Civil Disobedience

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817 in Concord Massachusetts, to John Thoreau, a pencil maker, and Cynthia Dunbar. He finished his primary and secondary education in Concord before completing his undergraduate education at Harvard. Though he suffered from medical and financial hardships during his undergraduate years, he ultimately graduated with distinction in 1937. He briefly took a job as a teacher before starting work at his father's pencil factory. Thoreau returned to the education field when he decided to start a school in Concord with his brother in 1839, before closing it permanently two years later, when his brother fell ill. By this point, Thoreau had already begun to show interest in different pursuits, primarily nature and writing. Shortly after the closure of the school, Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the foremost thinkers and philosophers of Thoreau's time (who also happened to be his neighbor, mentor, and friend) invited Thoreau to live with him as a handy man. Though Thoreau had become an informal mentee of Emerson's upon his graduation from Harvard, it wasn't until he began living with Emerson over the next two years that he fully immersed himself in Emerson's teachings. Thoreau began writing seriously under Emerson's guidance and began to publish some poems and essays. At the same time, he learned all about the philosophy of Transcendentalism, a mode of living that stressed the importance of putting spiritual concerns over material ones. Later, with Emerson's help, Thoreau built a small house on land that Emerson owned on the shores of Walden Pond. Thoreau moved into the house on July 4th, 1845. Over the next two years, surrounded by nature, he wrote his first two books and tried to live by Transcendentalist doctrines. After leaving the pond, he published his books and found modest success. For the rest of his writing career, he journaled extensively about nature and continued publishing and revising essays about issues important to him, such as the abolition of slavery and the importance of practicing civil disobedience. Thoreau died of tuberculosis in May 1862.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Thoreau was an ardent abolitionist during a time when slavery was an increasingly polarizing issue for most of the nation. Therefore, when the American government declared war on Mexico in 1846, while he was living at Walden Pond, Thoreau saw the war as an American plot to seize land from Mexico and spread slavery. As a result, Thoreau refused to pay taxes in objection to this power grab. Leading up to the war, Thoreau believed in Ralph Waldo Emerson's teachings that change and reform begin with the way an individual chooses to live one's life. Thus, as a follower of the Emerson's transcendentalist movement, Thoreau practiced self-sufficiency and tried not to depend too much on material goods. However, after America's declaration of war, though Thoreau still considered himself part of the transcendentalist movement, he no longer believed that an individual's way of life was enough to spur change. He believed that an individual must *act* to bring about the change he or she desires, an idea that spurred his writing of "Civil Disobedience."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a leading Transcendentalist, Thoreau usually stressed the importance of simple living and the importance of surrounding oneself with nature. His most famous works focused on these ideals and their contrast with the material world and its superficial concerns. *Walden*, for example, is a book that Thoreau wrote while living in a small cabin in the woods by Walden Pond. It is one of his most famous works and is now considered by many to be an American classic. Though it is less openly political than "Civil Disobedience," *Walden* does have some similarities to the essay, especially when it discusses the virtues of living independently (and thus not having to depend on the State for certain needs). *Life Without Interest*, which was published posthumously in 1863, also shares similarities with "Civil Disobedience." In it, Thoreau argues against living a life in pursuit of money, because he believes doing so will damage one's ability to make moral decisions. He argues instead that one should pursue occupations that bring one joy and happiness. Of course, in any discussion about Thoreau and Transcendentalism, one cannot fail to mention Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Thoreau's mentor and the father of Transcendentalism, Emerson and his works had a profound influence on Thoreau. Emerson published "Nature" in 1836 and "Self-Reliance" in 1841, and both works laid the foundations of the Transcendentalist doctrines that underlie many of Thoreau's own writings. While "Nature" encourages readers to reclaim their affinity to nature and sever some of their bonds to society, "Self-Reliance" encourages readers to trust themselves and be wary of the powerful influence of institutions and their impact on one's individual thought.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Civil Disobedience or Resistance to Civil Government.
- **When Written:** 1848
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts

- **When Published:** 1849
- **Literary Period:** Early 19th century American Literature, Transcendentalism, Abolitionism
- **Genre:** Essay; Nonfiction
- **Setting:** The United States of America; Massachusetts
- **Climax:** Thoreau entreats the American people to give up their rights to property and protection from the state
- **Antagonist:** The American Government
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Friends Forever: Thoreau first met Emerson during a Harvard lecture Emerson delivered on "The American Scholar." The speech was so inspiring that Thoreau approached Emerson afterwards, which was the beginning of what would go on to be a lifelong friendship.

Thoreau: Writer and Railroad Conductor. Thoreau was an ardent abolitionist. For a time he served as a conductor for the Underground Railroad, a system that helped fugitive enslaved people make their way to free states and Canada.

PLOT SUMMARY

Henry David Thoreau begins "Civil Disobedience" by reflecting on the best form of government. He admits that he believes that the best government is one that governs "not at all." From there, he asks his readers to reflect on the purpose of a standing government such as the one the United States has currently. He argues that like a standing army, a standing government can be perverted and corrupted to serve the ambitions of a few powerful people instead of all the American people.

Thoreau goes on to critique the American government and its role in furthering injustice and its limited success in governing so far. He argues that all of America's successes have been the result of the American people instead of the American government. Thoreau then makes his first plea to readers, calling for a "better government," instead of the faulty government he and his fellow citizens currently have. He argues that the power of governing is with the people and therefore the American people must take back their ability to think and act for themselves "as men first and subjects afterwards." Thoreau implores his audience to think carefully about the law and its capacity to promote injustice, arguing that his fellow citizens must risk breaking the law and becoming "bad" citizens in the pursuit of justice. Though the state may treat them as enemies as a result, Thoreau argues that there is no other way forward. That is, the state's abuse of power is so great that one cannot in good conscience recognize this government, especially because it also protects the institution of slavery.

Thoreau reminds his audience of their right to revolt against a tyrannical government, arguing that it is right and just to do away with the "machine" of any government that oppresses, robs, and practices slavery. Though Thoreau brings up William Paley's writings in "Duty of Submission to Civil Government," as a counter opinion to his argument, he ultimately debunks Paley's idea that one should not resist a government if it will be an "inconvenience" to the public. Thoreau's dissenting response is short: the people should always pursue justice, as inconvenient and risky as it may be. He argues that the people must reject slavery and halt the war in Mexico, even if doing so tears the nation apart.

From there, Thoreau turns his attention to Massachusetts its residents, who, in his opinion, are not ready to shoulder the costs of justice. He critiques his fellow Massachusetts residents for being more interested in commerce and agriculture and for failing to do anything to stop the Mexican-American war and end slavery. Thoreau also criticizes them for petitioning the state or voting as their primary ways of bringing about change. He notes that none of these official channels is effective for ending slavery and the war. He emphasizes that voting is simply a way to express one's feeble desire for an outcome. That people find these channels of change worthwhile worries Thoreau; he wonders about the passive and "odd" character of the American citizen.

Though Thoreau admits that he does not think people should make it their goal in life to abolish all of the world's wrongs, he continues to argue that people have the duty to at least reject an institution that practices immoral acts. This point brings him to double down on his critiques of petitioning the government. Thoreau wonders why people are petitioning the *state* to dissolve the union, when they have the power to dissolve it themselves. He argues that men should not simply have an opinion (by petitioning). Rather, they must take practical steps to make that opinion a reality.

Thoreau reminds his audience of the stakes of the situation, arguing that they must try to amend the unjust laws because, contrary to popular opinion, remedying any evil is better than continuing to perpetuate that evil in the name of patriotism. He argues that breaking the law is the only way not to avoid enabling the evil that one condemns. Thoreau notes again that these efforts cannot occur through state-run channels. Instead, he implores the Massachusetts people to withdraw their support in "person" and "property" from the Massachusetts government. He argues that if only a few "honest" men withdrew from supporting the state (by refusing to pay taxes and going to jail), slavery would cease to exist. Refusing allegiance to the state as a tax-payer, as a tax-gatherer, and as a public official are all ways to achieve the revolution that Thoreau calls for.

Thoreau also points out how difficult it is for the rich to practice civil disobedience. He notes that people with a lot of wealth and property to lose will always be more allegiant to the institution that protects them and their property. This causes Thoreau to reflect on the difficulties and risks associated with practicing civil disobedience, such as jail time, the loss of property, and the loss of state protection. However, he suggests that one must avoid this bind by depending on oneself while shunning wealth.

Thoreau goes on to give examples of his own efforts to practice civil disobedience. He describes how he has refused to pay taxes towards a church congregation and refused to pay a poll tax. He was imprisoned for not paying the poll tax and spent a night in prison with a fellow Prisoner, who had been imprisoned for allegedly burning a barn. The experience was disorienting to Thoreau, and he reflects on the new insight the experience brought him. He sees his surroundings with a clearer perspective and walks away with a deeper understanding of the place he has lived for most of his life. After his imprisonment, he begins to look at his neighbors skeptically; they seem like weak men and women who are so averse to risk that they don't care about doing what is right.

