

He saw the Grand Canyon, toured the Air Force Academy and a retirement community in Arizona as well as the infamous Dallas book depository.

He went on a quail hunt, stopped at a Pentecostal Church, got soaked at the opening of the Clinton Presidential library and went in search of Zelda Fitzgerald's legend.

He also heard Woody Allen play the clarinet, chatted with Warren Beatty and railed against totalitarianism, arm-in-arm with Christopher Hitchens.

Some of what he found corroborated Tocqueville's worst fears but other things supported Lévy's thesis that the democratic conversation is alive and kicking in the U.S.

Certainly plenty of American authors could have written such a book.

But coming from a foreigner, "American Vertigo" reminds us just how important the respect of other countries is to the integrity of our own.

For all those reasons and more, Lévy was an inspired choice to follow in Tocqueville's footsteps.

The lucky reader who survives the author's dense, vertiginous introduction and conclusion will be not only entertained by his feisty vignettes about the American people but inspired, by the example of his exalted prose, to greater heights of national pride.

### **Something For Everybody**

Most American readers of "American Vertigo" will feel both incensed by Lévy's criticisms of our country and satisfied by his political savvy.

It's exactly the reaction he expects from a country steeped in ideology.

"This book," he said, "is contrary to a lot of the political clichés we have in Europe about America. Between we Europeans and the truth of America is a huge wall of clichés."

Consider, for example, the issue of political correctness, an issue often mocked outside liberal communities and college campuses.

"Political correctness is a good thing," Lévy said.

"It's progress that you should not express a nasty joke about being Jewish, a woman, gay or whatever, and I don't care if the right thinks I'm a fool."

Or consider Lévy's take on neo-conservatives — the neo-cons who, both in the U.S. and Europe, are often characterized as blood-thirsty fascists.

"I say that neo-cons are not fascists," he said. "I have a strong opposition to the current American Administration but you cannot say a conservative is a fascist or a terrorist."

"Tant pis — what a pity if the left does not like it."

However, the biggest bone of contention in "American Vertigo" — at least for American readers — will be Lévy's assessment of the dangers to our democracy, especially regarding the mega-churches and neo-evangelists.

"These new religions that are developing are no longer Judeo-Christian but something else, something bad," he said.

While he writes that religion was the cradle out of which American freedoms were founded, Lévy says that religion today has taken a new shape.

"In Tocqueville's day, faith and liberty, religion and freedom went at the same speed and down the same road and didn't contradict each other. There was a wall between public affairs and religion.

"But today, you can see religion developing and freedom receding: the wall of separation between the two is cracked."

Lévy is also distressed that a country that says it believes in the rule of law could allow Guantanamo prisons to exist.

And while he was happy to see the compassion of the American people when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, he reminds us that it would be better to deal with poverty in a just way than to rely on charity.

Lévy's criticisms seem endless — we make up our history when it suits us, we wave our flag too much, our public space is being Balkanized by a multitude of factions, too many of us have a messiah complex, there's the danger of scientific creationism, many of our great cities are dying, we've the neurotic need to keep moving, plus the apartheid threat of gated communities, as well as our political obesity.

We are full of greed.

We are full of hubris.

And yet, he says "America has overcome deep crises in the past and you can predict that it will overcome these."

## **Reconstituting The Union**

Despite his endless litany of criticisms, Lévy wants his compatriots in France and neighbors in Europe to understand that the United States is not an imperialist country, that "we have no society marching as a single man toward nihilism."

Neither can the U.S. be seen as an empire in economic terms, he writes, because "the banks, the state governments, the Treasury Department, the businesses, and hence the pension and retirement funds ... are all dependent on a colossal foreign deficit that is itself financed by the economies the empire theoretically dominates — on Indian, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese assets especially."

Moreover, there's more political debate going on in America than most Europeans would guess.

America is a show, he writes, "that seems less likely than ever to shut down."

Lévy says these things with, however, a few caveats:

- "America," he said, "needs to look back to the traditions that originally shaped it — to the people and institutions of the founding fathers and to remain faithful to those institutions."
- Lévy also asks us to remember the founding principles of the United Nations — "to walk hand in hand with other nations," and,
- He calls for us to surmount the squabbling between minority factions and to imagine a new Federalism to unite us as one people.

He writes:

"If, despite ... the accumulated evidence of American vertigo, I had to make a bet on the future, it would be that of a newly defined reconstitution — around parameters that are ancient but arranged in a new order — of that old national model, which is really unlike any other in the world, where subtle equilibrium of talents and countertalents, devotions and predations ... have allowed the affirmation of a given identity to think of itself as