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**Obama's War on Inequality Presaged by De Tocqueville**

by

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It's clear that President Obama intends to spend much of 2014 trying to convince Americans that the most important problem we face is what he claims is increasing income "inequality."

Calling this inequality the "defining challenge of our time" in early December, the president declared that "we need to set aside the belief that government cannot do anything about reducing inequality."

Not surprisingly, there followed a litany of measures Obama suggested the government should take to reduce inequality, not the least of which is to adopt, yet again, an extension of long-term unemployment benefits.

Of course, there are hotly contested views among academics and others who study the issue as to whether, in fact, income inequality in America has grown in recent years, or recent decades. And the views concerning whether income mobility – movement up or down the income scale – has decreased or increased are contested as well.

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If income inequality actually is shown to be increasing in any meaningful way, considering whether there are useful actions that government might take to reverse the trend is a worthwhile endeavor. But my purpose here is not to assess the validity of the competing claims or to address any specific government measures.

Rather I wish to use the current focus on the inequality issue as an occasion to revisit the wisdom of Alexis de Tocqueville on this very subject.

Only 25 when he toured America for nine months in 1831-32 during the rise of Jacksonian democracy, the young Frenchman's great work, *Democracy in America*, was first published in 1835.

Tocqueville was more than just an astute observer of the American scene. He was a political philosopher of the first rank who has much to teach us regarding the relationship of the popular egalitarian impulse to the exercise of government power in a democracy. This was one of democracy in America's central concerns.

Tocqueville predicted that in modern democracies there would be a dangerous tendency toward centralization of power that would threaten individual freedom.

In his view, only mediating institutions such as private associations could possibly moderate this tendency. Even so, he saw in democracy the potential seeds of its own destruction.

Tocqueville argued that a democratic regime, by the sheer force of the majoritarian canon it embodies, would ceaselessly move in the direction of striving for ever greater degrees of what he called "equality of condition."

This continual push for more equality of condition would lead inexorably to an ever-increasing encroachment of government authority at the expense of individual freedom.

Why the loss of individual freedom? Because, Tocqueville said, human nature is such that "the personal pride of individuals will always seek to rise above the line, and to form somewhere an inequality to their own advantage."

To combat this innate individual striving "to rise above the line," government's response would be to take "each member of the community in its powerful grasp."

And then government, to achieve its leveling aim, would grow to cover "the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd."

Towards the end of *Democracy in America*, in one of its more foreboding but perhaps most prescient passages, Tocqueville laments:

“I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people.”

Obama surely will raise the "inequality" rhetoric in 2014. Fine. But when considering proposed new laws or expanded government benefits to address the perceived problem, please keep your Tocqueville handy.

For Tocqueville taught us nearly two centuries ago that there is a definite trade-off when politicians rush to respond to the majoritarian impulse to remedy inequality – the loss of a measure of individual freedom as government brings more and more of us within its grasp.

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