Thoreau turns back to the matter of civil disobedience, saying that refusing to pay one's taxes is akin to refusing allegiance to the state. As a citizen, he argues that it is his right to review the actions of the state when the tax-gatherers come to him, and, based on the morality of the state's actions, refuse or consent to paying what they demand.

Thoreau argues that citizens must look at the state's actions from a higher point of view, one that allows them to stand a bit apart from the state so that they can "nakedly behold it." He states, for example, that people must not align themselves with the Constitution simply because it is the original law of the land. Rather, they should look for "purer sources of truth," in order to answer the pressing moral questions of their day.

Thoreau ends by reminding his audience that the government—to rule justly—must have the consent of the people it governs and recognize the individual as a "higher and independent power." According to him, this is the key to a free, enlightened, and glorious state, one that treats all men justly and with respect.

CHARACTERS

Henry David Thoreau – Henry David Thoreau is the narrator of "Civil Disobedience." He writes the essay as a concerned and discontented American citizen, who feels it is his duty and right to critique the American government's actions, rebel against laws that he finds unjust, *and* galvanize other citizens to follow suit. He spends most of the essay doing just that. Thoreau begins by calling attention to the recent injustices that the government has committed in the name of the people, using examples such as the Mexican-American war and the government's continued support of slavery. Yet he also deliberately shows his hope and faith in the American people throughout the essay, even as his hope in the government wanes. His message to his audience is this: though the government may seem indomitable, the American people are the ones who hold the true power in the nation because of their belief in justice. Thoreau thus encourages the American people to use their power strategically, rebel against the State, and practice civil disobedience by refusing, for example, to pay taxes. He encourages them to do this not only as a way to object to the government's continued abuse of power, but as a way of wresting back some of their agency, which Thoreau believes the government has taken from the citizens in order to make them into docile servants of the state.

The American Government – The American Government is the chief antagonist of Thoreau and the American people. It is the government's actions that Thoreau is most concerned with in the essay—in fact, they're the reason he pens the essay in the first place. The government's actions, primarily its participation in the Mexican-American war and in slavery, are signs of its corruption. To Thoreau, the government is a self-serving body that claims to work for the good of the American people, when in reality it works for the benefit of a powerful few. What's more, it thwarts the law and ethics of Christianity and **God**, upholds immorality, and gives its citizens little to no respect. For these reason, Thoreau entreats his audience to give the government little to no respect in return. He incites the American People to practice civil disobedience by refusing to pay taxes as a way of limiiting the government's power. Because Thoreau fears that the government has become too powerful, he relies on the American people to check the state. To Thoreau, a government with immoral tendencies cannot be deserving of the American people's trust or taxes. Thus, Thoreau sees the American people and the government as locked in a hostile tension.

The American People – The American people are Thoreau's intended audience in "Civil Disobedience." They are his fellow citizens, and Thoreau has big expectations for them. Though he believes in their goodness and their impulse toward justice, he also notes that some are misguided patriots who serve the immoral state blindly. Nevertheless, the American people are the hope that Thoreau sees in the nation. In other words, they are the way out of the moral bind that the American government has pulled the nation into. The American people, so long as they heed Thoreau's call and practice civil disobedience, hold the power to change the course of the nation.

The Prisoner – The Prisoner is Thoreau's roommate during the only night Thoreau spends in prison for refusing to pay the poll tax. He is Thoreau's companion as well as his guide to navigating a night in prison. According to Thoreau, he is a "first-

rate fellow and a clever man" who believes he has been wrongfully accused of setting fire to a barn, though Thoreau believes the man most likely *unintentionally* set fire to the barn by falling asleep with a lit pipe. To Thoreau, the night in prison is a novel and slightly disorienting experience—"like travelling into a far country"—and so he relies on his fellow prisoner to keep him company and show him the ropes, since the prisoner has been there for three months. When morning comes, the prisoner is put to work and leaves knowing that he most likely will never see Thoreau again. The prisoner is effectively Thoreau's guide through an awakening, because when Thoreau comes out of the prison, he remarks that he is able to see and understand the state he lives in more clearly.

TERMS

Civil Disobedience – Civil disobedience is the strategic refusal to obey certain laws and statutes of a country or state. For example, one can practice civil disobedience by refusing to pay taxes to a state or government, as a way of objecting to the government's use of those funds. Civil disobedience is what Henry David Thoreau suggests every citizen with a conscience must use to respond to an unfair and unjust government.

THEMES

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AMERICAN PEOPLE VS. THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" critiques the American government's behavior during the second half of the 19th century. Writing in 1849, a year after the end of the Mexican-American war and during a time of increasingly bitter political division over slavery, Thoreau poses a simple question to his readers: What, if any, of America's few triumphs can be attributed to the government, given its role in travesties such as slavery and the Mexican-American war? His answer is simple: none. All of America's successes, in his opinion, come from the nation's people, whose singular character is much more deserving of recognition than the government is. Thoreau not only posits that the American people have achieved all of America's successes, but he even says that the American people would have accomplished more, "had [the government] not sometimes got in its way." Thus, Thoreau establishes an antagonistic relationship between the American government and the American people, arguing that the current government hinders the people's natural leanings towards moral decisions. What's more, it is the people's responsibility to reject this status quo and take action to reestablish the nation's integrity.

For Thoreau, the problem is not that the American government *exists*; his problem is with the *form* in which it exists. His displeasure stems in large part from how the government has abused its power without the consent of the American people. Citing examples of the government's recent transgressions, Thoreau makes a searing case against the government, saying that it ignores the people's wishes in favor of its own questionable goals. This claim sets the stage for his later calls for a new political order that prioritizes the American people's moral leanings over the government's appetite for war and slavery. One of Thoreau's most frequent examples of the government's infidelity to the American people is the Mexican-American war, which he sees as a hijacking of the people's will for the benefit of a few: "Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure." His argument is simple: a government that pursues a war with the vigor that the American government has pursued the Mexican-American War is failing to represent the people's (peaceful) will. Thoreau's choice to cite the Mexican-American War repeatedly throughout his essay is strategic. He refuses to let the still-fresh war fade from the collective consciousness of the American public, in order to galvanize them to act.

Furthermore, Thoreau argues that the American government isn't just failing to represent the American people; it's behaving in a completely immoral fashion. In his opinion, the government's lack of integrity has created a moral vacuum in the nation. Thoreau reasons that it is the government's pursuit of greatness that has created this loss of integrity: "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?" Here, Thoreau cheekily asks if the country's pursuit of greatness and longevity is a good enough reason to erode its own integrity. *But to Thoreau, no amount of greatness is worth the disgrace of the American government's actions—particularly the moral abomination of slavery. As he puts it simply, a man "cannot for an instant recognize [this] political organization as [his] government which is the slave's government also." In other words, perpetuating something as immoral as slavery means that the American government shouldn't actually be recognized as a government at all. Thoreau frames this immorality as so pervasive that the American people should "recognize the right of revolution." That is, in a choice between moral action or bowing to the American government's authority, Thoreau tells the people to choose morality and reject the government.*

To Thoreau, revolting against the government's immorality is

necessary to return power back to the people, who he believes will make better decisions than the government. Thus, the potential of the American people is Thoreau's silver lining in all of this. The government's pursuit of greatness over integrity has left a moral vacuum, but this regrettable situation does, at least, force the American people to step up and fill in where the government has failed. For example, Thoreau reminds us that, contrary to popular belief, the government "does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate." Rather, "the character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished." In other words, Thoreau attributes all of the good things that have come from the nation to the people, while attributing all the negative things to the government. However, Thoreau also argues that this dichotomy cannot continue to exist. For it to change, the American people must step up (like he has by writing this scathing essay) and make it their duty to reject moral transgressions like Mexican-American war and slavery, so that the country can regain its integrity.

It is no surprise that Thoreau uses the final paragraph of the essay to once again call attention to the fact that "the authority of government […] is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed." Thoreau's words function as a final rallying call for the people, and a way of reminding them to be wary of the government's current trajectory. Thoreau entreats them to act because only they, the *people*, can save the republic and keep tragedies like war and slavery from happening again.

JUSTICE VS. LAW

In "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau addresses the failures of the American government as it existed in 1849, specifically the government's enabling of slavery and its waging of the Mexican-American War (which Thoreau saw as an immoral land grab). To Thoreau, the fact that such immoral behavior could be legally justified points to a disconnect between what is simply legal and what is actually *just*. Thoreau goes further than simply suggesting that law and justice are different concepts; rather, he argues that the law often hinders the pursuit of true justice. Faced with a choice between law and justice, he tells readers, one must choose justice. In other words, it's the obligation of every moral person to break the law when the law is immoral.

