

Thoreau, Henry David. *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers: 1965.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American essayist, author of *Walden* and this essay. Friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau helped establish New England Transcendentalism. Thoreau was a dedicated naturalist and abolitionist, and worked odd jobs including pencil-maker and surveyor to maintain himself. Thoreau's works sold poorly during his lifetime.

Tirade against Government. Governments govern human frailty, and better men would require none. Government institutions perpetuate themselves, but degrade morally all the while. People, to the extent government steps aside, accomplish great things. We need better, not no, government. Governments persevere, not because they are just or right, but because they have strength.

The Individual Stands Against Government. The individual must not bow to government. They are individuals first, and citizen second. We should not respect law. Laws make each man complicit in a government's iniquities. Men serve governments as if they were machines, not persons with judgment and moral sense. Hence, most men deserve no respect. Persons who act under conscience resist governments, for the most part, and are persecuted by governments for their trouble.

Americans and American Government. Americans must dissociate from American government because it permits slavery and makes war on Mexico. Though making these changes might cause America to perish, justice demands this courage. One cannot weigh cost and benefit when justice hangs in the balance. Many in Massachusetts oppose slavery and the Mexican war, but decline to end them practically. Voting against slavery and the Mexican war are insufficient; one still capitulates to the errant majority. One must, at a minimum, oppose government by refusing to pay taxes. One must not patiently vote until slavery and unjust wars lost at polls. The greatest obstacle to change is men who oppose slavery and the Mexican war, but nevertheless support the government.

Action from Principle. People must do what they believe is right; that makes for fundamental change. All such change from conviction of the right is revolutionary. Unjust laws demand 1) acquiescence, 2) opposition while waiting repeal, or 3) refusal to obey. Patience is a tempting option; revolution might be worse than injustice, one fears. Democracy is too slow; you will die a cog in the machine. Refuse and follow your best purposes. We live to be ourselves, not to make the world a better place. The American Constitution is evil. One needs no majority. If you are right, you are all the majority you require.

Tax Resistance. Resist by refusing the tax collector. Seek to be jailed for abolitionist sentiment. Money drowns virtue. Rich men should do what they dreamed when poor. Thoreau resisted a church tax. He refused the poll tax for six years, and was jailed overnight once. Incarceration served no purpose, and was no great inconvenience. Thoreau is not responsible for society's weal. Thoreau pays highway tax, and supports schools by teaching. Still, he declares war on government. Personal allegiance, not money, is the issue. Thoreau wishes to abjure his citizenship, and live without connection to the state. Others paid Thoreau's refused tax obligation; Thoreau disapproves. They let their feelings run away with them.

Second Thoughts. Should one not forgive his neighbors' ignorance? No. Going along with the mass is to deliberately injure oneself. Thoreau wishes for excuses to comply with the State's demands. He is, perhaps, too ready to find such pretexts for conformity. Conventionally viewed, the Constitution is not that bad, after all. The American government is admirable and its courts respectable. From a higher plane, however, they are defective. Government is largely irrelevant, and should, for the most part, be ignored. One cannot trust those within government to give us a view of it. Government progresses when it increases respect for the individual. Any government authority derives from the individual. Where liberty and enlightenment prosper, States recognize and subserve the individuals who are their source.