An Exception?

Testing a claim about America's history

8.C.9.1.E "Analyze Alexis de Tocqueville's claim regarding the concept of American exceptionalism and identify ways in which America has been an "exception to the rule" (e.g., stability, realizations of liberty and civil equality, prosperity…"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details that support the idea that America followed a different path. Circle two details that limit or complicate that idea.

A Different Path?

1. In 1831, French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville traveled across the United States to study its young democracy. In Europe, inherited rank still shaped who held power. Tocqueville noticed that Americans had fewer legal ranks and often formed local groups to solve problems. He argued that this relative equality of social conditions helped democracy take root. American exceptionalism is the claim that the United States has followed a different path from many other nations. Tocqueville's observations can help us test that claim, but different does not mean perfect or better in every way.

2. Consider stability and liberty. The Constitution, in effect since 1789, created a government with regular elections rather than a hereditary ruler. Americans have changed leaders through elections even during major crises. Yet the Civil War nearly broke the nation apart, so stability was not guaranteed. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed equality, but slavery denied freedom to millions. After the war, the Fourteenth Amendment promised equal protection under the law. These examples show a gap between a national ideal and people's actual rights, as well as efforts to narrow it.

3. Prosperity and innovation offer another test. In the nineteenth century, plentiful land for settlers and expanding trade helped many Americans gain wealth. That prosperity depended partly on land taken from Native nations and on enslaved labor, so its benefits were unequal. Later, American inventors and workers developed methods of mass production, including moving assembly lines that made cars cheaper. Other countries also invented and prospered. The stronger claim is not that America alone achieved these things, but that its combination of opportunities, institutions, and exclusions created a distinctive history.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do Tocqueville's observations about social rank and local groups support the idea that the United States followed a different path from Europe?

2. What evidence both supports and limits a claim that the U.S. government has been stable?

3. How do slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment together complicate a claim that America achieved civil equality?

4. What evidence both supports and limits a claim that American prosperity and innovation were exceptional?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four- or five-sentence museum label that judges whether Tocqueville's observations support the claim of American exceptionalism. Use evidence from two different paragraphs, explain one limit to the claim, and end with a question a visitor could debate.

ANSWER KEY

An Exception?

GRADE 8 · 8.C.9.1.E

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details that support the idea that America followed a different path. Circle two details that limit or complicate that idea. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do Tocqueville's observations about social rank and local groups support the idea that the United States followed a different path from Europe?	**He saw fewer legal ranks and Americans forming local groups to solve problems, while inherited rank still shaped power in Europe.**
2	What evidence both supports and limits a claim that the U.S. government has been stable?	**The Constitution has remained in effect since 1789, and leaders have changed through elections. The Civil War nearly broke the nation apart.**
3	How do slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment together complicate a claim that America achieved civil equality?	**Slavery denied freedom to millions despite the nation's stated ideal of equality. The Fourteenth Amendment later promised equal protection under the law.**
4	What evidence both supports and limits a claim that American prosperity and innovation were exceptional?	**Expanding trade helped many Americans gain wealth, and moving assembly lines made cars cheaper. The benefits of prosperity were unequal, and other countries also invented and prospered.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Tocqueville saw Americans forming local groups to solve problems, a habit that could strengthen democracy. This differed from Europe's systems of inherited rank. Later, expanding trade helped many Americans gain wealth, but land taken from Native nations also helped create that prosperity. America's path was distinctive, yet its opportunities were not equally shared. Would you call a nation exceptional if its successes depended partly on exclusion?

Accept other accurate supporting and limiting details from the passage. The museum label should make a judgment, connect evidence from two paragraphs, and close with a debatable question.