To Thoreau, a truly moral government is "just to all men" and "treat[s] the individual with respect as a neighbor." Such a government would never participate in the Mexican-American war or authorize the owning of slaves. Yet, he points out, the American government willingly promotes such injustices every day. He asserts that "if the alternative is to keep all just men in prison or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose." In other words, the state is deeply aware of its unethical actions, yet it remains set on continuing on its immoral path and viewing anyone who stands in its way as a threat. Thoreau, however, believes that the true threat is the state rather than the American people who challenge it. For example, he makes the case that the government's actions even threaten **God**: "For eighteen hundred years […] the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation." Here, Thoreau appeals to Christian ideas of morality, imploring readers to see the government's actions as an affront not only to justice but also to God, whose code of morality and justice should come before any country's law.

Thoreau argues that because the government's priorities are so unjust, people should not follow the government's laws without questioning whether such laws actually serve a just purpose. In particular, Thoreau criticizes those who work for the government to wage war: "Soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powdermonkeys and all." According to Thoreau, these men participate in war "against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences," simply because they have "undue respect for law." In other words, Thoreau sees wagers of war as "peaceably inclined" men who simply confuse the law with genuine justice. To Thoreau, people who participate in wars like this assume that justice and law mean the same thing when, in reality, they are sometimes mutually exclusive. Observing such people leads Thoreau to ask why it is that citizens allow government to think and act for them, when the government's laws have nothing to do with true justice. Thoreau wants his fellow citizens to reclaim some of their authority from the government and begin to think for themselves. Thus, he entreats his readers to be "men first and subjects afterwards." Because American law is immoral, it is only right that the people use their judgement and decide for themselves what is just.

What's more, Thoreau argues that it is not enough that people simply decide for themselves what is just. They must also "*do* justice, cost what it may," Thoreau wants his audience to read his essay and be moved to put justice first in their actions, even when it means breaking the law. He argues: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right." Thoreau's changing use of the word "right" is tricky to understand at first, but to put it simply, he is saying that respecting the law should not come at the price of ignoring what one knows to be good and ethical. Choosing the ethical course of action should be readers' first priority—if following the law means doing what's wrong, then people must break the law. Thoreau also acknowledges the risks associated with pursuing justice in spite of the law, noting that "the true place for a just man is also prison." Thoreau is still asking his audience to break the law if need be, in the pursuit of justice, but he is also reminding them to be prepared to face the

consequences of this pursuit. While Thoreau's demands may seem harsh, he argues that there is no other solution for a system that "requires [one] to be the agent of injustice to another." To escape this trap of participating in an unfair legal system, Thoreau calls on his audience to accept the high costs of true justice.

Ultimately, Thoreau challenges the idea that the laws of the land are based on justice. He argues that, since laws can directly create injustice, people should not be blindly loyal to the nation's laws, but rather serve their own internal sense of right and wrong. Thoreau asks his readers to do what is just rather than what is legal, no matter the consequences.

STATE SUBMISSION AS A PRETENSE FOR PATRIOTISM

When Henry David Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience" in 1849, the United States was in an era of rabid patriotism. Thoreau understood the importance of this patriotism to his young country: not even a hundred years old, the United States was trying to find a cohesive identity while its territory and diverse population rapidly expanded. However, Thoreau was also very uncomfortable with how his fellow citizens embodied patriotism. To him, patriotism was not an attitude to be celebrated, but rather a posture that diminished his fellow citizens' moral character and made them submissive to ideas and values that were not their own. Patriotism, he argues in this essay, discourages citizens' rational criticism of their country and thus erodes their ability to think deeply about important issues and act in a conscientious manner. Thoreau argues that Americans should continue to be patriotic, but only if they redefine patriotism: to Thoreau, a love of country should require citizens to keep their nation accountable for its crimes and injustices, so he advocates for a patriotism founded on constructive criticism of the United States.

Thoreau argues that American patriotism, as practiced at the time of the essay's writing, forces citizens to abandon critical thinking. According to Thoreau, to become a good patriot according to typical definitions of patriotism, one must cease to be a person: "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, &c." Here he argues that all the people who work in these roles as seemingly good patriots are really cogs in the state machine. They see their blind allegiance to their nation as an act of love and dedication, but their actions in the name of patriotism can actually be harmful to others and to the society itself. Thoreau continues by arguing that would-be patriotic acts—such as serving in the militia or as jailers—"put people on a level with wood and earth and stones." In other words, Thoreau suggests that, by embracing patriotism and abandoning critical thinking, people essentially become akin to natural resources—they're the bricks of nation-building, but their function is not to act for themselves as individuals or even to be human at all. Rather, they are mere objects—pawns in service of the nation's (sometimes unjust) aims. In short, Thoreau argues that traditional patriotism depends on blind loyalty, which leads to dehumanization for the patriots and huge payoffs for the state.

What's more, Thoreau argues that unthinking patriotism is not only dehumanizing, but that it also reveals the state's lack of respect for its citizens. According to Thoreau, patriotic citizens "have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs…Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens." Thoreau suggests that the state markets submission as patriotism, to the point that it bestows the greatest rewards on citizens who are as docile as domesticated animals. This dynamic allows the state to stop seeing its citizens as human beings, which in turn lets it use the American people for its wars and immoral acts. That is, the state cares for the people only in so far as they are of use. Thoreau implies that once these so-called patriots are no longer useful, they will meet an unfortunate end—just as a domesticated animal might. To be a patriot is to command so little respect from the state that one is disposable. As the quote suggests, the state also distinguishes these so-called patriots as "good citizens," so that other citizens will envy them and aspire to be "good" as well. This ensures that the state always has a ready supply of patriots to use. So, Thoreau argues, even as the state mistreats its patriots, it manipulates the American people into aspiring to *be* patriots, by conflating personal goodness with service to the state.

But while blind loyalty to the state is not a virtue, Thoreau suggests that love of country (another aspect of patriotism) can be a virtue—as long as this love leads to constructive critique. Accordingly, Thoreau argues for redefining patriotism: to him, true patriots are not those who readily submit to the state, but rather those who challenge the state and therefore make it better. After all, "statesmen and legislators" (men who fit the traditional criteria for patriots) are "so completely within the institution" that they "never distinctly and nakedly behold it." In other words, people who have dedicated their lives to submitting to the state are the ones least capable of seeing it for what it is and then correcting its flaws. Thus, it is left to those who have not formed their identity around blindly serving the state to become the type of patriots that Thoreau calls for. They are the ones most poised to do the hard work of challenging the state. Thoreau notes that these people already exist: they "serve the state with their consciousness […though] they are commonly treated by it as enemies." Thoreau therefore calls for a celebration of the kinds of patriots who are truly doing the work of improving the country, alongside a condemnation of those who blindly serve the state in the name of false patriotism.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

As the title of "Civil Disobedience" suggests, Henry David Thoreau advocates for disobeying the government when it promotes immoral actions (such as slavery or the Mexican-American war), and he attempts to persuade his fellow Americans to pursue justice through such disobedience. Refusing to pay taxes is one of the main acts of civil disobedience—a citizen's non-violent refusal to obey a government's laws or demands—that Thoreau encourages. He suggests that people should not enrich the nation by paying taxes when the government is using that wealth for deplorable actions; that is, withholding funds will limit the state's ability to do harm. While Thoreau admits that there are other channels for change, such as voting and petitioning the state, he believes that those channels can't fundamentally change how the government operates. He argues that this is because working closely with the state as one tries to rebuild a more just version of that state can never really succeed; people will be too dependent on the state to succeed in dismantling it. Thoreau therefore argues that civil disobedience is the only way to reform America, because it allows citizens to maintain distance from the government while also working to improve that government.

Thoreau believes that participating in civil disobedience to bring about meaningful change is a basic moral requirement for anyone with a conscience. Though he concedes that "it is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong [because] he may still properly have other concerns to engage him," he does assert that "it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support." Put simply, Thoreau is not arguing that people must dedicate their whole lives to eradicating every injustice. However, he *is* saying that one can and should refuse to take part in any action that would *promote* the state's immoral deeds (such as paying taxes, which gives the state funds to wage war). This kind of refusal is crucial for bringing about the widespread change that Thoreau advocates for, because it encourages his readers to think of disobedience as power rather than weakness.

Of course, civil disobedience does involve risk, including fines and jail time. To Thoreau, however, any resistance to the state that does *not* involve risk—in other words, any state-sponsored method of reform—is ineffective. He points to people "petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President" and says that these demands are nonsensical: it cannot be the responsibility of the state to challenge itself, because the state will always preserve itself. Moreover, according to Thoreau, voting or petitioning for morally urgent change actually strengthens the authority of the state, because such action tacitly accepts that the state can dictate the terms reform. This hurts the possibility of real, radical change. Because of this feedback loop, Thoreau argues that people should agitate for change outside of state-run channels by refusing to participate in them, writing: "I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government." In other words, Thoreau argues that the state is only as powerful as the people who follow its orders, and that it thrives on the money that citizens voluntarily hand over. Without the people and their property, the state is deprived of the power and resources it needs to do evil and promote inequality.

