead became fascinated by the social condition of equality and its effects on all aspects of American life. Tocqueville presented his findings and reflections in his magisterial Democracy in America (1835), still regarded by many as the most penetrating account of the democratic ethos in general and of American democracy in particular, with profound insights into the ideas, beliefs, sentiments, passions, habits, and mores of American society and their influence on how we govern ourselves. This excerpt from the remarkable chapter that concludes Volume One, “Some Considerations on the Present State and the Probable Future of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States,” sheds light on the stark differences between the ideas and practices of the Euro-American settlers and those of the Indian tribes. Although written long after the voyages of Columbus and the subsequent early encounters between the Europeans and the Native Americans, this selection is very useful for thinking about why those encounters turned out as they did. It also sheds light on the question dealt with by Schlesinger in the previous selection.

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Describe the basic differences between the Indians and the European Americans, according to Tocqueville. Were their ways of life compatible? How does Tocqueville explain the “gradual disappearance of the native races”? Why does he think that it was, like the march of democracy itself, inevitable? Do you find his analysis and his arguments compelling? Does Tocqueville help you answer the vexed questions about Columbus and the “goodness” of European discovery and settlement of “The New World”?

All the Indian tribes that used to inhabit the territory of New England—the Narragansetts, the Mohicans, the Pequots—no longer live except in the memory of men; the Lenapes, who received Penn a hundred and fifty years ago on the shores of the Delaware, have disappeared today. I met the last of the Iroquois: they asked for alms. All the nations that I have just named formerly extended to the shores of the sea; now one must go more than a hundred leagues into the interior of the continent to meet with an Indian. These savages have not only withdrawn, they are destroyed. As the natives move way and die, an

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immense people comes constantly and grows larger in their place. A development so prodigious has never been seen among nations, nor a destruction so rapid.

It is easy to indicate the manner in which this destruction works.

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When the Indians lived alone in the wilderness from which they are exiled today, their needs were few; they themselves manufactured their arms, the water of the rivers was their only drink, and for clothes they had the hides of the animals whose flesh served to nourish them.

The Europeans introduced firearms, iron, and brandy among the natives of North America; they taught them to replace with our fabrics the barbarous clothes with which Indian simplicity had been contented until then. While contracting new tastes, the Indians did not learn the art of satisfying them, and they had to resort to the industry of the whites. In return for goods which he himself did not know how to create, the savage could offer nothing but the rich furs which the woods still contained. From that moment, hunting not only had to provide for his needs, but also for the frivolous passions of Europe. He no longer pursues the beasts of the forests only to nourish himself, but in order to procure the sole objects of exchange that he could give us.

While the needs of the natives were thus increasing, their resources did not cease to diminish.

From the day when a European settlement forms in the neighborhood of the territory occupied by Indians, the wild game takes alarm. Thousands of savages, wandering in the forests without fixed dwellings, did not frighten it; but from the moment when the continuous noise of European industry made itself heard someplace, it began to flee and to retreat toward the west, where its instinct taught it that it would encounter still boundless wilderness. “The buffalo is constantly receding,” says Mr. Cass and Mr. Clark in their report to Congress, February 4, 1829. “A few years since, they approached the base of the Allegheny, and a few years hence they may even be rare upon the immense plains which extend to the base of the Rocky Mountains.” I was assured that this effect of the approach of the whites was often felt at two hundred leagues from their frontier. Thus their influence is exerted on tribes whose names they hardly know, and who suffer the evils of usurpation long before recognizing its authors.

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Soon, hardy adventurers penetrate into Indian country; they advance to fifteen or twenty leagues from the whites' last frontier and go to build the dwelling of a civilized man in the very midst of barbarism. It is easy for them to do this: the boundaries of the territory of a hunting people are ill-secured. This territory, moreover, belongs to the nation as a whole and is not precisely the property of anyone; no part of it, therefore, is defended by individual interest.

