What It Means to Be a Libertarian
Charles Murray
New York: Broadway Books, 1997, 178 pp.

Charles Murray's volume, *What It Means to Be a Libertarian*, is an eloquent manifesto calling for a much reduced role for government, particularly at the federal level. For example, Murray identifies the following federal programs and functions to be eliminated entirely: Social Security, Medicare, welfare, agriculture, housing, training and employment, energy, and the Post Office. He advocates the repeal of most consumer and product safety laws leaving redress to traditional tort and contract remedies. He would also repeal civil rights laws in favor of a constitutional amendment to the effect that (1) no government at any level shall pass any law that requires discrimination by ethnicity, race, religion, or creed; and (2) no government shall pass any law limiting freedom of association for private individuals and groups. Whether one agrees with him or not, Murray is not serving up a watered-down brand of libertarianism.

While Murray credits a number of noteworthies for influencing his thinking in his "Sources and Acknowledgments," from Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill to Milton Friedman and F.A. Hayek, I submit he owes a large unacknowledged debt to Alexis de Tocqueville, who goes unmentioned. In fact, libertarians in general owe a large debt to Tocqueville.

But before recalling the fundamental groundwork laid by Tocqueville to the theory and practice of contemporary libertarianism, or liberalism as it used to be known before the meaning of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" became distorted beyond everyday comprehension, let us review the rationale articulated by Murray for his own brand of libertarianism. It is fair to ask at the outset, what is the end of such radical change as that prescribed in *What It Means to Be a Libertarian*? Put quite simply, to be free and happy. Says Murray: "Limited government leaves people with the freedom and responsibility they need to mold satisfying lives both as individuals and as members of families and communities."

On the always interesting "vice" issues which confront libertarians, Murray, like John Stuart Mill, does not shy away from arguing that freedom means that adults should be able to do in private whatever they please—even if they harm themselves—as long as such activity does not harm others. Thus, he would legalize drugs and prostitution so long as those activities are pursued in a non-coercive, voluntary fashion. (I should add that Murray does not promote those activities; he just believes that individuals and communities will be much better able to protect themselves from any harms inflicted by those activities through private social controls rather than government regulation.)

While Murray's chapter on "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll" is likely to be an attention-grabber, if for no other reason than how one handles the "vice question" seems to sort out various stripes of libertarians, no one can really argue with the proposition that, at least in one sense of

the word, fewer "vice" laws means more *freedom*. Obviously, if it is no longer a crime to use drugs or visit a prostitute, in a real sense one has greater "freedom" to do so. But from a larger societal point of view, surely the more fundamental questions pertain to the links between freedom and the other side of freedom's coin: *responsibility*. Does more limited government really lead to a more responsible citizenry in ways that contribute to the overall public good? Or, put another way, can government encourage individuals to act more responsibly simply by getting out of the way and expanding their freedom of action?

Murray's answer to those questions is an emphatic "yes." He contends that as government has grown and assumed more and more social welfare functions that were formerly performed by institutions such as the family, church, and community, it displaced the "civil responses" that otherwise would have risen to meet the needs at hand. He cites as examples Social Security and the War-on-Poverty programs that stripped civil institutions such as fraternal and craft organizations of some of the social insurance functions they fulfilled before the New Deal and the Great Society. According to Murray, "If government is not seen as a legitimate source of intervention, individuals and associations will respond. If instead government is permitted to respond, government will seize the opportunity, expand upon it, and eventually take over altogether." And it is at this point that "freedom of association" becomes so important: the more laws of whatever type make it more difficult for individuals to associate freely with like-minded persons to pursue their common objectives, the less likely individuals will be able to work cooperatively to meet needs that government otherwise will step in to meet.

Thus, it is not that government by fiat typically forbids any type of positive response by private persons or civic institutions to meet real or perceived human needs. It is just that human beings have a natural tendency to let someone else take care of a problem, particularly if that someone else claims that he can do it better. This theory of "displacement" holds true, and perhaps even especially so, if that someone is the government. This is because when the government undertakes a program it is almost by definition on the stated—and usually trumpeted—assumption that government can perform the service or function in question better than private individuals or institutions. After all, how many times can we recall a government official saying something to the effect, "We're going to regulate such and so, but the market [or the family, neighborhood, or church] really could perform this function just as well as the government can!"

When government steps in, our individual and collective sense of responsibility is diminished at least somewhat and our sense of dependency is increased. And, such a loss of a sense of responsibility is almost always accompanied by some measure of loss of freedom because government programs or services do not come without strings attached. Of course, the more strings attached—or put less prosaically—the more

government rules and regulations which bind us, the less freedom we have. As Murray would have it, the less "each person owns himself."

As stated earlier, Murray does not flinch from applying his "hands off" philosophy even to anti-discrimination laws, which he concedes to be a use of government which appears to be good. In defending his position, he argues that the trend lines show that Americans were making great strides in eliminating racial and others forms of bigotry before enactment of the civil rights statutes and would have continued to do so absent their enactment. Whether or not that is true may be debatable. But, more fundamentally, he argues that, in any event, by their very nature anti-discrimination laws necessarily and purposefully impinge on freedom of association, and that the state-imposed loss of any measure of freedom of association, even in pursuit of a seemingly benevolent purpose, ultimately interferes with the ability of private associations to serve as "mediating institutions" which act to limit the role of government in individual lives.