Thoreau admits, however, that civil disobedience is difficult not just because of the risk of punishment, but also because it requires one to give up both protection from the state and rights to property. As he explains, "when I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that [...] they cannot spare the protection of the existing government and they dread the consequences of disobedience to it to their property and families." Here, Thoreau admits that the state's involvement in the lives of its citizens makes it especially difficult to disobey the state, because one is in essence walking away from the comforts that the state provides, comforts that include protection of one's property and income. Thus, practicing civil disobedience means accepting a less secure life. Yet Thoreau also argues that there are ways to create one's own security, writing: "You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs." Thoreau suggests that for one to truly be ready to dedicate themselves to meaningful protest against the state, one must forfeit the right to property, so they are never lured by it when practicing civil disobedience. That is, everybody must subsist without the state's assistance, so they are not put in a situation where they have to choose between their morals or their survival.

Thoreau also suggests that, although there are very high costs associated with civil disobedience, it is costlier to obey the state than to disobey. Thoreau notes, "I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State, than it would to obey." This means that the state's evil actions are so numerous and do so much harm that Thoreau believes that losing his property and the state's protection of his life is a better price than continuing to prop up the injustice that is tearing society apart. To Thoreau, the high stakes of the American government's actions mean that the American people have to be willing to give everything up for the cause—especially their property and their security. This seeming sacrifice, he argues, is actually the only way that he and his fellow citizens can live in America as *proud* Americans, without participating in the nation's crimes.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GOD

Thoreau uses **God** as a symbol in two ways. First, he uses God as a symbol of morality and justice—things that he believes the American government lacks. He questions how government supporters can claim that their unjust laws are "the will of God," when those laws go against Christian ideas of morality. Second, Thoreau also uses God as a symbol of an enlightened higher power. It is this higher power that he encourages his audience to serve, rather than the American government. To Thoreau, God's moral teachings—that is, morality itself—must come before any government's laws, especially the American government's unjust ones. He pleads with his audience that it is better "[to] have God on their side," rather than behaving immorally in service to the government. Thus, Thoreau uses God in a symbolic sense as a way of strengthening his call to the American people to abandon their desire to be dutiful citizens, and instead join him in rejecting the American government and its actions by practicing civil disobedience.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Walden and Civil Disobedience* published in 2012.

Civil Disobedience Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker), The American People, The American Government

Related Themes:

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau argues that, in the course of pursuing greatness, the American government has exposed itself as a seedy and weak institution. For Thoreau to later argue that the American People are the key to America's prosperity, he must first establish a connection between the American government and failure. This allows him to state later that, unless the American people step in, the American government will only be a government in name while it continues to be a tool for the few people in society powerful enough to "bend it" to do their bidding.

In exposing the American government as a weak institution, Thoreau appears to be challenging his readers, the American People, to demand more from their government. It is the beginning of his calls for the American people to not only demand a better government, but to create one. Thoreau will continue to build on these appeals—and make them more urgent—as the essay develops.

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.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker), The American People, The American Government

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau wants his audience to take the time to seriously consider what it is they want in a government, which is what he urges them to do here. His wager is that the process of considering where the differences between their expectations and the government's actions lie will inspire them to *act* to obtain a better government—one worthy of their respect.

Moreover, it is important to note that Thoreau refers to himself as a citizen in this passage to align himself *with* the people and *against* the government and to show his unwavering belief in the people's ability to remake their country into a more just one. He is in effect saying that he is part of the people's struggle against the government and believes, as a citizen and not just as a writer, it is a fight worth fighting. This is done to make his readers feel like the fight for a better government is a group struggle and done on behalf of every single person in the nation.

The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, &c. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw, or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker), The American Government

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau criticizes those who work for the state under the guise of being good citizens and patriots. He undermines the logic that one should have to give up their right to "free exercise" and one's ability to make ethical and moral judgments based on the pressures of living up to the State's definition of being a good citizen. Thoreau suggests that this is just a way for the state to control its citizens and their actions and keep them from making their own decisions about what is just. Thus, he urges his audience to see the true price of their submission to the state. He likens the state's definition of a good citizen to a person giving up their status as human beings, to take lower positions as tools, animals, and resources as common as dirt. Consequently, Thoreau hints that the definition of a good citizen must change by reminding his readers that, while serving the state wins one the title, it comes with very little respect.

But Paley appears never to have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may [...] This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau directly criticizes William Paley's essay "Duty of Submission to Civil Government" for not considering the immorality of "submitting" to an unjust government. Thoreau argues that one cannot blindly submit to the government with knowledge of its immoral actions. It is the people's duty to always choose justice over injustice, especially when the government is the cause of the injustice. Therefore, if a consequence of ending slavery and the war with Mexico is breaking the union, Thoreau argues that the people must boldly choose justice over existing as a people under a flawed nation. Justice is non-negotiable in every situation. It is not something that can be put on hold or discussed as an inconvenience. Instead the people must boldly choose it and ensure it is in practice at all times, especially within institutions that claim to represent them—such as the American government.

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing [...] They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau criticizes the population of Massachusetts for failing to do anything effective to combat the war and the institution of slavery, while claiming to oppose both. Again, he suggests that they are invested in being "good" citizens so their hesitation to do something more to bring about change stems from the government's distortion of what it means to be a patriot. Thoreau suggests that one cannot claim to oppose something without taking the necessary action to stop it, or at the very least, to limit its practice—regardless of whether this is looked down on by the government. Moreover, it is especially baffling to Thoreau that these people claim to be descendants of revolutionary figures like Washington and Franklin, without showing any of their initiative or willingness to challenge an unfair and unjust system.

He hints that these men are not prepared to do what it

takes to truly combat the government's unjust practices because of the type of reforms they pursue. Thoreau claims that reforms like petitioning are ways for the public to simply bide their time and wait for others to fix the problem so that they do not have to take any risks in fixing it themselves by challenging or disobeying the government.

> Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority [...] Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280-281

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau argues that voting for the abolition of slavery is not good enough. Again, he emphasizes that direct action must be taken to ensure slavery is abolished. Any action, like voting, that leaves justice and freedom to chance (or in other words, leaves the outcome to what a majority of people want) is ineffective. Although the people might want justice, they could just as well vote against it. Hence the outcome is always up in the air. Since Thoreau believes freedom and justice are non-negotiable, he critiques those who are willing to put their efforts into this extremely flawed way of bringing about change. Consequently, he hints that there must be risks involved with change. One must be willing to do everything it takes to make freedom a reality, even when it is not convenient, practical, or lawful to do so.

> It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker), The American People, The American Government

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281-282

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau concedes to his audience that there is more to life than simply holding the government accountable; nevertheless, he insists that, while one can pursue other things with their time, they must at the very least make sure that their actions are not causing harm in the world. In other words, a balanced life full of other interests and pursuits is not mutually exclusive to fighting for freedom.

This moment also allows Thoreau to subtly argue that the American government has made it impossible for the people to serve it without causing harm. The claim is meant to give him leverage so that he can continue to make his case that the American People must step in and thwart the government's rampant abuse of power. It is also a moment for Thoreau to remind his audience that "wash[ing] [one's] hands of the problem," or doing nothing, is the same as giving the problem one's support. Again, he argues action must always spring from one's belief in justice and freedom. The belief alone is not enough.

> 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 [...] 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.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283-284

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau argues that it is not enough to let injustice continue for the sake of simply *having* a government. He challenges his readers again to think beyond their fear of possibly splintering the country by giving them hope that the splintering would be temporary. The country would splinter at first, but just as it overcame the hardships of remedying the injustice it so faithfully condoned in the past, it would ultimately "wear smooth" in time by remaking itself into a different type of "machine," and government—one that would treat its citizens better and protect their freedoms dutifully. Until this happens, Thoreau urges his readers to take matters into their own hands and resist the

government by breaking the law and living their lives to counter the government's actions until the government responds to their demands and changes its course. Thoreau's later calls for his readers to act will become more pronounced as his writing becomes more defiant.

> I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name, —if ten honest men only, —aye, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau argues that if one person had the courage to take a real stand against the government by refusing to support it, slavery would be abolished. While Thoreau writes to garner support from the American people at large, he is also interested in the individual and an individual's efforts to reform the country. Because he doesn't believe any act is too small for justice, he reminds his audience that the smallest of acts by individuals are as critical to the movement as any wide scale rebellion. As long as they are well executed, these small actions create the ripples of change that are necessary for any movement. Thus, Thoreau subtly makes the case that, even if his words only resonate with a few of the readers, these readers still have the power to bring about the change that they seek—with or without the support of others.

> Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau undermines his audience's fear of prison. He characterizes it instead as a noble place. He urges his readers to be proud of themselves if their stand against the government warrants their imprisonment because it means they have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of justice and that they are willing to risk their own freedom for the greater good.