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A few European families, occupying well-separated points, then serve to chase out the wild animals, never to return, from all the intermediate space that extends between them. The Indians, who had lived until then in a sort of abundance, find it difficult to subsist, and have still more difficulty in procuring the objects of exchange they need. By making their game flee, it is as if one made the fields of the farmer sterile. Soon the means of existence are almost entirely lacking to them. One then encounters these unfortunates prowling like famished wolves in the midst of their wooded wilderness. An instinctive love of their native country attaches them to the soil that has seen them born, and they now find nothing there but misery and death. Finally, they decide; they part, and following from a distance the elk, the buffalo, and the beaver in their flight, they leave to these wild animals the care of choosing a new native country for them. It is therefore not, properly speaking, the Europeans who chase the natives from America, it is famine: a happy distinction that had escaped ancient casuists, and that modern doctors have discovered.

One cannot imagine the frightful evils that accompany these forced migrations. At the moment when the Indians left their paternal fields, they were already exhausted and worn down. The country where they go to stay is occupied by small tribes who see the newcomers only with jealousy. Behind them is hunger, before them is war, everywhere is misery. In order to escape so many enemies, they divide up. Each of them seeks to isolate himself so as to find furtively the means of sustaining his existence and lives in the immensity of the wilderness like an outcast in the heart of civilized societies. The social bond, long since weakened, then breaks. Already there was no more native country for them, soon there will no longer be a people; families will scarcely remain; the common name is lost, the language is forgotten, traces of the origin disappear. The nation has ceased to exist. It scarcely lives in the memory of American antiquarians and is known only by a few scholars in Europe.

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I would not want a reader to be able to believe that my picture here is overcharged. I saw with my own eyes several of the miseries that I have just described; I contemplated evils that would be impossible for me to recount.

At the end of the year 1831, I found myself on the left bank of the Mississippi, at a place named Memphis by the Europeans. While I was at this place, a numerous troop of Choctaws came (the French of Louisiana name them Chactas); the savages were leaving their country and sought to cross to the right bank of the Mississippi, where they flattered themselves they would find the refuge that the American government promised them. It was then in the heart of winter, and the cold ravaged that year with an unaccustomed violence; snow had hardened the ground, and the river carried along enormous pieces of ice. The Indians brought along their families with them; they dragged behind them the wounded, the ill, infants who had just been born, and the old who were going to die. They had neither tents nor carts, but only some provisions and arms. I saw them embark to cross the great river, and this solemn spectacle will never leave my memory. One heard neither tears nor complaints among this assembled crowd; they were silent. Their misfortunes were old, and they felt them to be irreparable. All the Indians had already entered the vessels that were to carry them; their dogs still remained on the shore; when the animals finally saw that they were going away forever, together they let out frightful howls, and dashing at once into the icy waters of the Mississippi, they followed their masters swimming.

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In our day the dispossession of the Indians often works in a regular and so to speak wholly legal manner.

When the European population begins to approach the wilderness occupied by a savage nation, the government of the United States commonly sends a solemn embassy to it; the whites assemble the Indians on a great plain, and after having eaten and drunk with them, they say to them “What have you to do in the country of your fathers? Soon you must dig up their bones in order to live. How is the region that you inhabit worth more than any other? Are there woods, marshes, and prairies only where you are, and can you live only under your sun? Beyond those mountains that you see on the horizon, beyond that lake that borders your territory to the west, one encounters vast regions where wild beasts are still abundant; sell us your lands and go live happily in those places.” After having held this discourse, they spread firearms, wool clothes, barrels of brandy, glass necklaces, tin bracelets, earrings, and mirrors before the eyes of the Indians. If at the sight of all these riches they still hesitate, it is insinuated to them that they cannot refuse the

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consent that is asked of them and that soon the government itself will be powerless to guarantee them enjoyment of their rights. What to do? Half-convinced, half-compelled, the Indians move out; they go to inhabit new wilderness, where the whites will hardly leave them in peace for ten years. Thus it is that Americans acquire at a cheap price entire provinces that the wealthiest sovereigns of Europe cannot pay for.

