“It’s the Soul, Stupid”:
Contemporary America’s Preoccupation
with the Politics of Prosperity
-by Carson Holloway

“It’s the economy, stupid!” So read a sign on the wall at Clinton campaign headquarters during the 1992 election season. The sign was put up by Democratic strategist James Carville to remind Clinton’s campaign workers to focus on what Carville took to be the Democrats’ most politically advantageous issue. The strategy seemed to work. Clinton won the election, and political analysts declared that his victory was in large part due to the astute advice of his crafty consultant.

The use of this strategy is not, however, unique to the 1992 Clinton campaign or the Democratic party. Indeed, Carville’s exhortation is emblematic of the tendency of contemporary American politicians of both major parties—and all ideological hues—to seek political advantage in playing to the contemporary American electorate’s concern with economic prosperity. After all, it was Ronald Reagan, a conservative Republican, who won the presidency by posing the question, “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” with the understanding that “better off” meant more comfortable materially or economically.

Is this strategy good politics? Insofar as it helps candidates to win elections, it would seem to be. But for the public spirited citizen, if not for the committed partisan, the decisive question is whether or not it is good statesmanship. That is, regardless of which side wields the issue more successfully, is this single-minded wielding of it by both sides against each other conducive to the common good? For an answer to this question we turn to the thought of that celebrated analyst of modern democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. His *Democracy in America* suggests that his response to Carville would likely be, “It’s the soul, stupid!” According to Tocqueville, democracy is inclined toward, and threatened by, an excessive concern with material well-being. Therefore what is called for is not the economic electioneering of today’s politicians which encourages democracy’s dangerous instinct, but a spiritual statesmanship which restrains it.

According to Tocqueville, the “taste for physical well-being” dominates American society. It is “felt by all,” and “everyone is preoccupied caring for the slightest needs of the body and the trivial conveniences of life” (530). It seems that the natural taste for material well-being, which had been restrained in the older aristocratic societies, is greatly intensified in democracy (531). Aristocrats are born, and expect to die, rich. As a result they simply take physical pleasures for granted, enjoying them without being obsessed by them (530-531). Similarly, peasants are born, and expect to die, poor. And just as nobles grow accustomed to their wealth, the people grow accustomed to their
penury: they do not think about physical comfort “because they despair of getting it and because they do not know enough about it to want it” (531). Such conditions foster a certain elevation of mind in both groups. With the natural longing for physical well-being “satisfied without trouble or anxiety,” the aristocrats turn to “some grander and more difficult undertaking that inspires and engrosses them” (531). Similarly, the poor are “driven,” by their irremediable material deprivation, “to dwell in imagination in the next world” (531).

In a democracy, however, the absence of fixed social classes and the concomitant possibility of upward mobility emancipates, and excites to an extreme intensity, the natural taste for physical comforts (531). If aristocracy calms this passion in the few by providing them with effortless satisfaction and in the many by foreclosing any expectation of satisfaction, democracy agitates it by providing all with a tantalizingly incomplete satisfaction. With the abolition of privilege, the division of inheritances, and the spread of freedom and education, a great many “middling fortunes are established,” which provide “enough physical enjoyments” for their owners “to get a taste for them, but not enough to content them” (531). And since the heart is most agitated not by “the quiet possession of something precious but rather the imperfectly satisfied desire to have it and the continual fear of losing it again,” the result is that everyone is “continually engaged in pursuing or striving to retain these precious, incomplete, and fugitive delights” (530, 531).

Democracy’s excessive taste for physical comforts is problematic for Tocqueville in the first place because it is unseemly, unsightly, low. He confesses that he is “tempted to regret” the passing of aristocracy because the democracy which has succeeded it is “less elevated” (704). And his argument makes clear that this lack of elevation is at least in part due to the taste for physical pleasures. In democracy, he writes, “the heart, imagination, and life itself are given up to” physical comforts “without reserve,” with the result that “men lose sight of those more precious goods” of the soul “which constitute the greatness and glory of mankind” (534). The democratic man “cleaves” to the “petty” objects of his desire for physical comfort, dwelling on them “every day and in great detail” until they finally “shut out the rest of the world and sometimes come between the soul and God” (533). This tendency represents a loss of human dignity, a frustration of the full flowering of human potential, a lowering of man to the level of brutes. For physical pleasures are what we have in common with beasts (546). And this is the side of human nature to which democratic society devotes itself, neglecting that other, nobler, side by which “man is able to raise himself above the things of the body and even to scorn life itself,” of which capacity “the beasts have not the least notion” (546).