Their stint in prison is therefore not a sign of their failure to do what is right. Rather it is a sign of the extent of the government's corruption. After all, it shows that the government unfairly imprisons people that hold it accountable. Again, Thoreau urges his audience to think deeply about whether they should continue to support a government that refuses to respect them and threatens them unfairly with punishment instead of addressing their concerns.

> Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects and obtains them for him; and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it. It puts to rest many questions which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while the only new question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend it.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau argues that the wealthier a person is, the harder it is for them to practice civil disobedience because they have much more to lose by refusing to support the state. He characterizes money as an obstacle keeping wealthy men from truly understanding the threat that the government poses to society because it keeps them in a comfortable yet unaware state. These people no longer entertain the same questions about freedom and justice that those with less wealth do because, in a sense, their status and money have made those things invisible concerns. Keeping and spending the wealth becomes the purpose of their lives so that questions of freedom become the concerns of only those with less wealth and thus less to lose. In short, freedom becomes an issue for only certain social classes and not others.

Thoreau hints however that the movement for freedom and justice would suffer as a result of the wealthy population's

absence, and later he suggests that wealthy people should preoccupy themselves with the issues and questions they had before they found wealth.

> As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was halfwitted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it and pitied it.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau realizes in the course of his night in jail that the State has imprisoned him because it is incapable of changing his ideas and remaking him into a model citizen. It is unable to "reach him" in this way, so it resorts to punishing him, revealing the extent of its fragility in the process. The State punishes Thoreau because it fears him and fears the ideas that his behavior might spread in others. This causes Thoreau to further distance himself from the state as he notes that not only is the state "timid" and unable to tolerate and address its dissenters' critiques, it also has no way of distinguishing dissenting acts done out of one's desire to see the country in a better light. Rather than see Thoreau as a good citizen and as a friend, the state prefers to see him as an enemy. This causes Thoreau to not only feel sad for the state, but also to pity it because of the way it is has strayed so far from truth and justice.

> They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau criticizes people who are content to follow the Constitution and the Bible devoutly without looking for other sources of truth. To Thoreau, there is a higher power that is bigger than both the Constitution and the Bible: God. Rather than worship the wisdom of these objects, Thoreau appeals to his audience to commit themselves to growth and open themselves to finding truth where they least expect it—and perhaps encountering God in the process. He likens this journey of truth to a long pilgrimage through nature—no doubt influenced by his interests and time spent in Walden pond—that one must take. His use of pilgrimage shows that, while he doesn't mention God in name, he thinks of the search for pure truth as a deeply natural and religious experience. After all, God's laws are worth more than any government's.

Moreover, according to Thoreau, the search for truth is never ending. It is an ongoing pursuit. While one strives to reach the "fountain-head" of truth, it remains elusive, ensuring that one is always working towards finding an even higher truth.

> 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.

Related Characters: Henry David Thoreau (speaker), The American People, The American Government

Related Themes:

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

Thoreau ends his essay by challenging his readers to make the American government recognize the power of the American people. Like he does at the beginning, Thoreau urges his readers to imagine a better country for themselves so that they can take the first step to making this unrealized version of their country a reality.

A "free and enlightened state" that recognizes that its power stems from the people is Thoreau's definition of a state that the people deserve. With this type of

government, the people would be able to exercise the right to make moral decisions for themselves without the fear of its illegality. They would no longer have to suffer the embarrassment of the government treating them and seeing them as tools. It would give them a deep understanding of their power as people of the United States. With the power back in the people's hands, Thoreau wagers that the country would be a better place for everyone.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Thoreau begins his essay by admitting that he believes that the best governments are the ones that "govern least." He follows up by arguing that, unfortunately, most governments are "inexpedient," and that in many cases a standing government is just as objectionable as a standing army because it is "equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it."

Thoreau begins by reflecting on the role of the government. This reflection is deliberately abstract, not taking any particular government to task yet. Rather, Thoreau simply asks his readers, the American people, to consider why a standing government could and should be thought of as impractical or even dangerous. Thoreau is intent to establish the connection between a standing army and a standing government so that his readers can have it at the back of their minds as he launches into a more specific critique of the American government.

Thoreau argues that the American government has become so corrupted that it is now being used to wage an unjust war (the Mexican-American war), to which the American people did not consent.

Here Thoreau bluntly sets up a rift between the American People and the American Government. He hints that the government shouldn't have been able to declare war—especially an unjust one—without the People's consent. Thus, he fuels the idea among his readers that the American government has done a grave offence against the very people it claims to represent.

Thoreau maintains that the American government has lost much of its integrity, which has made it weak enough "for a single man [to] bend it to his will." He compares the government to a wooden gun, saying that it is so fragile that if the people ever used it in "earnest," it would split. He asserts that the government continues to serve its purpose, though it is ineffectual, because it simply satisfies the American people's *idea* of government.

The image of a wooden gun is meant to illuminate Thoreau's point about the weakness of the government, as well as its fraudulent nature. It is a phony government, because it is only a government in the minds *of the people; its actions, on the other hand, don't represent a true government. As a result, Thoreau hints to his readers that they should begin to question why they are satisfied with a government as fragile and prone to "splitting" as the one they have.*

Thoreau states that the American government, in direct violation of the American people's will, is not only waging an unjust war but has also failed to achieve the things it boasts of, such as keeping the country free and settling the west. Thoreau maintains that it is the "character" inherent in the American people that has accomplished these great feats; in fact, he argues that the people would have accomplished *more* had the government not got in their way.

Thoreau asks his readers to reconcile the government's noble ideas with its terrible actions, in the process widening the divide further between the People and the Government. He then twists the knife by suggesting that the government takes credit for accomplishments that properly belong to the American people. In some sense, Thoreau is stroking the reader's ego, trying to get readers to see themselves as full of a greatness that government doesn't cultivate, but rather represses.

Thoreau also argues that if one were to judge the people in government on their actions, not their intentions, they would be "classed and punished."

Thoreau is interested in actions *more than words and intentions. He believes that one should be judged by what one* does *not what one* intends *to do because actions, rather than words, come with consequences. Therefore, people acting under the government's name who continue to practice slavery and wage an unjust war are committing acts worthy of punishment, despite their "intentions." This further adds to Thoreau's claim that the government is really just a tool for powerful people to use for their own interests with no consideration of the ethics of their choices.*

This leads Thoreau to call for a better and more responsible American government, one in which the majority "do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience [does]." He follows up by calling for a government that does not depend on its citizens to resign their consciousness to the legislator, and for a government that "decide[s] only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable." Thoreau pleads for a government that allows the people to be "men first, and subjects afterwards," so that they always have the freedom to do what is *right* instead of what is simply *lawful*.

Thoreau makes his calls for a better government on behalf of the American people. His concern for his fellow citizens is palpable here. He attempts to illuminate what the abusive government has done to them—how it has made them resign their ability to think for themselves—and why that must stop. This leads him to make one of his most central claims yet in the essay: the government does not have a right to decide on every issue; that right, he suggests, belongs to his fellow citizens. As a result, he urges them to be independent of the government by questioning whether what is right *always means doing what is* lawful.


Developing this distinction between justice and law, Thoreau argues that the law does not make men more just, because in many cases those who respect the law are "agents of injustice."

Thoreau's distinction between justice and law is meant to further stoke rebellion among his readers by getting them to question the basis of some of the laws that they follow. He makes the case that it is possible to be an "agent of injustice" by following the law. In other words, there is nothing inherently ethical about the laws of the land.

To Thoreau, an undue respect for the law instead of for what is right often makes soldiers march into wars and conflicts against their will, and against their "common sense, and consciences." He questions whether these people are men at all because, for them to serve the state, they must give up their agency and their ability to think, until they are reduced to little more than bare resources or domesticated animals that command little to no respect from the state. However, these are the people whom the government often hails as good citizens and "patriots." Meanwhile, the people who dare to rightfully challenge the state are called enemies of the state.

The topic of the government's toxic effects on its citizens comes up again, as Thoreau argues that the government actually dehumanizes those willing to serve it, such as soldiers. He questions if one can serve the state and *be a man, which is his way of suggesting that the state is degrading because it reduces one to a tool or an animal, a thing that is simply useful for labor and not for its intelligence. Thoreau points out the problem of bestowing the title of "patriots" to men like this, suggesting it is absurd that one should be required to give up their freedom of thought and all the respect that comes with being a human being to be a "good citizen."*


This situation leads Thoreau to argue that it is impossible for a person to be associated with the American government "without disgrace." In particular, he refuses to recognize the government as his because it is also the "slave's government."

Thoreau's decision to refuse to recognize the government as his because of its connection to slavery is meant to once again fan the flames of rebellion in his readers. It is also meant as a sign of solidarity, a way for Thoreau to say that he also practices what he preaches and is not proud of the American government's actions, which are in some ways committed in his name (as a white man).

