

59. Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849)

Source: Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in *Aesthetic Papers* (Boston, 1849), pp. 189-200.

The Mexican War of 1846-48 was the first American conflict to be fought primarily on foreign soil and the first in which American troops occupied a foreign capital. It resulted in the absorption by the United States of about one-third of the territory of Mexico—the present-day states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah. The war pushed to the center of political debate the question of whether slavery should be allowed to expand into this vast new territory.

Inspired by the expansionist fervor of Manifest Destiny, a majority of Americans supported the war. But a significant minority in the North feared that far from expanding the "empire of liberty," the real aim of the administration of James K. Polk was to acquire new land for the expansion of slavery. Many organized politically to oppose slavery's expansion. A few engaged in other forms of resistance. In Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau was jailed in 1846 for refusing to pay taxes as a protest against the war. Defending his action, Thoreau wrote the essay, "On Civil Disobedience." The individual citizen, he insisted, could not "resign his conscience to the legislator." Supposedly, when his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him in prison and asked, "David, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau replied, "Ralph, what are you doing out there?" "Under a

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Read
for
Question
#2

10-Point "In-Class Discussion/Debate" on Henry David Thoreau's Civil Disobedience

Directions: Work with your Team.
Read at same pace.

Everyone says something about each question
before you go on to next question

Question #1: What do you already know about
Henry David Thoreau?

Question #2: Read the Introduction. Discuss what was
the historical context in which Thoreau
wrote this?

government which imprisons any unjustly," Thoreau insisted, "the true place of a just man is also a prison." The essay would inspire such later advocates of nonviolent resistance to unjust laws as Martin Luther King, Jr.

Question #3

First read this 1 paragraph.

1) In your own words share with group....

What is Thoreau saying here?

+ Do you agree or disagree?

2) What is Thoreau's view of the US-Mexican War?

+ Do you agree or disagree?

I HEARTILY ACCEPT the motto,—“That government is best which governs least,” and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all,” and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

~~This American government,—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we~~

Question #4

First only read this part

What is Thoreau saying Here →
and do you agree or disagree?

~~must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.~~

Question #5

What is Thoreau
saying Here →
+ do you agree or disagree?

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

Question #6

What is Thoreau saying about
how so far in History #6
governments have been
created?

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it.

#6

Start here
for
Question #7

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have

#7

continue
for #7

Question #7

What does Thoreau say about the relation between government laws and your personal conscience?
Do you agree?

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Voices of Freedom

#7 a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and producing palpitation of the heart...

...

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy *is* worse than the evil. *It* makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and *do* better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

~~One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offence never contemplated by government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who placed him there; but if I should steal ninety~~

Question #8

What does Thoreau say about "the USA military" in 1849?
Do you agree?

Question #9

What is Thoreau saying here?
Do you agree or disagree?

times nine shillings from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.

~~In the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth,—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn...~~

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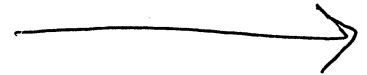
Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race, should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not *with* her but *against* her,—the only house in a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error.

Question #10

What is Thoreau
saying here?

Do you agree or
disagree?

Now turn to the
Debate Questions



Debate Questions for Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*

Directions: Debate these questions with your small group. Do not rush through them. You should discuss each question for at least 45 seconds or more for each question. Everyone should say something before you go on to the next question.

#1) Thoreau is arguing here that there is a "burden of living in a democracy." Because in a democracy the government represents all the people; therefore, in a democracy each individual (you and me) are responsible for all the actions of the government. Therefore, whatever bad actions are committed by my government I am equally responsible for those. For example, if my government murders an innocent person, then that person's murder is my fault and my responsibility. Ultimately, that person's death is on my soul. So what are your thoughts about this? Do you agree or disagree with Thoreau on this point? Why? Explain!

#2) If Thoreau is correct about #1- that bad actions of the government in a democracy are on each individual's soul- then what actions must an individual do to atone for or to make up for the bad actions of the government?

#3) In answering question #2- Thoreau is saying that if your government creates 'a police state' in which the government is jailing, enslaving, and even killing innocent people- then the only place where an individual's soul & conscience can be cleaned is if that person voluntarily goes to prison too. What do you think about this idea? Do you agree or disagree?

#4) What did Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. think about Question #3? Explain.

#5) Why did Thoreau insist that your form of 'civil disobedience' MUST be non-violent? Explain. Do you agree or disagree?

#6) Relate Thoreau's Civil Disobedience to anything today? How can anything in Thoreau's Civil Disobedience be related to anything that is going on today in the USA and also the world?

#7) In 1849 Thoreau was saying that USA slavery was an "evil abomination" that every single American had to fight against if he/she wanted his/her conscience to be clean. Is there anything going on today that Thoreau- or you- would say is our modern day "evil abomination" that every individual must use "civil disobedience" against to try and change? Explain.