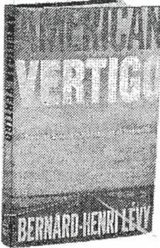
Stranger in a Strange Land

AMERICAN VERTIGO
By Bernard-Henri Lévy
(RANDOM HOUSE, 308 PAGES, $24.95)

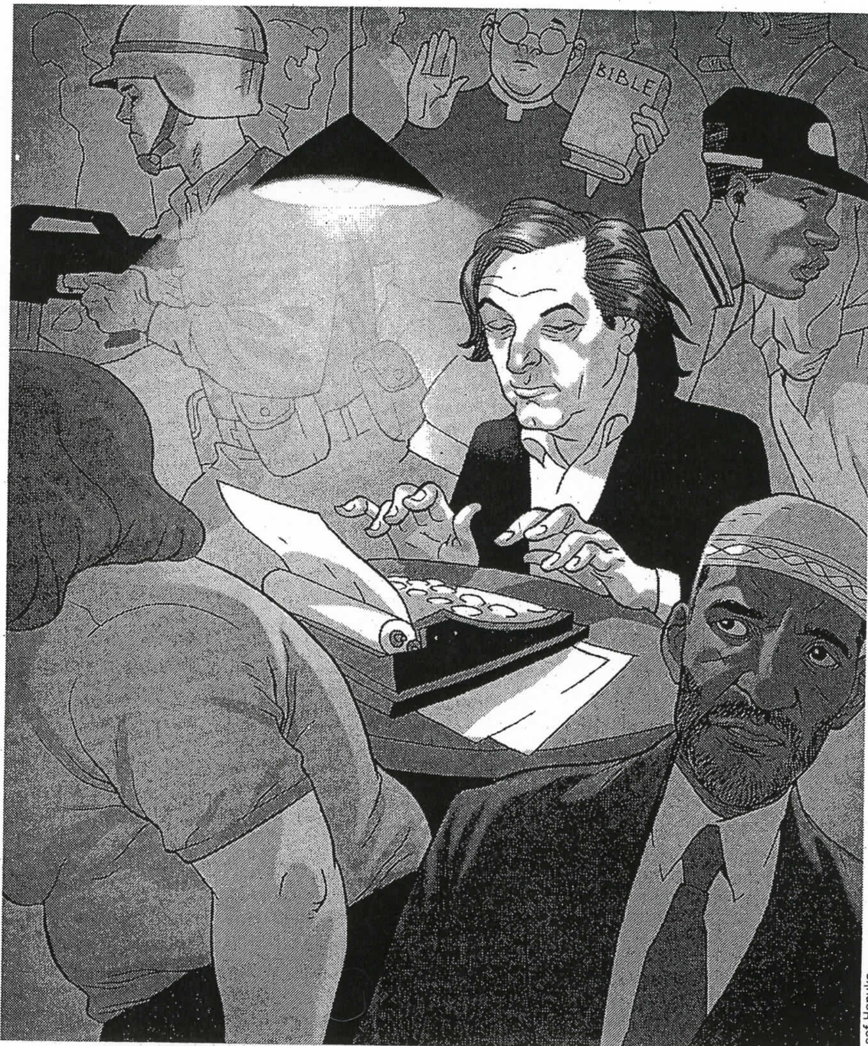
BY HARVEY MANSFIELD



IN THE MID-1970s, the "new philosophers" of France, stirred by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago," rebelled against the Marxism that dominated Parisian intellectual culture. They made history by doing so, and they made themselves into celebrities—glamorous and shrewd. Bernard-Henri Lévy was among the most prominent of their number.

The thinker who concerns Mr. Lévy today—30 books and 30 years later—is Tocqueville, not Marx; and the country whose destiny compels his attention is the U.S. "American Vertigo," much of which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, is a chronicle of Mr. Lévy's travels through the U.S. "in the footsteps of Tocqueville," repeating the trip that Alexis de Tocqueville made in the 1830s before writing his great work, "Democracy in America."

Unlike Tocqueville, always a politic man, Mr. Lévy presents himself pointedly as a writer, an intellectual and a European (one gets the sense that, for him, these are really all the same thing). The reader of "American Vertigo" gets a chance to see how the U.S. looks to a European who speaks with the verve of a journalist and the confidence of a philosopher. Mr. Lévy is not unconscious of his charm and intelligence, nor is he unfriendly to Americans per se. He has his doubts, though.



Asaf Hanuka

Mr. Lévy writes brilliantly, if eccentrically, of the places he visited and the people he met: Seattle, with its "wide-openness," is his favorite American city. Los Angeles, without a center, a border or a "vantage point," is his least. He regards America's prisons—à la Michel Foucault—as statements of exclusion rather than as means of self-defense. At Mount Rushmore, he feels indignation at the Great White Fathers and their misdeeds to Indians. In Michigan, he discovers, in the habits of the Arab-American community, the tendency of minorities in America to behave like majorities. He finds obesity everywhere, but the obsession with weight loss—the supposed need for a restrictive regime—disturbs him as much as the dependence on junk food. The Mall of America, near Minneapolis, puts him in mind of Tocquevile's description of a future democratic people fixed irrevocably in childhood and suffering from a new despotism, enjoying themselves on the condition that they think of nothing but enjoying themselves.

