POL 110HA Module 3 AVP Transcript

Title Slide

Narrator: No audio.

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Title: Alexis de Tocqueville

Slide Content:

[Image of a painting of Alexis de Tocqueville]

Narrator: Welcome to our discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

We will start with a very brief biography of Alexis de Tocqueville. He was born to the French Norman aristocracy in 1805. He was from the manor house in the small village of Tocqueville, near the port city of Cherbourg in France. As a member of the aristocracy, his father had been imprisoned during the French Revolution. de Tocqueville was strongly influenced by Voltaire and Rousseau. He studied the classics and law and became a court official at Versailles. While in Versailles, he established a friendship with Gustav de Beaumont who was his traveling companion when he later made the trip to America.

Tocqueville and Beaumont’s travels in America lasted from May 11, 1831 through February 20, 1832. The French government provided de Tocqueville and Beaumont with an opportunity to go to America to evaluate a new style of prison called a penitentiary.

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Title: America of the 1830s

Slide Content:

[Image of a drawing of Nat Turner being apprehended at gunpoint]

Narrator: The following is to provide you with an understanding of America of the 1830s:

- Andrew Jackson was in his first term
- Nat Turner’s slave rebellion occurred in Virginia
- There was an abolitionist movement and a significant religious revival during the period
- The Whig party was formed, and nullification was being pursued in South Carolina
- Railroads had just been introduced in America, and the Erie Canal was active

de Tocqueville and Beaumont landed in Rhode Island and went directly to New York City. Both had difficulty with English. Both also kept extensive journals. Some of their first remarks were:

- Social movements including abolition and temperance
- Public education
- Trade is a passion
• Catholicism was more prevalent than they expected
• Protestants preach morality rather than doctrine
• America is a middle-class nation and is a nation of high morals and strong families
• A demonstrated national conceit

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Title: Traveling Throughout the U.S.

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[Image of a map showing the path Tocqueville and Beaumont took through the U.S.]

Narrator: Their travels took them to Albany, Buffalo, Michigan, and Green Bay, Wisconsin. It was in Wisconsin that de Tocqueville saw his first Native Americans in a wilderness setting. Then they traveled to Boston where they met former President, John Quincy Adams. After visiting Baltimore they traveled down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. While on the Ohio River, they noted significant differences in society between the free and slave holding banks. During the river trip, they had an accidental meeting with Sam Houston and, of course, heard the popular Davey Crockett stories of the time. While in New Orleans, they visited a plantation. They traveled to Washington, D.C., where de Tocqueville had an informal meeting with President Andrew Jackson. He was not impressed. de Tocqueville and Beaumont then left for New York City and their return to France.

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Title: Democracy in America—Primary Portions

Slide Content:

Four primary sections of the book covered:

• Equality of Conditions
• Freedom of the Press
• The Tyranny of the Majority
• Blacks and Indians

Narrator: We will detail four primary portions of Democracy in America.

• Equality of Condition
• Freedom of the Press
• The Tyranny of the Majority, and
• Blacks and Indians

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Title: Equality of Conditions

Slide Content:

[Image of a drawing portraying the upper class as very sophisticated looking]
Narrator: de Tocqueville considered equality of condition as a central element of democracy. He defined it as an absence of aristocratic barriers and mobility between the rich and poor.

de Tocqueville noted that America had retained some aristocratic features. One was the availability of bail. He noted that the wealthy could avoid immediate time in jail by posting bail, whereas the poor were not able to do so. He also observed the South was significantly more aristocratic than the North. He noted a strongly held American belief in equality that extended down to the least well off. He also reported that Americans shared a belief in the superiority of groups over any individual, thus rejecting the European view of royalty. de Tocqueville indicated that America was more stable than ancient democracies and credited high American literacy rates.

Tocqueville built a case for equality without the freedom. He used as an example, under the Pope all Catholics are equal. To Tocqueville freedom and equality were not synonymous. He also noted the spirit of the revolutionary war had been lost and attributed it to too many having too much to lose.

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Title: Freedom of the Press

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[Image of a drawing of a six cylinder printing press, designed by Richard March Hoe]

Narrator: de Tocqueville stated that “in a nation which follows the dogma of the sovereignty of the people—censorship is absurd.” A democracy absolutely requires a free press. He could be critical of the American press, and indicated that it was better at preventing evil than at promoting good. To paraphrase, criticism was more prevalent than promotion of alternatives.

