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American Political Thought Study Guide

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AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT:
STUDY GUIDE, 1991
Steven Alan Samson

Alexis de Tocqueville, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

1. Identify some of the changes that have accompanied the rise of democracy in France since the twelfth century. How may this movement be directed? What are some of the elements that might mitigate democracy's vices? What "strange confusion" characterizes the religion of the day? (273-79)
2. Why is it important to study the American experience? What role is played by voluntary associations, and what are their uses? What are some of the effects of press freedom? How party politics provided a guarantee against the tyranny of the majority? (279-84)
3. Why do men of distinction deliberately tend to avoid a political career? Why has "the race of American statesmen . . . strangely shrunk?" (284-86)
4. What is the great danger of making the will of majority omnipotent? What are its visible effects in America? What are some of the accidental or providential causes that help maintain its democratic republic? (286-93)
5. What is the role played by Christianity in the life and politics of America? What are the effects of individualism and how are its effects combatted? What would happen if government began taking the place of associations? (293-302)
6. Tocqueville notices that virtue is justified in a utilitarian rather than a moralistic fashion. What does he mean by the "principle of self-interest properly understood?" (303-305)

John C. Calhoun, ABOLITION PETITIONS

1. What is Calhoun's objection to the abolition movement in the North? What will be its consequences?
2. What are the advantages of slave labor over the industrial system of the North?

John C. Calhoun, FORT HILL ADDRESS

1. What is the rationale for a right of interposition? Along what lines do separate interests tend to be organized? What made the plan of our general government so well adapted to this situation? Where does the danger lie? What is the "naked question?" Who should finally judge? (311-17)

John C. Calhoun, ON THE VETO POWER

1. What theory of government did Henry Clay based his proposed constitutional amendment upon? What is his objection to the presidential veto? Following the same logic, what else needs to be changed? (155-58)
2. Does the nation have a will of its own? What is the constitutional evidence pro or con? What is Calhoun's "matter of fact solution" to the problem? (158-64)
3. How does the constitutional system take "the sense of each part separately, and the concurrence of all as the voice of the whole?" Has this prevented "oppression and usurpation on the part of the Government?" Why or why not? (164-72)
4. Who is responsible for "the fatal tendency of Government to the absolute and despotic control of the numerical majority?" The president? Congress? What is the solution? (174-80)

William Graham Sumner, WHAT SOCIAL CLASSES OWE TO EACH OTHER

1. What is the State? Who are "the poor?" What distinction regarding the hardship of humanity is of prime importance? What provision should be made for paupers? What role is played by reformers (A) and philanthropists (B) on behalf of "the poor man" (D)? Who is C? (323-26)
2. What is the relative importance of status and contract in the modern state? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a society based on contract? What is the chief business in life of the Forgotten Man? Why is he threatened by the paternal theory of government? (327-28)
3. What rights do we owe each other? What else? Why is the yearning after equality so dangerous? (328-30)