**Civil Disobedience**

**Henry David Thoreau**

### **CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE BACKGROUND**

In July of 1846, town constable and tax collector Sam Staples arrested Henry David Thoreau in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau had refused to pay his poll tax for six years, resulting in his arrest. He was released on bail just the next morning, but his night in jail proved pivotal, inspiring his 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” later known as “Civil Disobedience.”

Like [other New England transcendentalists](https://www.owleyes.org/text/self-reliance), Thoreau believed in an individual’s right to self-determination. For Thoreau, the drive to disobey stemmed from both a principle of personal autonomy and a deeply anti-authoritarian perspective. Thoreau places himself in the history of American political thought with the opening sentence, in which he “heartily accept[s]” the claim that “‘that government is best which governs least.’” Thus, Thoreau aligns his interest with those of a strain of American conservatism that stretches back to the days before the Revolutionary War and remains alive today with its central question — how should individuals respond to a government that pursues policies they believe to be immoral — still challenges us today.

For Thoreau the goal of any response to unjust policies is to insure that the individual does not, either directly or indirectly, advance them. “What I have to do,” he writes, “is to see… that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.” In his essay, he postulates two main points: first, he maintains that the individual is the source of all moral authority. “The only obligation which I have a right to assume,” he says, “is to do at any time what I think right.” Second, he contends that it is not enough simply to perceive the right. “How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely?” he asks.

He demands “action from principle.” The “perception of right” must be accompanied by “the performance of right.” We might respond by saying that, in a democratic society, citizens “perform” the right by deciding where they stand on issues and voting according to their principles. Thoreau would disagree: “Even voting for the right,” he insists, “is doing nothing for it.” **[His italics.]**

“Civil Disobedience” was influential to Mahatma Gandhi during his movement against British imperialism and to Martin Luther King, Jr. during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

*1. Leigh Kathryn Jenco, “Thoreau’s Critique of Government,“ in*A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2009), p. 76.*

### **CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE QUOTES**

“If 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… 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.” – Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience

“An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

“An unjust law is itself a species of violence. Arrest for its breach is more so. Now the law of nonviolence says that violence should be resisted not by counter-violence but by nonviolence. This I do by breaking the law and by peacefully submitting to arrest and imprisonment.” – Mahatma Gandhi

“One has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE EXCERPTS**

**ASSIGNMENT**: complete a SOAPSTONES annotation on the excerpt below from “Civil Disobedience,” marking up the text as you read, to assess the RHETORICAL SITUATION of this essay. Then hi-lite and label at least three “T-Shirt” quotes.

I HEARTILY ACCEPT THE MOTTO,—“That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more readily 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 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.

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…

*(Conclusion)* The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well—is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.

**QUOTES from Self Reliance & Other Essays**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

1. “Envy is ignorance; imitation is Suicide”
2. “The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet.”
3. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines; with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.”
4. “Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood: Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”
5. “What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think.”
6. “God will not have his work made manifest by cowards.”
7. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”
8. “My life is not an apology, but a life. It is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady.”
9. “The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we are become timorous desponding whimperers. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other.
10. "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages."

**ASSIGNMENT**: choose one of the above Ralph Waldo Emerson quotes as your “prompt;” write a full classical oration argument on the extent to which you agree or not with the quote’s argument/position. Make sure you state your claim/position clearly with at least two supporting arguments (aka thesis); make sure you include a variety of types of evidence (remember the 6 types!) as your build your line of reasoning with CDs and CMs. **Type and submit to CANVAS on designated due date.**

**COMPARE/CONTRAST: Man of La Mancha and Emily Dickinson**

**ASSIGNMENT**: read the two texts below. Each puts forth an “argument” regarding madness. Write a brief summary for each text explaining what the argument/claim/position regarding madness is. Then, find two similarities and two differences between the two texts. (Consider: tone, diction—especially connotations of word, arguments on madness, figurative language, imagery)

“I have lived nearly fifty years, and I have seen life as it is. Pain, misery, hunger ... cruelty beyond belief. I have heard the singing from taverns and the moans from bundles of filth on the streets. I have been a soldier and seen my comrades fall in battle ... or die more slowly under the lash in Africa. I have held them in my arms at the final moment. These were men who saw life as it is, yet they died despairing. No glory, no gallant last words ... only their eyes filled with confusion, whimpering the question, "Why?"  
I do not think they asked why they were dying, but why they had lived. When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!” **–Dale Wasserman, from his play *Man of La Mancha*, based on the story of Don Quixote**

**Much Madness is divinest Sense - (620)**

BY [EMILY DICKINSON](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)

Much Madness is divinest Sense -

To a discerning Eye -

Much Sense - the starkest Madness -

’Tis the Majority

In this, as all, prevail -

Assent - and you are sane -

Demur - you’re straightway dangerous -

And handled with a Chain-