Thoreau then reminds his fellow citizens to recognize their right of revolution. He brings up the American Revolution as an example of the American people exercising their right to revolt. Nevertheless, he admits that, while he could do without the taxed foreign goods that caused the uproar that led to the "Revolution of '75," he cannot continue with a government "machine," in which "oppression and robbery are organized" and slavery continues to be practiced. He emphasizes again that honest men have the "duty" to rebel and revolutionize.

Thoreau brings up the American Revolution as a way of connecting his argument with the larger American narrative of colonists rebelling against gross injustices of power to gain independence. Thoreau's message to his readers is this: just like in 1775, America now faces an unjust threat that is just as serious, if not more serious, than the Revolution of '75. Consequently, Thoreau suggests that stopping the American Government's practice of slavery and War is also a fight for the independence of his fellow citizens to be able to think, act, and decide for themselves what is right. Thoreau urges his readers not to settle for the "machine" they currently have because it is simply a means to promote injustices like slavery with little social benefit to them. He urges his readers to rebel, as a commitment to the ongoing fight for freedom that began with the Revolution of '75.

Thoreau then addresses an argument that William Paley makes in "Duty of Submission to Civil Government." Paley argues that one should not do away with a government if changing it will be an inconvenience to the public. Thoreau disagrees, however, and accuses Paley of being more concerned with the cost of "redressing" a "grievance" instead of the injustice underlying that grievance. This prompts Thoreau to urge his audience to "do justice," regardless of the inconvenience—"cost what it may."

Thoreau once again undermines the argument—this time made by William Paley—that the existence of government is more important than doing justice. Thoreau's message to the reader is that justice must be the first consideration above everything else, whether it's an inconvenience to the public or not. Besides, he suggests that the cost of not doing justice is perpetuating injustice—which he hints would be costlier in the long run because of the misery it would spread.

Thoreau uses Massachusetts residents as an example of a population that is unwilling to *do* justice, "cost what it may." He blames this on their interest in commerce and agriculture. Although he notes that many think of themselves as opponents to slavery and the war, he argues that, in reality, they "do nothing to put an end to them."

Thoreau's engagement with Massachusetts politics shows that he is both interested in the larger politics of the country and with the local minutiae of state politics that defined the pre-civil war era he is writing in. He once against points to the discrepancy between intentions and actions, noting that although some citizens intend *to be opponents to slavery, their* actions *show that their interests in commerce and agriculture come first, limiting their ability to actually mobilize, practice civil disobedience, and do something useful to put an end to slavery.*

Thoreau emphasizes the passiveness of his fellow Massachusetts residents, though they consider themselves to be the children of revolutionary icons like Washington and Franklin. He accuses them of "[postponing] the question of freedom" in favor of "questions of free-trade." He also argues that they "hesitate, regret, and sometimes petition" the actions of the government with little sincerity and impact. Instead of taking real action, the residents wait for others to "remedy the evil [so…] they may no longer have to regret it."

Thoreau suggests that the people of Massachusetts should not consider themselves related to revolutionary icons like Washington and Franklin if they rank issues of commerce over issues of freedom. Once again, he suggests that this is an inacceptable way to be a good citizen in a nation as unjust as America. To him, freedom must always come first. Thoreau also begins to unravel the logic of using government approved measures to seek large scale changes. To Thoreau, these actions are useless in the long run, because they are slow to work, lack sincerity because of the proximity to the government (the very thing these actions seek to change), and are done purely for the residents to feel good about themselves.

Thoreau notes that "at most" these residents give a "cheap vote" as their way of objecting to the war and slavery. To him, however, voting is like betting, because one casts their vote for what is right but leaves it to the majority of voters to determine the outcome. Thus, he argues that voting—even when it is "for the right"—is not only ineffective but is actually akin to doing nothing, because one is only expressing a *desire* for one's ideas to succeed. Thoreau argues that a "wise man" would not leave justice to chance.

One particular government-approved measure for bringing about change is voting. To Thoreau, though, the act of voting is a cheap way for one to claim distant interest in an issue all the while remaining content to leave the outcome of the issue to the masses. Even if the masses share the same sentiment, and the vote works out in the favor of freedom, Thoreau is still bewildered by the people who would leave the outcome to the chance that the majority will be correct. That is, he is unsure how people can claim to stand for freedom by only voting, knowing that there was a chance they would have to live with unjust results. To Thoreau, a "wise man" must take deliberate action to make freedom uncontestable.

Thoreau claims that the masses would only vote for abolition if it is convenient or when there is "little slavery left to be abolished." To truly bring about abolition, Thoreau argues, one must "assert his own freedom" and act against slavery in a context in which it isn't convenient to do so or in which the majority of people are not yet indifferent to slavery.

Thoreau criticizes voting for being a convenient measure for people who do not want to take risks for freedom. To really do justice, Thoreau argues, people must be prepared to take effective action when it isn't convenient or when it is still a divisive issue among people. In short, standing for freedom when it is risky, makes one's actions mean something.

Thoreau then critiques the upcoming Baltimore convention "for the selection of a candidate for presidency" by a group of "editors" and career politicians. He questions the fairness of the selection process and the absence of "independent votes," and asks why a "respectable man [would…] adopt one of the candidates thus selected as the only *available* one."

Thoreau points to the unfairness of the political process for prioritizing the decisions and votes of powerful people in society. This further illuminates his earlier point that the government's actions are the result of a handful of powerful men in society and not the people at large. He suggests that no respectable man—no man who exercises his right to think for himself—would be satisfied with the limited options for president provided by the government.

Thoreau states that voting in such a system is worthless, and that men who cast their votes for candidates provided by this system are spineless. This leads him to wonder about the character of "the American," whom he believes has dwindled into an "Odd Fellow," that lacks "intellect" and "self-reliance."

Thoreau makes one of his most important critiques of Americans, calling them an "Odd Fellow" that is lacking in important traits and skills. Yet it is a constructive critique because he appears to be challenging his readers to prove to him that they are capable of acting with intellect and self-reliance and do something to bring about change within the government.

Though Thoreau concedes that it is impossible for a man to strive towards eradicating every evil in the world, he continues to argue that one must at the very least "wash his hands" of supporting injustice. One is free to live their life pursuing other things, according to Thoreau, but it is one's duty not to "pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders."

Thoreau challenges his audience to make sure their actions do not at the very least promote injustice. This is the bare minimum requirement that Thoreau believes people should use to live their lives. Although he is still advocating for the people to break from the government and its actions, he is arguing that this is not a huge or ambitious request given that one's life should be spent avoiding committing injustice. Thus, if that means disobeying the government, then one must disobey.


Thoreau then exposes the concepts of "order" and "civil government" as ways for the American government to make the American people "pay homage to and support [their] own meanness." He claims that this support for order and civil government has embedded injustice so thoroughly in society that it has caused one to feel indifferent to it. That is, this injustice has become necessary "to that life which [one has] made" as an American.

Thoreau argues that the government manipulates the people into following its rules for the sake of maintaining "order" and the longevity of the government. In other words, it is a way for the government to convince the people that its laws must be followed at all times, which has effectively made it hard for the people to question the ethics of the laws they follow. As a result, the American people unknowingly build a life within an unjust structure. Even worse, the continuity of the lives they build depend on them continuing to follow those unjust laws. Thus, the people are stuck in a bind: to do justice they must risk everything.


Thoreau criticizes those who disapprove of the American government's actions but continue to serve it dutifully. He argues that these alleged reformers are serious obstacles to reform. He also notes that these reformers have recently petitioned the State to dissolve the Union, even though they have the power to dissolve the Union themselves. This leads him to conclude that the act of petitioning the state is ineffectual.

Thoreau is unimpressed by reformists, those who claim to disapprove of slavery and the war but continue to swear allegiance to the government. These reformers are dangerous because they limit the people's capacity to demand deep rooted change. Instead they fall victim to superficial calls for change that come through government-approved measures. Another issue he has with these reformers is their inability to act on their inherent power as the people the government should serve. He argues that petitioning the government to dissolve the union is ineffectual because it is asking the government to do something these reformers, as people of the union, already have the power to do.


Thoreau again asks his audience about the purpose of simply "entertain[ing] an opinion" especially if one is *aggrieved* by having that opinion. He uses the example of a person being cheated out of a "single dollar by [one's] neighbor" to make the case that anyone in that situation would "take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount," and "see that [one] is never cheated again." Thoreau then suggests that action and principle must always go together in this way, whether in money disputes between neighbors or in civil disputes between a country and its citizens.

Thoreau challenges his readers to dare to have more than an opinion; he challenges them to act when they witness injustice, whether it is after they have been cheated out of a dollar or when they face an abusive government. To Thoreau, as people with agency, it is their duty to act whenever they witness a violation against themselves or their fellow citizens. Again, Thoreau is interested in building solidary among his readers so that they can take on the government as one united body of people.

Because unjust laws continue to exist, Thoreau rhetorically asks his audience if they are content obeying them or should "transgress them at once?" He attempts once again to dissuade his audience from thinking of the remedy to injustice as being *worse* than the injustice. He claims that the American government is responsible for making radical change so difficult and making the American people think that change is bad, because it does not support reform or "encourage its citizens" to hold the government itself accountable. Thoreau argues that this is the case because the government sees itself as infallible.