Tocqueville said all that and more, quite eloquently, in *Democracy in America*. Although only 25 years old when he arrived in May 1831 for his 9-month visit to America and only 30 when he published the first part of his great work, Tocqueville was more than just an astute observer of the American scene. He was, of course, a political philosopher of the first rank. Tocqueville is cited most often nowadays by commentators across the political spectrum only with regard to his observations concerning the proclivity of those early Americans to engage in private associational activity, especially activity directed toward common charitable or societal goals. In perhaps the most oft-quoted passage, Tocqueville reported that:

> The political associations that exist in the United States are only a single feature in the midst of an immense assemblage of associations in that country. Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds—religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive.

While acknowledging a necessary role for government carrying out certain functions, Tocqueville asked: "What political power could ever carry on the vast multitude of lesser undertakings which the American citizens perform every day, with the assistance of the principle of association?"

As a keen student of human nature, Tocqueville recognized the positive role that associational activity could play in an individual's life. By being part of a group that strives to accomplish a common objective, an individual achieves a sense of personal satisfaction. Tocqueville said the heart is enlarged and the mind is developed by the reciprocal influence of men and women working together in their voluntary associations. And it is in this same sense that Murray speaks of voluntary engagement undertaken

for the benefit of the community as fulfilling an innate need of individuals to live satisfying lives.

But, as a political philosopher, Tocqueville went much further. He predicted that in modern states, including democracies, there almost certainly would be a dangerous tendency toward centralization of power that would threaten individual freedom. In Tocqueville's view, only mediating institutions such as private associations, possibly could moderate such tendency. Even so, he feared for the future because he saw in democracy the potential seeds of its own destruction.

He argued that a democratic regime, by the sheer force of majoritarian canon it embodied, would ceaselessly move in the direction of striving for ever greater degrees of what he referred to as "equality of condition." That continual natural striving for "equality of condition," in Tocqueville's view, inexorably would lead to an ever-increasing encroachment of central government authority at the expense of individual freedom.

But, despite what he understood to be the majoritarian impulse of the populace at large to achieve ever greater degrees of "equality of condition" or leveling of society, Tocqueville understood that human nature is such that "the personal pride of individuals will always seek to rise above the line, and to form somewhere an inequality to their own advantage." Because it is human nature to strive to "rise above the line," Tocqueville thought government would respond by striving mightily to take "each member of the community in its powerful grasp." Then the central government would grow to cover "the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd."

Tocqueville genuinely despaired for individual freedom in the popular democratic societies he envisioned evolving: "I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people." Or, as he put it more lyrically, when power becomes concentrated in the central government, such power "does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people."

Pretty strong words from someone whose name usually is invoked today only for describing the "habits of the heart." But it was squarely in the context of his apprehension about the natural tendencies toward too-powerful modern central governments that Tocqueville extolled the virtues of private associations as counterweights. He saw in the American bent for associational activity, particularly manifested during the time of his American travels by the birth of the new temperance societies, an antidote to the natural centralization tendencies of the modern state. Tocqueville did not praise the virtue of associational activities only for the positive contribution to be realized by the beneficiaries of the benevolent

activity. Rather, the chief virtue of the associational activities, according to Tocqueville, lies in the mediating role private institutions such as family, religious organizations, and community groups play in providing citizens with alternative vehicles for problem-solving that might stave off an excuse for further accrual of governmental authority.

So, Murray owes quite a debt to Tocqueville, one that might well have warranted a mention along with the others in Murray's acknowledgments (on pp. 171–72) of those who have influenced his thinking.[1] For Murray's emphasis on the important links between freedom of association, the willingness and ability of individuals to perform good deeds through mediating private institutions, and the tendency of governments, even democratic ones, to supplant individual liberties gradually and in the most benevolent of ways certainly has deep Tocquevillian roots. In any event, Murray surely would agree that we all would be better off if Tocqueville's early warnings in *Democracy in America* were read more often today in the libertarian vein in which Tocqueville intended.

The fact that Tocqueville laid the libertarian groundwork over a century and a half ago does not diminish Murray's own considerable present achievement. His *What It Means to Be a Libertarian* sets forth in plain and simple English a passionate call for a reduced role for government in our everyday lives. Murray's hope, in my view well-grounded in logic and Tocquevillian understanding of human nature, is that such a reduced government role will spur a rebirth of civic engagement that not only will benefit the objects of such engagement but, as important, will help those so engaged lead more satisfying lives because of the decisions they have made freely about how to live their lives. Tocqueville surely would be pleased if Murray's book moves us at least a little in the classical libertarian direction.

Randolph J. May
Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan, LLP
George Mason University School of Law

Asia Rising
Jim Rohwer
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, 382 pp.

In *Asia Rising*, Jim Rohwer addresses three questions: Why did the economies of East and South-East Asia grow between 1970 and 1995? Will Asia continue to grow in the next 25 years? And what does the growth of Asia mean for the West?

Rohwer argues that there are four elements that have contributed to the extraordinary economic growth of Asia. First, Asia has a greater

[1]Murray does cite Tocqueville on p. 136: "Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to marvel at the American genius for voluntary associations."