Tocqueville was very impressed with the wide dispersion of the American press. Every small town seemed to have a local paper and the larger cities usually had several. He attributed this to the idea that as a newspaper publisher could not make a large salary, wealthy individuals and large companies simply did not go into the business. He also indicated that a broad base of independently-owned newspapers was important to the health of a democracy. He indicated potential trouble should the press become dominated by a small number of companies, as it would provide fewer perspectives.

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Title: Tyranny of the Majority

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[Image of a drawing showing the masses pushing a large rolling wheel that is squashing the opposition]

Narrator: Tocqueville indicated that in a pure democracy, the power of the majority is absolute and that absolute power is dangerous. He wrote that the legislative branch was the most susceptible to majority pressure. He posited that the unbridled majority, at least from time to time, needed to be checked by the courts or the executive branch.
He offered an observation: In a monarchy, the population regards as a constant that the king cannot fail. Whereas, in America, the population regards as a constant that the majority cannot fail. Tocqueville indicated that laws in America have a shorter duration than elsewhere, as monarchies that are intact for decades change their composition at very infrequent intervals. Tocqueville indicates that if there is an aristocracy in America, it is the lawyers. He stated that the lawyers and the courts were the greatest protectors of individual freedom.

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Title: Blacks and Indians

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[Image of photograph of a slave family outside of their cabin]

Narrator: Tocqueville’s longest chapter is devoted to blacks and Indians. His initial conclusions are that the combination of differences of law, origin, and physical features makes barriers between the races almost insurmountable. He stated that Europeans make others serve them, when Europeans cannot bend them, they destroy them.

He wrote that “half breeds and mulattoes will be the natural links between the three races.” The first Indians he saw were drunks and beggars in New York. He also met a group of Choctaws as they were being forcibly relocated to the West.

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Title: Tocqueville’s Observations on Indians

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[Image of a painting of Lander’s Peak in the Rocky Mountains]

Narrator: He made the following observations:

- Indians had no real concept of private wealth and property
- Indians were mild and hospitable in peace but pitiless in war
- Indians, like whites, believed in another world under a different name and worshiped God

Later, when Tocqueville saw Indians on the Western frontier he saw Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “noble savage.” He observed that “they had no profound corruption and did not display rudeness.”

He wrote that the Europeans treated the Indians badly and unjustly:

- They produced dependency with brandy and iron
- They pushed the Indians west
- They took advantage of the indistinct boundaries
- They often placed Indians under state law, as they knew Indians would rather move than submit to state law
He noted that the Cherokees had a written language, a newspaper, and quoted the Cherokee’s petition to Congress in full. Sadly, he indicated that the Indians only real choice was to relocate to the West or war. He was very pessimistic about the future of the Indians in America.

Slide 11

Title: Tocqueville’s Observations on Blacks/Slavery

Slide Content:

[Image of a sign indicating a slave auction was going to be taking place]

**Narrator:** Tocqueville obviously encountered slavery in America. He noted that unlike the ancient world, where slaves could be someone from their own city or the city next door, American slavery was racial. He predicted that America would abolish slavery, but that it would be based on the interests of the whites, rather than the blacks. He found slavery incompatible with democracy, freedom, and enlightenment.

He was not optimistic regarding black interests, even after the end of slavery. He said “once freed, they will still be strangers.” Abolition will not eliminate prejudice of the master, prejudice of the race, or prejudice of the white. He feared that abolition would actually increase the repugnance the whites directed towards blacks. He also indicated that relocating the blacks back to Africa was totally unrealistic as there were too many.

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Title: Tocqueville’s Observations From the Ohio River

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[Image of a drawing of small boats traveling on the Mohawk River]

**Narrator:** Some of his most interesting observations were recorded during the time he spent sailing down the Ohio River between Kentucky and Ohio. He noted that in Ohio, the land was cultivated by the whites. There was industry and commerce, and work was honored. On the southern bank, the land was not well cultivated and the whites preferred hunting and war to work. Work was dishonored. In short, he saw slavery as more corrupting of the masters than of the slaves. He also noted the prejudice against the blacks was worse in the North where there was no slavery. Finally, he indicated, that if there is a revolution in America, it would be caused by the inequality between the other races and the whites.

We have reviewed a relatively small number of de Tocqueville’s observations. You may well consider reading the entire book to be time very well spent.

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End of Presentation