Again, Thoreau makes the case that there is nothing costlier than injustice, not even the clashes that may result from making an unjust system fairer. He makes this case to incite the people act, to convince them that their transgressions against the government are worth it so long as they are for justice. However, he does show that he understands the people's hesitation to remedy injustice, admitting that the government makes it hard for people to hold it accountable. This leads him to comment on the power imbalance within the nation: the government is allowed to act however it wants while it encourages the people to ignore the consequences of those actions.

Thoreau notes that if injustice is the price for having a government, it is not a good enough price. He implores his audience to "let [the government] go" instead, to "break the law" if necessary, and to live one's life as a "counter friction to stop the machine."

Thoreau notes that, if the choice came down to having a government and doing justice, one must under every circumstance choose justice, even if it breaks the law. One's life should be dedicated to standing outside of any system or "machine" that is built on rampant human rights abuse.

Thoreau also notes that he has no interest in following the state-approved ways of bringing about reform; to him, they are time-consuming and ineffective, especially given a human's short life span. He reminds his audience that there really is no way to bring about change through the state because "its very constitution is the evil."

Again, Thoreau includes himself in the debates about the best way to stop the government's abuses of power. He reveals that he would never follow the state-approved ways of bringing about reform because, given the short time span of human life, one should do something that is effective and hastens *change. Besides, he notes that the very foundation of the country, the constitution, is evil, making it hard to trust the whole structure. Here Thoreau again suggests that a full-scale revolution is necessary, not just petty changes (reforms).*

Instead, he argues that those who call themselves abolitionists in Massachusetts should bring about reform by "withdrawing their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts." Thoreau argues that this is the right thing to do because, even if they don't have the government on their side, they will have **God** on their side, and that is more important.

He turns his attention again to Massachusetts to advocate for a different type of reform, one that is riskier and more effective. "Withdrawing [one's] support" for the government by withdrawing one's property (in other words, not paying taxes) is a way of taking action that would minimize the government's financial resources and thus its ability to continue its rampant abuses of power. Just like people must strive to do justice by any means, Thoreau argues that they must also strive to align themselves with God first before anything else. Thus, if the People's actions are in line with God, it does not matter if they go against the government.

Thoreau reminds his readers that the moment he decides to refuse to pay the tax-gatherer, he is giving the tax-gatherer a chance to decide who he is as a person. The tax-gatherer then has the choice to respect his wishes or he can treat Thoreau as an "obstruction."

Thoreau argues that when one refuses to pay taxes, the moment isn't only important for the person who refuses, but for the tax-gatherer as well. In other words, the tax-gatherer can use it as an opportunity to dissent, too, and join the movement or they can continue to be a "good citizen" and see the dissenter's actions as an unfair challenge to the government they serve.

He also makes the claim that if "*one* HONEST man," in Massachusetts stopped holding slaves, and were put in jail, "it would be the abolition of slavery in America." To Thoreau, the smallness of the act matters less than how well it is executed. He maintains, however, that people "love" to only *talk* about the issue of slavery in newspapers and the Council Chamber, instead of *acting*.

Thoreau reminds his audience again of the power they hold even in small numbers. He argues that, if one person were to take a stand, their actions would be enough to stop slavery. In other words, no act is too small as long as it is executed well enough and hastens justice. Anything is better than simply talking or desiring change without the necessary action it takes to make it happen.

He notes that, if an act of civil disobedience ends in jail time, then all the better, because "the true place of a just man is also a prison." Just men belong there because their moral principles have already made them outsiders to the state, just like Native Americans, Mexicans, and the enslaved population. Thus, it is "on that separate, but more free and honorable ground [..] in which a free man can abide with honor." He adds that the imprisoned person will only be equipped to "more eloquently and effectively [...] combat injustice" because of the time spent in jail. Thoreau also reminds the audience that the state would not hesitate to "keep all just men in prison" if that were the price for war and slavery.

Again, Thoreau concerns himself with the risk that civil disobedience brings, arguing that people's pursuit for justice in the form of civil disobedience should not be thwarted by the risk of jail time. He urges his audience to see prison as not just a price but as a reward for being a good person, attempting to minimize the negative connotations of prison. He brings up other unfairly treated groups in America, urging his readers to align themselves with these groups, for the purpose of building solidarity and to get his readers to understand how much of an honor it is to live one's life in a way that promotes freedom for oneself and those around him. To Thoreau, prison is like the school one must go through to prepare oneself to see injustice more clearly so that one can stop it. The state, on the other hand, sees prison as a way of controlling its dissenters, a way to quarter them off, while it continues to abuse its power.

Thoreau states that a peaceable revolution would be possible "if a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year," because it would stop the American government from being able to "commit violence and shed innocent blood." He then goes even further to advise those in power, particularly the tax-gatherers and public officials, to resign their allegiance and their "office" and join the American people in achieving the peaceable revolution he is advocating for. However, Thoreau states that if some blood is shed in the course of revolution, it is no different from the "blood shed when the conscience is wounded," when people willingly serve an immoral government.

Thoreau draws a connection between refusing to pay taxes and minimizing the government's resources. Refusing to pay taxes directly limits the government's ability to kill innocent people, making it more useful than any petition or vote. If everyone were to do this, including those who work for the state as public officials, Thoreau argues, the people would be able to achieve the wide scale revolution they seek without any blood. Nevertheless, Thoreau is not averse to shedding blood should it be necessary, as he also argues that the blood from a "wounded" conscience is no different than the blood from battle. They are one in the same to Thoreau, which suggests that he thinks the People are already being wounded by the government's actions even if they don't see the wounds.

Thoreau notes, however, that those with wealth and much to lose may find it difficult to practice civil disobedience. He claims that more money equates to less virtue, which leads in turn to "superfluous" concerns. Thus Thoreau argues that the best thing for someone to do is "carry out those schemes which he entertained when he was poor."

Thoreau argues that those with wealth are more likely averse to risking their wealth and property to disobey the government, not because they can't, but because their wealth makes life more comfortable so that they think less about issues of freedom and justice. For this reason, he argues that one must look at society as if he were poor to see everything more clearly, especially its contradictions.

Thoreau goes into more detail about why the loss of property and the government's protection of one's life are big enough risks to deter "the freest of [his] neighbors" from practicing civil disobedience. He concedes that if he were in their shoes, he would also find it difficult to "deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax-bill," and force the state to "take and waste all [his] property and […] harass [him] and [his] children without end." For this reason, he implores his readers to live self-sufficient lives and avoid amassing wealth, by living and depending on themselves and not "having many affairs." This is the key to practicing civil disobedience because, given his small wealth, he "can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts," so that it "costs [him] less" to disobey "than it would to obey."

Thoreau, however, does not mean to disparage his wealthy neighbors; he reveals that he would find it difficult to give up his wealth if he were in their shoes, as well—especially when, in addition to the loss of wealth, disobeying the state comes with making life more insecure for one's family. Thoreau's solution to this, however, is that people must live self-sufficiently outside of the protection of the state so that they are freed from this conflict of interest. Having a life outside of the state gives one the agency to protest and resist the state. They become free from the anxiety of worrying about their family and their survival should they go to jail. Civil disobedience is already a risky endeavor, so Thoreau aims to make it easier for his readers to practice by advocating for this responsible way of practicing it. Thoreau's way limits the harm that would fall on one's family and dependents.

Thoreau provides examples of his own acts of civil disobedience. First, he recounts how he refused to pay a tax to the church, though someone else eventually paid on his behalf. Then he shares that he also did not pay a poll tax for six years, for which he was eventually imprisoned. During his time as a prisoner, Thoreau realizes that the American government "resolved to punish [his] body" because "they could not reach [him]." This makes him realize that the state is "half-witted" and "timid," which prompts him to lose all his respect for it and pity it instead.

Again, Thoreau takes a moment to show that he is also involved in the fight for freedom—that is, he practices what he preaches. He uses two examples of himself refusing to pay taxes to the church and the state, the second of which led to his imprisonment, to show that he is not just advocating for his readers to take risks that he isn't prepared to take himself. Thoreau also reflects on the importance the state places on punishing one's body because it doesn't have the capacity to challenge dissenting ideas and critiques. Thoreau believes it hides behind physical power because it lacks intellectual power. Thus, prison time is the state's way of hiding its fragility.

Thoreau goes into greater detail about his night in jail. He discusses his relationship with a fellow prisoner, "a first-rate fellow and a clever man," who has been jailed for allegedly setting a barn on fire. Thoreau examines every aspect of the jail cell and occupies his time by talking to this other prisoner. However, he finds the whole experience disorienting and likens his time in the jail to "travelling into a far country."

