

Copyright 2006 The Economist Newspapers Ltd.  
All Rights Reserved  
The Economist

January 21, 2006  
U.S. Edition

**SECTION:** BOOKS & ART

**LENGTH:** 379 words

**HEADLINE:** French letters;  
American reflections

**BODY:**

SAY what you like about the French; you never know what to expect when they write about the United States. They have produced by far the best book on the country, Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America", as well as a disproportionate share of the worst. They are capable of the most grovelling America-worship as well as the most grotesque anti-Americanism: just try changing the subject on the *rive gauche* from the evils of George Bush to the wonders of Woody Allen.

All of which adds to the suspense about Bernard-Henry Lévy's new book, "American Vertigo". Mr Lévy is a quintessential French intellectual—a "superman and a prophet", at least according to *Vanity Fair* magazine. Mr Lévy recently spent a year travelling around the United States in de Tocqueville's footsteps, courtesy of a clever (and extremely generous) commission from *Atlantic Monthly*. The result is a strange product—more a collection of notes than a polished manuscript. Mr Lévy never rises to de Tocqueville's heights; indeed, his reflections on the spirit of democracy and equality can be remarkably flat, as when he muses on America's lack of a European-style fast lane on its highways. And he spends far too much time telling us things that we already know—that Buffalo and Detroit are bombed-out wrecks and Los Angeles is a jolly big place where people spend a lot of time in their cars.

Still, "American Vertigo" is much better than most European books on America at the moment. Mr Lévy visited the country during the 2004 election and managed to meet an astonishing number of interesting people, including Woody Allen, Warren Beatty, John Kerry and Norman Mailer. He is generally sympathetic to his host country, dismissing the charge that America is degenerating into a theocracy and even finding a few kind words for the neoconservatives. But he is acutely aware of the country's oddities—not least its strange commitment to both freedom and order. He is particularly struck by a sign in a San Francisco swingers' club: "No alcohol. No drugs. No sleeping. No uproarious or loud laughter. Condoms obligatory. Turn all cell phones off."

"American Vertigo" is worth reading for these delicious details; it is doubly worth reading if it sends you back to de Tocqueville's original masterwork.

**GRAPHIC:** American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville.

**LOAD-DATE:** January 19, 2006