Mr. Lévy did not meet George W. Bush during his travels, but he did watch him in one of the debates of the 2004 campaign. "Something of a child" is his verdict, a child pretending to be a man. John Kerry he did meet and found disappointing; in a moment of dullness, Mr. Lévy does not quite understand why Mr. Kerry—all too easily portrayed as haughty and compulsively multilateral—felt reluctant to meet a Frenchman during the campaign.

Fear and Hubris

Mr. Lévy's heroes are Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and various anti-poverty and civil-rights activists. Also Norman Mailer. But he does not flinch from talking to the conservatives who have led America's "profound evolution in the direction of the far right." In what are clearly the essential encounters of his book, he interviews Richard Perle, William Kristol, Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, reporting their views with reasonable fairness if also with evident dislike. (Mr. Perle and Mr. Kristol could be described as robustly hawkish conservatives; Mr. Fukuyama as an ambivalent one; Mr. Huntington as a former hawk concerned now with "the clash of civilizations" and immigration.)

Conservatism, Mr. Lévy believes, is responsible for American vertigo, for the dizzy fear and hubris that launched the war in Iraq. The war itself he views as an unnecessary, messianic venture that shows how far America has departed from the European spirit of Enlightenment and applied rationalism. It was such a spirit that once distinguished America from Europe, he claims, when Europe retained aspects of its tradition-bound *ancien regime*. Today the Enlightenment, he believes, resides more serenely dominant in Europe than here.

The presence that Mr. Lévy cannot abide in America is religion, which he regards as superstitious fear. Religion, he concedes, does not make America a fanatical place—Puritanism is only the cradle, not the grave, of American liberty—but it worries Mr. Lévy on other grounds. American religion, he observes, is not extremist but banal; God is not angry or jealous but well-wishing, a "good guy." Such a conception, when installed as a guide to foreign policy, is not harmless, Mr. Lévy argues; it causes America to blunder its way ahead with a fake toughness that it cannot sustain. At home, a false idea of virtue blinds Ameri-

cans to the suffering of the poor.

The contrast between Tocqueville's view of religion and Mr. Lévy's could not be more stark. Tocqueville regarded the Old World as full of "intellectual miseries." None was worse than the hatred that existed between partisans of religion and partisans of liberty, for he thought that religion and liberty belonged together and that America proved the point. Tocqueville wrote: "If [man] has no faith he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe." Mr. Lévy might ponder that statement for a while.

A Source of Pride

In Tocqueville's view, men without faith tend toward material enjoyments, the very things that Mr. Lévy despises when he visits an American mall. Such men, having been "made" by mere material forces, think little of themselves and of their capabilities. They lack pride. Religion supplies a wholesome fear of excess at the same time that it gives men a high calling—the fate of their immortal souls. The calling itself is a source of pride, giving strength to individuals who might otherwise be weak, as units in a mass. Mr. Lévy and other intellectuals, both European and American, ought to think more precisely about how religion affects conduct and character, what was once called, often nonreligiously, the soul.

> Found along 'the footsteps of Tocqueville': obesity, a warrior mission and too much God.

Concern for democracy is another difference between Mr. Lévy and his forerunner. Tocqueville came to America seeking "an image of democracy itself," from which he could divine the future of European civilization. Mr. Lévy fastens on the peculiarities of America without considering what they might show about democracy, whether American or European. He remarks, for example, on the American fascination for halls of fame (like baseball's at Cooperstown) and for museums. But is this not democratic more than American? With halls of fame we democratize our love of honor; with museums we pride ourselves on the progress that we have made.

Nor does Mr. Lévy share Tocqueville's admiration for the practical activity of American politics. For Tocqueville, the ability to organize, encouraged by frequent elections, gives expression to a variety of admirable democratic ambitions. Mr. Lévy dismisses the whole business as a mere effort to fish for votes, a kind of greed. Tocqueville, a vote-fisher himself, thought that philosophy is always somewhere in any given country; it may thrive in the heights above ordinary politics but not only there. A philosopher, he maintained, is always responsible to his fellow citizens. Mr. Lévy, by contrast, has said (in other writings) that philosophy is "always elsewhere," and he carries with him an intellectual's contempt for politics as he watches and comments on it from elsewhere.

Thus the political judgments that Mr. Lévy makes—and here we may include his views on Iraq—are not fashioned from a political point of view. "American Vertigo" is filled with insights and goodwill, but it would have been even richer had Mr. Lévy shown more appreciation for democracy in America, or "Democracy in America."

Mr. Mansfield is the editor and translator, with Delba Winthrop, of Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" (University of Chicago, 2000).