During Thoreau's time in prison, his fellow prisoner acts as his guide. Thoreau spends time learning about the man and adjusting to the nuances of life in jail, a life that seems to exist apart from the world and society they live in. Thoreau's world in jail is a world that feels like he and his fellow prisoner are its only inhabitants at times. Thoreau likens it to being in a different country to show the extent of the alienation he feels from the society he has called home all his life. It is as if he no longer belongs to America and, for those reasons, can no longer call its laws, customs, or government his.

When he comes out of jail the next day (after someone pays on his behalf), Thoreau looks at his community and surroundings with new and distrusting eyes. He finds that he now understands how little he can trust his neighbors and friends: "They did not greatly propose to do right [and] that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions." He claims that they are risk-averse, especially when it comes to their property, and are more concerned with following a "particular straight though useless path [...] to save their souls." He realizes that he has become disillusioned by his fellow citizens, even though most of them do not realize the change that has taken place and look at him as if he has just finished running an errand.

Thoreau's feelings of alienation become only more pronounced once he leaves jail. A change has taken place and his post-jail eyes begin to pick up on the antipathy of his neighbors and friends, their general passiveness and incapacity to make society a better and more just place. Not only does Thoreau not feel any form of solidarity with them, he finds it hard to see them as Americans, fellow citizens, or even part of the human race because of their ambivalence about the unjust state of the country. He critiques them for following useless rules to "save their souls" while living comfortably within an immoral structure as if God won't notice. Thoreau notes, however, that while jail was a critical experience for him, the rest of the world continues to operate as it had before he was imprisoned.

Thoreau notes that he does not believe in disobeying *all* of the nation's laws, only the unjust ones. As a result, he declares war against the State because he refuses to continue the violent "effects of [his] allegiance." Moreover, he criticizes those who continue to pay their taxes because of "a sympathy with the State," or "to save [their] property," because they have failed to realize how they "abet injustice" with their actions or wrongfully put "their private feelings" over the "public good."

Thoreau argues that just like there is nothing inherently good about the government's laws, there is nothing inherently bad about them either. He provides room for nuance by arguing that not every law is unethical. Nevertheless, he notes that this does not make his declaration of war against the government any less necessary because the good laws do not hinder the violent effects of the bad ones. Again, he challenges those sympathetic to the state to put justice and the "public good" over their desire to be good citizens and patriots.

Thoreau does, however, concede that the American people "mean well" but are just ignorant of the American government's sins. He claims, "they would do better if they knew how." However, Thoreau argues that ignorance is not a good enough reason to allow others to suffer. He maintains that one must treat their fellow humans how they think they "ought to be" treated instead of maintaining how they are *currently* being treated, while wrongly claiming that this treatment is the "will of **God**."

Thoreau portrays the American people sympathetically, arguing that because the American government makes it hard for them to criticize its actions, they know no better. He shows that he continues to believe in them, however, by insisting that the People would do better if they knew how. His writing about the government's actions, in fact, is meant to expose some of the government's abuses so that the People are better informed. Yet Thoreau continues to argue that, while the people may be ignorant, they should still act in line with God's will. Thoreau brings up God to appeal to his audience's Christian ethics to get them to put it over the laws of the government. Consequently, if God wills the People to disobey the government, they should and must.

Thoreau says that, although he would prefer not to "quarrel with any man or nation [...and] conform to [the State's laws]," he nevertheless must review the American government's actions and positions whenever the tax-gatherer demands he pay taxes each year, in order to see if the State is worth supporting.

Thoreau argues that it is his right and duty to review the government's actions and decide for himself, regardless of any law, if he supports what the government will use his taxes for. Again, Thoreau believes that the People hold the power within the nation to make these critical decisions. Therefore, they must reclaim this right and act on it.

Thoreau argues that while the State, the courts, and even the Constitution may seem "very respectable" from a "lower point of view," he implores his audience to look at the country from a "higher" vantage point to better see the American government's failures. He also wonders what the government must look like from **God**'s vantage point, the "highest" vantage point.

Again, Thoreau criticizes the constitution for being the root of America's problems. Although it may seem respectable to those who are content to look at the country with uncritical and passive eyes, Thoreau argues that, for one to see the government for what it is, it is necessary to look at the document and government institutions from God's perspective. This perspective, according to Thoreau, allows one to leave their desires to be good citizens behind and see the country for what it is without earthly conflicts of interest.

Yet Thoreau then admits that he would rather not waste all of his concerns and thoughts on the government, because he is distrustful of those who dedicate all their studies to understanding it. He notes that those who stand too close to it, like statesmen and legislators, will never "distinctly and nakedly behold [the government]." Thoreau maintains that these people's capacity for bringing about change is limited. Likewise, he critiques defenders of the Constitution as well for failing to note the document's shortcomings, especially where slavery is concerned.

Thoreau here argues that he is not focusing on the government just for the sake of studying it alone, like so many other statesmen and legislators. To Thoreau, to truly understand the government, one must have some distance from it and look at it outside of one's political ambitions and one's role within it. Being too close to the government makes it hard for people to take risks in their calls for change. In other words, they become reformers rather than radicals. According to Thoreau, one cannot be a true abolitionist and defend the constitution; both things are incompatible.

He brings up Daniel Webster as an example of a politician whose words are "wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government." Thoreau critiques Webster for practicing "prudence" in his ideas instead of "wisdom." He argues that Webster's words aren't about *truth* but are rather about "consistency," which has earned him the title of the "Defender of the Constitution." After all, as Thoreau notes, Webster has never done anything "to disturb the arrangement as originally made, by which the various States came into the Union." Thoreau reminds his readers that Webster has even advocated for letting slavery stand as it is because it was part of the "original compact" of the American government's founding.

Daniel Webster is Thoreau's example of a politician who does not advocate for any useful reforms. Webster is cautious in his calls for change: to him, the constitution and the endurance of the government must be protected above everything else. Webster is unwilling to distance himself from the very root of America's problems—its practice of slavery—because of his fears of what this would mean for the country's longevity. As a result, Webster's ideas for the nation are limited by his unbreakable allegiance to the Constitution. He is so preoccupied by threats to the still-new country, that he is willing to look the other way at the country's abuses of power as long as it means America will remain a nation.

Thoreau states that Webster should think of slavery as a separate issue from the Constitution, and not just allow the states in which slavery is practiced to regulate it in whatever way they deem best according to the constitution, "laws of propriety, humanity, justice, and to **God**." He critiques those "who know of no purer sources of truth" and stand stubbornly "by the Bible and the Constitution," and he differentiates these people from those who actively continue to search for truth beyond the laws.

Thoreau undermines Webster's logic, urging him to look at the issue of slavery from a higher vantage point, separate from the constitution, and do what is ethical according to God and not the government. Again, Thoreau's claim is that justice and God's will must trump any government's laws. People must actively look outside the law for the best ways to act. In other words, God's laws on what is right must take precedent over the Constitution and a faulty interpretation of the Bible.


Thoreau wonders why "no man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America," even though there are plenty of "orators, politicians, and eloquent men." He argues that the eloquence of these men lacks truth and heroism, which forces him to conclude that the "wordy wit" of the legislator will not help America to "retain her rank among the nations." He also critiques legislators for not using the New Testament to shed light on the "science of legislation."

Thoreau does not believe well-spoken politicians make good legislators because, while there is an abundance of eloquent men in the nation, American laws currently lack truth and heroism. In other words, the laws fail to adequately make the nation a more just and fair place. This forces Thoreau to conclude that, in the end, eloquent words won't save America. This can only be done by actions that remake America into a more just country. Moreover, Thoreau advocates for using God and the Bible responsibly, particularly the New Testament, for an ethical compass on how legislators should lead.

Thoreau begins his conclusion by reminding his audience that the "authority of [their] government is still an impure one," because a just government must have the "consent of the governed" in order to rule. He argues that any transition to a democracy must mean "a true respect for the individual." He urges his audience to think about how they can take the country a "step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man."

Thoreau begins his conclusion as a call to arms, reminding the American People that they hold the power to change the trajectory of the nation because the government's power is derived from theirs. Although Thoreau promotes solidarity among his readers and urges them to think of themselves as a nation of freedom fighters, he also reminds them that they are acting on behalf of the individual, as well. They must act to promote justice so that the nation, as well as the individual, is worthy of respect.

Thoreau ends by arguing that "a free and enlightened State [must…] recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived." He imagines an idealized State in which the government fulfils this function, while respecting and allowing those who want to stand outside of its authority to do so unbothered. He dreams of this government as the catalyst to a "still more perfect and glorious State, which […] [he has] imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

Thoreau ends by challenging his audience to work towards making their country better than it is by returning power to the individuals that make up the nation. Though most of Thoreau's writing has been critical, he shows at the end that he still has hope for an idealized version of America. This America would be a state that wouldn't make conformity a necessity for someone to live within its borders. Thoreau admits that, while this state would not be perfect, it would be a good and promising beginning of what's to come. This is Thoreau's ultimate hope for the nation in advocating for civil disobedience.

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