

**Title: Wisdom from a 21st Century Tocqueville**  
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## The Lane Report

In 1831 French sociologist and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville traveled throughout the United States to study its prisons and returned home with a wealth of broader insights he memorialized in his classic work *Democracy in America*, one of the most influential books of the 19th century. With its trenchant observations on equality and individualism, Tocqueville's work remains a valuable explanation of America to Europeans and even to ourselves.

Philip Alston, the United Nations' special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has now taken his own trek through Alabama, California, Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C. and West Virginia to explore whether the persistence of extreme poverty in America undermines the enjoyment of human rights by its citizens. Professor Alston, an international law scholar and human rights practitioner, saw, as many of us know first-hand, that the idealistic notion of American exceptionalism, its founding commitment to human rights and its immense wealth are shockingly at odds with the public squalor found in plain sight throughout the United States.

America has the highest incarceration rate in the world, nearly five times the OECD average. Its infant mortality rates in 2013 were the highest in the developed world. Americans can expect to live shorter and sicker lives than people living in any other rich democracy. The United States ranks 35th out of 37 OECD countries in terms of poverty and inequality. And the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality ranks the United States last among the 10 best-off countries—18th among the top 21—in labor markets, poverty, safety net, wealth inequality and economic mobility.

There are no easy answers to these daunting problems. Yet, Professor Alston's explanation of the crisis we face, easy to express but extraordinarily challenging to address, rings true. These are a few of his compelling observations:

- People living in poverty, minorities and other disfavored groups are systematically deprived of their voting rights through the disenfranchisement of felons, gerrymandering and other voter suppression strategies that continue to undermine democracy. So the disaffected don't vote and too many politicians ignore the poor.
- Extreme poverty continues to spiral out of control not only because of the poor's growing disconnection from the social safety net but also because of declining employment opportunities. With automation, new technologies and robot-staffed factories and

warehouses, the nation's demand for low-skilled labor can only shrink. Yet realistic workforce development industries, job training and vocational education opportunities remain scarce.

- A stunning percentage of American children live in poverty. In 2016 18% of children—some 13.3 million—were living in poverty, with children comprising 32.6% of all people in poverty. The causes are many, but homelessness high on the list. Around 21% of people experiencing homelessness are children. While most of them are experiencing sheltered homelessness, the financial instability, high eviction rates and high mobility rates they inevitably encounter negatively impact their education as well as their physical and mental health.
- In too many American jurisdictions, the criminal justice system, which piles up fines on fees on those who can least afford them, keeps the poor in poverty while generating revenue to fund not only the justice system but also other unrelated programs.
- Women shoulder an unconscionably high burden as a result of living in poverty. They are more exposed to violence, more vulnerable to sexual harassment and notoriously discriminated against in the labor market.
- Racial minorities, the disabled and the poor at large continue to be demonized.
- National drug policies are confused, counter-productive and unjustifiably punitive.

Still other disturbing developments warrant mention here. The new tax law will only exacerbate the wealth and income inequality dividing the richest Americans from the poorest. And dramatic cuts in public assistance—some already implemented, others in the works—will shred the fragile safety net on which too many Americans rely.

In President Donald J. Trump's January 30 report on the state of our nation in turmoil, he aspirationally declared that, "This is our new American moment. There has never been a better time to start living the American dream." When will we, as a people, begin to demonstrate the courage, the resolve and the political will it takes to restore the basic human rights our neighbors deserve as much as we do?



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