

from

Democracy in America

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

Arriving in the United States in 1831, French statesman and writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1805—1859) spent nine months studying the country's society, economy, and political system. Returning to France, he produced Democracy in America, one of the classic studies of the American character and way of life.

How is it that in the United States, where the inhabitants arrived but yesterday in the land they occupy, whither they brought with them neither customs nor memories, where they meet for the first time without knowing each other, where, to say it in one word the instinct of country can hardly exist—how does it come about that each man is as interested in the affairs of his township, of his **canton**, and of the whole state as he is in his own affairs? It is because each man in his sphere takes an active part in the government of society.

The common man in the United States has understood the influence of the general prosperity on his own happiness, an idea so simple but nevertheless so little understood by the people. Moreover, he is accustomed to regard that prosperity as his own work. So he sees the public fortune as his own, and he works for the good of the state, not only from duty or from pride, but, I dare almost say, from greed.

There is no need to study the institutions or the history of the Americans to recognize the truth of what has just been said, for their **mores** are sufficient evidence of it. The American, taking part in everything that is done in his country, feels a duty to defend anything criticized there, for it is not only his country that is being attacked, but himself; hence one finds that his national pride has recourse to every **artifice** and descends to every childishness of personal vanity.

Nothing is more annoying in the ordinary **intercourse** of life than this irritable patriotism of the Americans. A foreigner will gladly agree to praise much in their country, but he would like to be allowed to criticize something, and that he is absolutely refused.

So America is the land of freedom where, in order not to offend anybody, the foreigner may speak freely neither about individuals nor about the state, neither about the ruled nor about the rulers, neither about public undertakings nor about private ones—indeed, about nothing that one comes across, except perhaps the climate and the soil, but yet one meets Americans ready to defend both of these, as if they had a share in forming them...

No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of **tumult**; a confused clamor rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements. All around you everything is on the move: here the people of a district are assembled to discuss the possibility of building a church; there they are busy choosing a representative; further on, the delegates of a district are hurrying to town to consult about some local improvements; elsewhere it's the village farmers who have left their **furrows** to discuss the plan for a road or a school. One group of citizens assembles for the sole object of announcing that they disapprove of the government's course, while others unite to proclaim that the men in office are the fathers of their country. And here is yet another gathering which regards drunkenness as the main source of ills in the state and has come to enter into a solemn undertaking to give an example of **temperance**.

The great political movement which keeps American legislatures in a state of continual **agitation**, and which alone is noticed from outside, is only an episode and a sort of extension of the universal movement, which begins in the lowest ranks of the people and thence spreads successively through all classes of citizens. No one could work harder to be happy.

canton—small territorial division

mores—social customs

artifice—scheme

intercourse—communication

tumult—disturbance.

furrows—narrow trenches made by a farmer's plow.

temperance—abstaining, particularly from alcoholic beverages.

agitation—political activity.

It is hard to explain the place filled by political concerns in the life of an American. To take a hand in the government of society and to talk about it is his most important business and, so to say, the only pleasure he knows. That is obvious even in the most **trivial** habits of his life; even the women often go to public meetings and forget household cares while they listen to political speeches. For them clubs to some extent take the place of theaters. An American does not know how to converse, but he argues; he does not talk, but **expatiates**. He always speaks to you as if addressing a meeting, and if he happens to get excited, he will say "Gentlemen" when addressing an audience of one.

The inhabitant in some countries shows a sort of **repugnance** in accepting the political rights granted to him by the law; it strikes him as a waste of time to spend on communal interests, and he likes to shut himself up in a narrow **egoism**, of which four ditches with hedges on top define the precise limits.

But if an American should be reduced to occupying himself with his own affairs, at that moment half his existence would be snatched from him; he would feel it as a vast void in his life and would become incredibly unhappy.

I am convinced that if **despotism** ever came to be established in the United States it would find it even more difficult to overcome the habits that have sprung from freedom than to conquer the love of freedom itself.

That constantly renewed agitation introduced by democratic government into political life passes, then, into civil society. Perhaps, taking everything into consideration, that is the greatest advantage of Democratic government, and I praise it much more on account of what it causes ' he done than for what it does.

It is **incontestable** that the people often manage public affairs very badly, but their concern therewith is bound to extend their mental horizon and shake them out of the rut of ordinary routine. A man of the people, when asked to share the task of governing society, acquires a certain self-esteem. Since he then has power, the brains of very enlightened people are put at his

disposal. Constant efforts are made to enlist his support, and he learns from a thousand different efforts to deceive him. In politics he takes a part in undertakings he has not thought of, and they give him a general taste for enterprise. Daily new improvements to communal property are suggested to him, and that starts him wishing to improve his own. He may not be more virtuous or happier than his **forebears**, but he is more enlightened and active. I have no doubt that democratic institutions, combined with the physical nature of the land, are the indirect reason, and not, as is often claimed, the direct one, for the **prodigious** industrial expansion seen in the United States. It is not the laws' creation, but the people have learned to achieve it by making the laws.

When the enemies of democracy claim that a single man does his appointed task better than the government of all, I think they are right. There is more **consistency** in one man's rule than in that of a multitude, assuming equal enlightenment on either side; one man is more **persevering**, has more idea of the whole problem, attends more closely to details, and is a better judge of men. Anyone who denies that either has never seen a democratic republic or bases his views on too few examples. Democracy, even when local circumstances and the character of the people allow it to maintain itself, does not display a regular or methodical form of government. That is true. Democratic freedom does not carry its undertakings through as perfectly as an intelligent despotism would; it often abandons them before it has reaped the profit, or embarks on perilous ones; but in the long run it produces more; each thing is less well done, but more things are done. Under its sway it is not especially the things accomplished by the public administration that are great, but rather those routine things done without its help and beyond its sphere. Democracy does not provide a people with the most skillful of governments, but it does that which the most skillful government often cannot do: it spreads throughout the body social a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favored by circumstance, can do wonders. Those are its true advantages.

trivial—insignificant

expatiates—elaborates in speech or writing.

repugnance—strong distaste

egoism — self centeredness

despotism — tyranny.

Incontestable — unarguable

forebears — ancestors

prodigious — huge.

consistency — sameness.

Persevering — enduring

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHILE READING

1. According to Tocqueville, what motivated the ordinary American to participate in public life?

2. Why did Tocqueville dislike the “irritable patriotism” of Americans?

3. What did Tocqueville mean when he observed of Americans, ‘No one could work harder to be happy’?

4. In your opinion, did Tocqueville approve of the amount of political activity in the United States? Why or why not?

5. What do you think was Tocqueville's opinion of democracy as a form of government?

***Alexis de Tocqueville's five values crucial to
America's success as a constitutional republic***

DEFINE THE FOLLOWING VALUES	EXPLAIN HOW THE VALUE IS REFLECTED IN THE READING?
Liberty -	
Egalitarianism -	
Individualism -	
Populism -	
Laissez-faire -	