

Remote Learning Packet

There is no need to submit this packet at the end of the week. Enjoy your summer break!

Week 9: May 25-29, 2020

Course: US History

Teacher(s): Mrs. Jimenez (margaret.cousino@greatheartsirving.org)

Monday, May 25

Happy Memorial Day! No School!

Tuesday, May 26 - Friday May 29

- Answer the pre-reading questions
- Read the essay from Alexis de Tocqueville
- Answer post-reading questions
- Have a relaxing and enjoyable summer! Thanks for all your hard work this year!

Are Americans Happy?

In 1831 a young Frenchman named Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States. The result was his book, Democracy in America, which might still be the most profound analysis of American society and character available. A selection from this classic, "Why Americans Are So Often Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity," is the focus of this assignment.

Pre-reading Questions:

1) In your experience, are Americans a happy people? Why or why not?

2) Is the legal, constitutional, and political equality of Americans more likely to lead them to be happy or unhappy?

“Why Americans Are So Often Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity” by Alexis de Tocqueville

You still sometimes find, in certain remote districts of the Old World, small populations that have been as if forgotten amid the universal tumult and that have remained unchanged when everything around them moved. Most of these peoples are very ignorant and very wretched; they are not involved in governmental affairs and often governments oppress them. But they usually show a serene face, and they often exhibit a cheerful mood.

I saw in America the most free and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition in the world; it seemed to me that a kind of cloud habitually covered their features; they appeared to me grave and almost sad, even in their pleasures.

The principal reason for this is that the first do not think about the evils that they endure, while the others think constantly about the goods that they do not have.

It is a strange thing to see with what kind of feverish ardor the Americans pursue well-being, and how they appear tormented constantly by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest road that can lead to it.

The inhabitant of the United States is attached to the goods of this world, as if he was assured of not dying, and he hastens so much to seize those goods that pass within his reach, that you would say that at every instant he is afraid of ceasing to live before enjoying them. He seizes all of them, but without gripping them, and he soon lets them escape from his hands in order to run after new enjoyments.

A man, in the United States, carefully builds a house in which to spend his old age, and he sells it while the ridgepole is being set; he plants a garden and he rents it as he is about to taste its fruits; he clears a field, and he leaves to others the trouble of gathering the harvest. He embraces a profession, and he leaves it. He settles in a place that he soon leaves in order to carry his changing desires elsewhere. If his private affairs give him some respite, he immediately plunges into the whirl of politics. And when, near the end of a year filled with work, he still has a little leisure, he takes his restless curiosity here and there across the vast limits of the United States. He will do as much as five hundred leagues in a few days in order to distract himself better from his happiness.

Death finally intervenes and stops him before he has grown weary of this useless pursuit of a complete felicity that always escapes.

You are at first astounded contemplating this singular agitation exhibited by so many happy men, in the very midst of abundance. This spectacle is, however, as old as the world; what is new is to see it presented by an entire people.

The taste for material enjoyments must be considered as the primary source of this secret restlessness that is revealed in the actions of Americans, and of this inconstancy that they daily exemplify.

The man who has confined his heart solely to the pursuit of the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time to find them, to take hold of them and to enjoy them. The memory of the brevity of life goads him constantly. Apart from the goods that he possesses, at every instant he imagines a thousand others that death will prevent him from tasting if he does not hurry. This thought fills him with uneasiness, fears, and regrets, and keeps his soul in a kind of constant trepidation that leads him to change plans and places at every moment.

If the taste for material well being is joined with a social state in which neither law nor custom any longer holds anyone in his place, it is one more great excitement to this restlessness of spirit; you will then see men continually change path, for fear of missing the shortest road that is to lead them to happiness.

It is easy to understand, moreover, that if the men who passionately seek material enjoyments do desire strongly, they must be easily discouraged; since the final goal is to enjoy, the means to get there must be quick and easy, otherwise the difficulty of obtaining the enjoyment would surpass the enjoyment. So most souls are at the same time ardent and soft, violent and enervated. Often death is less feared than constant efforts toward the same goal.

Equality leads by a still more direct road toward several of the effects that I have just described.

When all the prerogatives of birth and fortune are destroyed, when all the professions are open to everyone, and when you can reach the summit of each one of them on your own, an immense and easy career seems to open before the ambition of men, and they readily imagine that they are called to great destinies. But that is an erroneous view that experience corrects every day. The same equality that allows each citizen to conceive vast hopes makes all citizens individually weak. It limits their strengths on all sides, at the same time that it allows their desires to expand.

Not only are they powerless by themselves, but also they find at each step immense obstacles that they had not at first noticed.

They destroyed the annoying privileges of a few of their fellows; they encounter the competition of all. The boundary marker has changed form rather than place. When men are more or less similar and follow the same road, it is very difficult for any one of them to march quickly and cut through the uniform crowd that surrounds and crushes him.

This constant opposition that reigns between the instincts given birth by equality and the means that equality provides to satisfy them torments and fatigues souls

You can imagine men having arrived at a certain degree of liberty that satisfies them entirely. They then enjoy their independence without restlessness and without fervor. But men will never establish an equality that is enough for them.

Whatever efforts a people may make, it will not succeed in making conditions perfectly equal within it; and if it had the misfortune to arrive at this absolute and complete leveling, there would still be inequality of intelligence that, coming directly from God, will always escape the laws.

No matter how democratic the social state and political constitution of a people, you can therefore count on each of its citizens always seeing near himself several points that are above him, and you can predict that he will obstinately turn his attention solely in their direction. When inequality is the common law of a society, the greatest inequalities do not strike the eye. When all is nearly level, the least inequalities offend it. This is why the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater.

Among democratic peoples, men easily gain a certain equality; they cannot attain the equality they desire. The latter retreats from them every day, but without ever hiding from their view, and by withdrawing, it draws them in pursuit. They constantly believe that they are about to grasp it, and it constantly escapes their grip. They see it close enough to know its charms, they do not come close enough to enjoy it, and they die before having fully savored its sweet pleasures.

It is to these causes that you must attribute the singular melancholy that the inhabitants of democratic countries often reveal amid their abundance, and this disgust for life that sometimes comes to seize them in the middle of a comfortable and tranquil existence.

Some complain in France that the number of suicides is growing; in America suicide is rare, but we are assured that insanity is more common than anywhere else.

These are different symptoms of the same disease.

Americans do not kill themselves, however agitated they are, because religion forbids them to do so, and because among them materialism does not so to speak exist, although the passion for material well-being is general.

Their will resists, but often their reason gives way.

In democratic times enjoyments are more intense than in aristocratic centuries, and above all the number of those who sample them is infinitely greater; but on the other hand, it must be recognized that hopes and desires are more often disappointed there, souls more excited and more restless, and anxieties more burning.

Sources:

https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-democracy-in-america-historical-critical-edition-vol-3/simple#lf1532-03_label_1235
www.uhd.edu

Post-reading Questions:

1) Does Tocqueville think that Americans are mistaken in desiring prosperity and equality?

2) According to Tocqueville, what is the sort of equality Americans long for?

3) Why does Tocqueville think men can achieve a satisfactory degree of liberty but not a satisfactory degree of equality?

4) Is Tocqueville right that equality leads to restlessness and unhappiness? Can one be happy and still endlessly pursue greater prosperity?
