

## DREAM ON: John Fugelsang's Takeaway

Alexis de Tocqueville's influence on America is like the big bang – it happened all at once and it's still expanding. He traveled this country for nine months in 1831 and documented the people, the politics, the commerce and the religion of our fledgling nation. He tried to understand what America was and what it might be, and he saw the best and worst that it had to offer - all the cruelty and all the goodness. And, he fell in love with this concept of equality - the idea that anyone from any background could climb the ladder of economic opportunity. To this day, his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, continues to inspire Americans of almost every political stripe. He wasn't trying to entertain or distill America for contemporary consumption; he was exploring how the whole society worked and where it might lead.

I've spent the past few years immersed in political comedy. I've toured across the country, performed overseas for the troops, and appeared on countless cable TV and radio shows. I've met politicians, journalists, activists, diplomats, and citizens of every background. As a professional observer, I honestly didn't know where America was heading. For every reason to feel pessimistic, I saw a reason for hope. I suppose that's why I was drawn to Tocqueville, an aristocrat inspired by class struggle, an author who wrote a prison report that became a treatise on liberty, and a writer who became an inspiration to progressives and conservatives alike. Tocqueville's multi-layered, often contradictory depictions of the character, values, and core beliefs that define us as Americans planted the seeds for the very concept of The American Dream.

I felt like I had finally grasped a piece of the American Dream when I got to host my own political comedy talk show on cable TV. We covered a lot of stories about jobs sent overseas and the plight of unemployed Americans, and then one day that network was sold to a foreign buyer, and I became one of those unemployed Americans. So, at the very moment I was completely disillusioned about the American Dream, I got a very curious offer to hit the road to help make a movie about the current state of the American Dream. The idea was to retrace Tocqueville's journey and try to see in two months what it took Tocqueville nine months to cover on horseback and steamship. We interviewed 200 people in 17 states and over 50 cities. We spoke with fast-food workers and retirees, prisoners and entrepreneurs, undocumented immigrants and community organizers about their hopes, dreams, and daily struggles.

Tocqueville didn't want to create a simple travelogue, and neither did we. He wanted to understand how America worked, and we wanted to see how America could keep working. We found that the divisions and dysfunction in the areas Tocqueville reported on in commerce, government, religion, and race relations – were still prevalent and festering today. We wanted to report on the whole of America in all her imperfect splendor. And by not turning away from her defects, we wanted to find new reasons to hope. We discovered that Americans' pride in their past is often matched by their cynicism about the future. Sixty-three percent of Americans think that next generation will be worse off than them, but the majority of Americans also think that their own kids will do better than them. That's the paradox that captures the optimistic spirit Tocqueville loved about us in 1831. He said, "No American is devoid of a yearning desire to rise." The old adage – that hard work will lead to prosperity – may no longer be true for the majority of Americans. Yet, most of the people I met on my Tocqueville journey still believed in the dream, even when their daily struggles made it feel impossibly out of reach.