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Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy in America Study Guide

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**ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE: DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA
STUDY GUIDE, 2004
Steven Alan Samson**

VOLUME ONE

**CHAPTER FIVE: NECESSITY OF EXAMINING THE
CONDITION OF THE STATES BEFORE THAT OF THE
UNION AT LARGE**

Life in the Township

1. What are some concrete implications of the principle of popular sovereignty? What attitude is taken toward the duties of citizenship [self-government]? What accounts for the relative independence of the New England **township** [which in colonial times anticipated the development of federalism]? (58-59)
2. In what interests are the townships subordinate to the state? What are their social [societal] duties? What sort of division of labor is evident? How do France and America differ? (59)

Spirit of the Townships of New England

1. Why is the New Englander attached to his township? How does it engender a local public spirit that is absent in Europe? Why is it the focus of ambition more than the county, State, or Federal Government? Why does the American System multiply the functions of town officers? Summarize Tocqueville's points. (59-6!)

The Administration of Government in New England

1. Identify the two methods – one typical of Europe – by which the force of [central] authority is diminished in a nation. What was the goal of the American Revolution? What purposes did it recognize and limits did it respect? What accounts for the invisibility of the hand that directs the social machine? [NOTE: Tocqueville noted the existence of nineteen functionaries, including selectmen, assessors, collectors, and surveyors of highways, in each of the townships. He also cited some other examples in Pennsylvania: constables, overseers of the poor, township clerks, trustees, fence-viewers, and township's treasurer]. (62-63)

Political Effects of Decentralized Administration in the United States

1. Identify two kinds of centralization. Which kind enervates the nation, diminishes its local spirit, and injures productivity? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the kind of decentralized administration characteristic of America? On balance what view does Tocqueville take of European vs. American administration? What are the **political** advantages of the American way in his view? (63-68)
2. What circumstances account for Europeans who oscillate "between servitude and license?" How do such nations manage to survive? How does Tocqueville account for the decay of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire? What remains? What are the only two

motives that “can long urge all the people towards the same end?” Which of these may through laws be “consolidated into a durable and rational sentiment?” (68-69)

3. What effects of decentralization in America does Tocqueville admire? [NOTE: Tip O’Neill, late Speaker of the House, famously remarked that “all politics is local”]. In contrast to the European, what attitude does the American take toward the public officer? Who is apt to take the initiative in important undertakings connected with the public welfare? [NOTE: In Volume Two, Chapter 5, Tocqueville writes: “Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association”]. (69-71)
4. Why are provincial institutions more necessary to a democratic people? Why are democratic nations “most likely to fall under the yoke of a centralized administration? What about the double character of the French Revolution commended it to the friends of absolute power [such as the Jacobins]? What testifies most in favor of the local system?

Review

obedience to the government	independence of townships	local public spirit
attachment to township	centralized government	centralized administration
effects of decentralized administration in America		servitude and license in Europe
patriotism	political effects of decentralization	
two impulses of the French Revolution		