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I have just recounted great evils, I add that they appear to me to be irremediable. I believe that the Indian race of North America is condemned to perish, and I cannot prevent myself from thinking that on the day that the Europeans will have settled on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, it will have ceased to exist.

The Indians of North America had only two options for salvation: war or civilization; in other words, they had to destroy the Europeans or become their equals.

At the birth of the colonies it would have been possible for them, by uniting their forces, to deliver themselves from the few foreigners who came to land on the shores of the continent. More than once they attempted it and were at the point of succeeding. Today the disproportion of resources is too great for them to be able to think of such an undertaking. Nevertheless, among the Indian nations men of genius still arise who foresee the final lot reserved to the savage populations and seek to unite all the Indian tribes in common hatred of Europeans; but their efforts are impotent. The small tribes who neighbor the whites are already too weakened to offer an effective resistance; the others, indulging in the childish insouciance of the morrow that characterizes the savage nature, wait for the danger to arrive before occupying themselves with it; the ones cannot act, the others do not want to.

It is easy to foresee that the Indians will never want to become civilized, or that they will try too late when they come to want it.

Civilization is the result of a long social endeavor that operates in one same place, and that different generations hand down, one to another, as they succeed each other. The peoples among whom civilization has the most difficulty founding its empire are hunting peoples. Tribes of shepherds change location, but they always follow a regular order in their migrations and constantly retrace their steps; the dwellings of hunters vary with those of the very animals they pursue.

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Several times attempts have been made to bring enlightenment among the Indians while leaving them their vagabond mores; the Jesuits had undertaken it in Canada, the Puritans in New England. Neither did anything lasting. Civilization was born in the hut and went to die in the woods. The great fault of these legislators for the Indians was not to understand that to succeed in civilizing people, one must before everything else get them to settle, and one can only do that by cultivating the soil; it was therefore a question first of turning the Indians into farmers.

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Not only do the Indians not possess this indispensable preliminary for civilization, but it is very difficult for them to acquire it.

Men who have once indulged in the idle and adventurous life of hunters feel an almost insurmountable disgust for the constant and regular labor that cultivation requires. That can be perceived within our societies, but it is still more visible in peoples for whom the habits of hunting have become national customs.

Independent of this general cause, there is one no less powerful that is encountered only among the Indians. I have already indicated it; I believe I ought to go back to it.

The natives of North America not only consider work as an evil, but as a dishonor, and their haughtiness struggles against civilization almost as obstinately as their laziness.

There is no Indian so miserable who, in his bark hunt, does not entertain a haughty idea of his individual worth; he considers the cares of industry to be demeaning occupations; he compares the farmer to the cow who plows a furrow, and in each of our arts he perceives nothing but the work of slaves. It is not that he has not conceived a very lofty idea of power of the whites and the greatness of their intellect; but if he admires the result of our efforts, he scorns the means by which we have obtained it, and while submitting to our ascendancy, he still believes himself superior to us. Hunting and war seem to him the only cares worthy of man. The Indian, in the depth of his misery in his woods, therefore nourishes the same ideas, the same opinions as the noble of the Middle Ages in his fortified castle, and to resemble him completely he needs only to become a conqueror. What a singular thing! It is in the forests of the New World, and not among the Europeans who people its shores, that the old prejudices of Europe are still found today. . . .

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From whatever side one views the destiny of the natives of North America, one sees only irreparable ills: if they remain savages, one drives them ahead as one advances; if they want to civilize themselves, contact with men more civilized than they delivers them to oppression and misery. If they continue to wander from wilderness to wilderness, they perish; if they undertake to settle, they still perish. They can only become enlightened with the aid of the Europeans, and the approach of the Europeans depraves them and pushes them back towards barbarism. As long as they are left in their solitudes, they refuse to change their mores, and there is no longer time to do that when they are finally compelled to want it. . . .

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