

The ADVOCATE

De Tocqueville said this would happen

By Paul Greenberg

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After touring Jacksonian America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville would write a wide-ranging, eloquent and still highly relevant analysis of "Democracy in America," the title of his masterwork. But he was interested in more than the America of his time. He was also intrigued by the future of democracy in America.

What shape, he wondered, would tyranny assume when it came to this new, ever-bubbling democracy? Being both a Frenchman seeking refuge from the violent swings of politics in his own country (from autocracy to democracy to terror and back again), and a student of classical political theory, he had little doubt that democracy would prove a prelude to tyranny.

He was in doubt only about what shape such a tyranny would take. For in this new, unique society, surely tyranny, too, would come in a new, unique form. He saw democracy in America as always teetering between its two desires: liberty and equality. Which would triumph?

After long deliberation, the answer came to him: In the end, an oppressive equality would settle upon the land. But it would be a velvet-gloved oppression new in the annals of man. He explained how it would work in a chapter entitled "What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear."

Tocqueville envisioned a ruling power that would

be "absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild," one that keeps its subjects "in perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances. What remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?"

If you doubt the relevance of Alexis de Tocqueville's dusty old ideas to today's bright, shiny Twittering America, just look around at the web of maternal regulations we follow from dawn to dusk, and that hovers over us even as we sleep on mattresses with tags we are enjoined not to remove under penalty of law. Or just try to fill out your own income tax form without being shown the way by a certified (public accountant) guide.

Whether by intention, accident or just inertia, the maze of rules and regulations we live under, each with its own extensive bureaucracy to administer it, keeps growing -- much like the Internal Revenue Code. And all of it is always For Our Own Good, of course.

In the end, shall we have to commit the contents of old books to memory, like the characters in "Fahrenheit 451," lest the book-burners send them up in flames? Think of the Russian poets in the Soviet era who carried their subversive lines around in their heads -- lest the KGB find evidence of thoughtcrime on the premises.

Those who construct Brave New Worlds always begin by erasing the past, for its values must be stamped out, lest the next generation realize that

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there was once an alternative to the New Order. It is no coincidence that Winston and Julia, the lovers in "1984," rendezvous above an antique shop. Their original sin is to treasure the past. After that, their fate is sealed; it is only a matter of time before the Thought Police come bursting in. These two subversives must be apprehended. And re-educated. For their own good, of course.

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