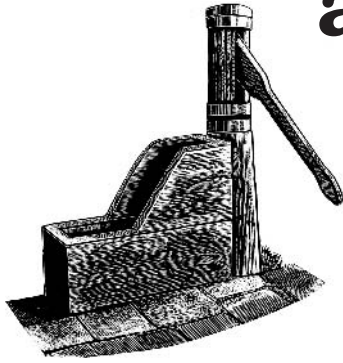


# Advice to America from a French Friend



“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched  
to shake with passers-by.”

**I**N THE COURSE of scholarly rummaging in the Harvard University Archives, Robert T. Gannett Jr. ’72 came across an unpublished letter to Harvard from Alexis de Tocqueville. Gannett is an independent scholar and community organizer in Chicago and the author of *Tocqueville Unveiled: The Historian and His Sources for “The Old Regime and the Revolution,”* just published by the University of Chicago Press. He reports as follows:

“During his journey to America, Alexis de Tocqueville encountered numerous Harvard men, especially during a four-week sojourn in Boston in September 1831 that helped spark the genesis of *Democracy in America*.

“Among these Boston contacts, Tocqueville’s most valuable consultant proved to be Jared Sparks, A.B. 1815, LL.D. ’43, a renowned historian of the American Revolution and future president of Harvard. Both in conversations and a subsequent memo, Sparks ably articulated for Tocqueville the role played by early American townships in providing their citizens with a practical passport to freedom.

“Two decades later in 1852, during Sparks’s tenure as president, Harvard awarded Tocqueville an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. Notified in Paris of this honor, Tocqueville responded on December 11, 1852, with two letters of thanks to Sparks, one personal and the other for-

mal. In his personal letter, he communicated to his friend his concerns about America’s increasing international belligerence and adventurism, a pugnacious spirit that he had encountered firsthand during his own tenure as French foreign minister in 1849. [America] has nothing more to fear except from herself, from the abuse of democracy, from the spirit of adventure and conquest, from the sentiment and exaggerated pride of her forces, and from the impetuosity of youth,’ he told Sparks. ‘Do not pick quarrels lightly with Europe,’ he then warned, since these could lead to ‘grave difficulties for you, and could have many repercussions on your internal affairs that are difficult to anticipate in advance.’

“In his official letter to Harvard—never before published—Tocqueville praised the University’s role in developing the principles on which American democracy was founded. His public respect for those principles, similarly based on his practical American experience, was as heartfelt in its positive support as his private reflections had been sober in their cautionary advice: ‘Nothing could touch or honor me more than the testament of esteem that the University wishes spontaneously to accord me. I am so sincerely and profoundly attached to America that all that serves to bind me to her has a very great prize in my eyes....I know that Harvard’s [sic] College, almost as old as the colony of Massachusetts, has not ceased to be the principal foyer of enlightenment, not only in New England but on your whole continent. I recall that it was within its walls that the first and greatest propositions of civil and political liberty were supported, close to a century ago, during an era when even in England similar doc-

trines were not professed so boldly. I am not unaware, finally, that many of [America’s] great statesmen were [Harvard’s] students and that it still contains an assembly of able and wise professors such as one would encounter only with difficulty in any of the universities of Europe.’

“Respect for America’s pioneering role in formulating democratic principles, concern that those principles be applied abroad with a spirit of moderation and international support: Tocqueville’s carefully calibrated views could well be heeded on both sides of today’s Atlantic divide.”



UNIVERSITY ARCHIVIST Harley P. Holden retired last year after more than four decades of service. At a large gathering in the fall to wish him farewell, an associate, Robin McElheny, explained to the assembly that the provost had initiated a new policy: that an exit examination be required of all administrators “before they are allowed to retire. Each examination must include four baseline questions designed by the Office of Human Resources to test an administrator’s knowledge of University-wide operations. The remaining questions are designed by the prospective retiree’s office or department to test position-specific competencies and expertise.”

Holden was able to pass the examination, but not without considerable help from the audience (permitted under the regulations governing the exam). He did not know the street address of Holyoke Center, nor did he know the number of digits in a Harvard billing code. He was allowed to retire and departed without much further delay to Maine. ~PRIMUS V