Moreover, Tocqueville suggests that this inclination can lead to despotism by distracting people from the duties of citizenship. “There is,” Tocqueville contends, “no need to drag their rights away from such citizens” who are “[i]ntent only on getting rich,” for “they themselves voluntarily let them go” (540). Those bent on material gratifications, he continues, find it a tiresome inconvenience to exercise political rights which distract them from industry. When
required to elect representatives, to support authority by personal service, or to discuss public business together, they find they have no time. They cannot waste their time on unrewarding work (540).

Faced with such hedonism-induced political somnolence, an able and ambitious man who gains power will find “the way open for usurpations of every sort” (540). “So long as he sees to it for a certain time that material interests flourish,” the people will allow him to “get away with everything else” (540). Alternatively, the exclusive taste for physical pleasure can lead by the same route to the despotism of a politically energetic minority. “When the great mass of citizens do not want to bother about anything but private business,” he writes, “even the smallest party need not give up hope of becoming master of public affairs” (541). In such circumstances a few people, “on the move while others rest,” can “speak in the name of the absent or inattentive crowd,” with the outcome that a minority’s “caprice controls everything, changing laws and tyrannizing over moral standards” (541).

But happily the antidote to this democratic tendency, and thus the solution to these problems to which it gives rise is at hand, namely, religious belief. Tocqueville remarks that on Sunday in America trade and industry cease and are replaced by a “solemn contemplation” of things spiritual (542). American religious practice, Tocqueville’s argument indicates, elevates the lives of the citizens above the level of the essentially animalistic pursuit of material comforts by appealing to, and in some measure satisfying, the natural human “taste for the infinite and love of what is immortal” (534-535). Turning to Holy Scripture, the American finds “sublime and touching accounts of the greatness and goodness of the Creator, of the infinite magnificence of the works of God, of the high destiny reserved for men, of their duties and of their claims to immortality” (542). In addition, their religion appears to hinder despotism by explicitly attacking democracy’s tendency toward materialism-induced indifference to politics and thus encouraging public-spiritedness. In church Americans are reminded of “the need to check” their desires, “of the finer delights which go with virtue alone,” and “of their duties” (542).

Religious belief, then, is necessary to the well-being of democratic society. Indeed, Tocqueville suggests that democracy’s tendency to sink into dehumanizing materialism inclined to surrender to political despotism is so dangerous that checking it by encouraging religious faith is the primary duty of the democratic statesman. In the “Author’s Introduction” to Democracy in America, Tocqueville indicates that the purpose of his book is to provide the knowledge necessary to render democracy compatible with human dignity and greatness. He examines America in order to see “the shape of democracy itself;” to grasp its “inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions,” and to discover how these can be turned “to the profit of mankind” (19). His aim is to teach “those who now direct society” how best to “educate democracy,” how to substitute “knowledge of its true interests” for its “blind instincts” (12). In brief, he seeks to provide a “new political science for a world itself quite new” (12).
In the context of his discussion of the taste for physical comforts, Tocqueville returns to the issue of the knowledge by which those who lead the new societies can make democracy a blessing, and here he reveals the central place of religion in his project. He speaks of “the lawgiver’s art,” the “essence” of which “is by anticipation to appreciate the natural bents of human societies” with a view to restraining them where they need to be restrained and encouraging them where they need to be encouraged (543). In a democracy, he argues, this art requires primarily that lawgivers combat materialism by elevating “the souls of their fellow citizens” and turning “their attention toward heaven” (543). This is the primary duty of the democratic legislator, it would seem, because the taste for physical pleasures is the “vice which is most familiar to the heart in” democratic “circumstances” (544). Or, to use the terms of the “Author’s Introduction,” materialism turns out to be the most dangerous of the “blind instincts” of democracy, and thus religion turns out to be at the heart of Tocqueville’s “new political science” which “is needed for a world itself quite new” (12).

