

# Trump's Dream and Tocqueville's Nightmare

Written by MJ Fox

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MJ FOX, OCT 12 2017

Many of us observe in astonishment as we witness the startling outbursts of Donald Trump on the critical issues of the day, from taunting North Korea with total destruction to provoking the abuse of basic freedoms. It seems to not matter if the outbursts are proclaimed to the United Nations General Assembly or simply tweeted in the wee hours of the morning, and we are left wondering how this election came to pass. Of course, there is no singular explanation, but his coarse populist message and the FBI's timing for reinvestigating Hillary Clinton have been cited as being among the main culprits. Some found token comfort in President Obama's formal farewell speech, and others found consolation in provocative satire, an ultimately toothless antidote for a toxic presidency.

But the appeal of Trump and his contentious win also took place because the tilling of fertile democratic soil had been underway for decades, and in 2016 it was closer than ever to a long-predicted tipping point, ripe for a final push. This prediction was not made by some sharp contemporary pundit or lauded intellectual, but by a European visitor almost 200 years ago. We often forget the past has something to offer, and are very caught up in the *now*: current events, current technology, current concepts, current theories, current authors. It hardly seems possible that the distant past would have anything to say to the present since the world has so changed.

But has it?

The one constant that has stubbornly endured is human nature, and one person who understood this well was the French civil servant Alexis de Tocqueville, who travelled throughout the new United States in 1831 to examine the results of the strange new democratic experiment. Democracy was so new in the world at that time. What grew out of Tocqueville's keen observations was his classic tome, *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, and augmented with a second volume in 1840.

It is amidst insightful analysis on equality, religion, slavery, the role of women, and much more that he foretold, for example, the looming American Civil War and the rise of the USA and Russia as bi-polar powers. And he also foretold democracy's demise. In one of the final chapters, entitled "What Sort Of Despotism Democratic Nations Have To Fear", Tocqueville cautions that the path to "despotism" will be unprecedented, developing in ways never seen before. He explains, "it might assume a different character; it would be more extensive and more mild; it would degrade men without tormenting them."

Importantly, his despotic democracy experiences an encroaching erosion of agency, one that "restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties." This has a familiar ring as we look back and observe several decades of increasing social fracture and the receding American dream. It has been characterized by a growing forgotten and disempowered working class without the time or money to exercise much agency; low wages or unemployment; the crisis in civics education in public schools; and ominously low adult literacy. It is here we find so many of the people who believe they voted for change in the 2016 presidential election. Their evolving disaffection was well recognized and seized, Trump exuding a bombastic self-confidence with seductive but hollow reassurances, including the resurrection of that American dream.

But Trump's American dream is Tocqueville's American nightmare as the US lurches in a despotic direction. Trump's posturing as America's saviour calls up Tocqueville's description of a government where "the citizens quit

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their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters" and "console themselves...by thinking that they have chosen them themselves", unaware they have no agency. Tocqueville suggests that with these fleeting instances of voting, the people will "soon become incapable of using the one great privilege left to them." This is also borne out by the more than 90 million people who chose not to vote in the 2016 election.

Amidst Tocqueville's insights, a glimmer of light appears, easy to miss if you were not looking for it. He tells us how "the vices of those who govern and the weakness of the governed will soon bring it to ruin. Then the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, will either create freer institutions, or soon fall back at the feet of a single master." Here, salvation does not rest with government: averting the dystopian road to political ruin rests with the people themselves.

Tocqueville's prophecy did not escape the notice of outgoing President Obama, who picked up where Tocqueville left off. In his farewell address, Obama deliberately stressed "the people", mentioning "us" and "we" more than 100 times, and "democracy" more than twenty-five times. Echoing Tocqueville, Obama alerted his fellow Americans they are skidding towards a precipice, and how the current order, based on "the rule of law, human rights, freedom of religion, and speech, and assembly, and an independent press...is now being challenged.

Challenged indeed. Like a nuclear bomb, the ripple effect of American citizens' decreasing agency inevitably will become global, inescapably touching us all. The antidote for any people's erosion of agency, sense of desperation, social fracture and anomie, of being a bit too close to that earlier mentioned tipping point, is remembering that government and elected representatives are meant to serve all of us, and not for us to serve them. From a historical distance Tocqueville quietly counsels:

One should never expect a liberal, energetic and wise government to originate in the votes of a people of servants.

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## About the author:

MJ Fox is an independent researcher and editor, with a PhD from the Peace and Conflict Research Institute at Uppsala University, Sweden. She is the author of *The Roots of Somali Political Culture* (Lynne Reiner Publishers) and her published articles cover aspects of political culture, child soldiers, democracy and conflict, democratization processes, Somalia, Palestine and other states.