How statesmen can encourage faith, however, presents a problem. Though it is “easy to see” the importance of making “spiritual conceptions” prevail in democratic times, it is “far from easy to say what those who govern democratic peoples should do to make them prevail” (545). The most obvious tool at the democratic lawgiver’s disposal, law, is explicitly excluded by Tocqueville as a means of effecting this elevation of the souls of the citizens. State religions, far from being useful with a view to maintaining faith, actually “are always sooner or later fatal to the church”; for by “mingling” religion with the “bitter passions” of the political arena religious establishments cause more animosity than devotion to religion (545, 297).

How then are democratic statesmen to carry out this crucial task? Tocqueville argues that the only effective means which “governments can use” to encourage belief in the importance of the soul’s well-being “is daily to act as if they believed it themselves” (546). He thinks that “it is only by conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they can flatter themselves that they are teaching the citizens to understand it and respect it in little matters” (546).

Statesmen must teach respect for the immortality of the soul by example. Yet this example is not to be set merely in their behavior as private citizens. It is apparently insufficient for democratic politicians merely to attend church and to live personally as if the goods of the soul are as much to be desired as those of the body. Rather, this edifying example must be set in their behavior as statesmen; it must shine forth in their performance of their public duties. Thus Tocqueville insists that they must respect religious morality “in great affairs” and asserts that this duty belongs not just to citizens who happen to hold political authority but to “governments” themselves. In the laws they advocate and the policies they adopt, they must demonstrate that the goods of the soul are important. They must not, as contemporary American politicians do, treat material prosperity as if it is the foremost public issue.

If Tocqueville is convinced of democracy’s need for spiritual statesmanship,
however, his argument implies doubt that democratic political leaders will provide it. Democratic politicians are, it seems, unlikely to possess the insight to understand democracy’s problems and their solutions. Tocqueville’s project requires leaders of considerable enlightenment, men philosophical enough to rise above their culture’s most intensely felt passions and to recognize them as problematic and in need of restraint. Such men exist in democracies, but they are not likely to be able to influence public affairs; for democracy, Tocqueville argues, does not tend to “summon” the “most outstanding” men to “public office” (197). That summoning, after all, is done by the people, most of whom cannot be very “enlightened” because, not being rich, they must devote most of their time to supplying their material needs (197). And a thoughtless electorate cannot be expected to elevate thoughtful leaders. Indeed, Tocqueville doubts that citizens possessing the requisite enlightenment would even attempt to enter politics, “in which it would be difficult to remain completely themselves or to make any progress without cheapening themselves” (199). It is, after all, unlikely that a man with the refinement of mind and character necessary to appreciate democracy’s need to transcend its petty obsession with material comfort would want to thrust himself into the democratic political arena, dominated as it is by that same petty obsession.

Moreover, even if some politicians possessed the rare enlightenment necessary to understand democracy’s true needs, it is unlikely that they would possess the firmness of character to try to act on it publicly. Although Tocqueville claims that religion enjoys the support of public opinion in America, he also sees that the desire for material comforts is the “dominant national taste” (532). That is to say, public opinion accords greater importance to pleasures than to religious faith. This is the tendency the democratic statesman must resist; but in a democracy it is very dangerous to resist public opinion. Because democracy’s respect for the authority of public opinion is based upon its ardently held belief in intellectual equality, the people tend to grow indignant with those who flout public opinion. And that indignation is vented by means of a chillingly effective form of persecution which strikes directly at the human soul by denying satisfaction of the natural human longing for the community’s esteem (255-256). The result is politicians deficient in “candor” (258). America has some citizens “who are not slaves to slogans,” who understand the defects of democracy and the means to correct them (258). But although they will reveal these thoughts privately, in public, among the people whose power to ostracize they fear so greatly, these thoughtful citizens “use quite different language” (258). There they offer not the constructive criticism democracy needs so desperately but only the assurance that democracy has no defects to overcome because of the people’s supposed “natural brilliance” and effortless possession of all the virtues (258).

Ultimately, then, Tocqueville’s analysis is characterized by a keen sense both of the kind of leadership democracy needs and of the daunting obstacles to it. It is therefore safe to say that he would be disgusted but not surprised at the materialism prevalent in contemporary American politics.