

# To obey or disobey

Politics



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Obedience is an age old expectation that rulers, priests, and government officials have required for years from their subjects. Most of the time individuals follow their leaders without question. This is the case because the population from which obedience is required believes that they continue to have a choice. When, for whatever reason this belief is lost, some individuals will begin to exhibit an increasing disobedience to the requirement. This often increases to the point of violence or, the case of a country, war.

While there are all types of disobedience, this paper will discuss civil disobedience and the social pressure often associated with it. A good example of this type of cycle can be found in the historical background of the United States. When the United States was first populated by Europeans it was a colony of Great Britain. Over the course of several decades, the British king imposed a series of taxes on the colonists. Most colonists felt that they were being taxed without any representation.

Over the course of approximately 15 years the protests against the taxes became increasingly violent until the Continental Congress was formed in 1775 (History Central). With Thomas Jefferson serving as the writer, the Declaration of Independence was drafted by the Congress and sent to the King of England. In it, Jefferson wrote, Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security (Ushistory) The Revolutionary War was fought and freedom from British rule was won. Today the population of the United States is expected to pay taxes. The difference is that people believe the choice is theirs because of our representative form of government.

In the mid 1800s, Henry David Thoreau introduced a new concept that has greatly influenced individuals and groups desiring change since then.

Thoreau spent several years living in a simple cabin near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. During this time the United States still allowed slavery.

Thoreau was opposed to this. He refused to pay taxes as a form of protest. His explanation evolved into an essay entitled “ Civil Disobedience”.

Basically Thoreau felt that an individual should not support by any means a government that was engaging in acts of which the individual did not agree.

He felt that the individual should be willing to suffer the consequences of his disobedient act, however he/she should never take a violent stand in defense of his/her belief (Williams). Today “ Civil Disobedience” is considered to be the basis of several modern nonviolent resistance movements. “ It is known to have been an inspiration to Mohandas Gandhi, who led the passive resistance movement for the liberation of India from British colonial rule.

Thoreau’s ideas also influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. sCivil Rightsmovement and the American struggle to end theVietnam War” (Williams). During the fight for equal rights for Black Americans that took place in the 1950s and 60s, Martin Luther King Jr. relied on the principle of civil disobedience written

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a century earlier by Thoreau. While incarcerated in the Birmingham, in a letter known as the “ Letter from the Birmingham Jail”, King wrote, “ Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.

I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends” (King). Others followed Dr. King’s example of non-violent protest. One evening in December, 1955, on her way home from her job in downtown Montgomery Alabama, a woman, Rosa Parks, was asked to give up her seat to a white passenger on the bus she was riding. She refused. She was arrested and fined. This simple action inspired the Montgomery Bus Boycott. By June of 1956, the court declared Alabama's racial segregation laws for public transit unconstitutional.

The city appealed and on November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling. . . The city of Montgomery had no choice but to lift the law requiring segregation on public buses” ( Bio. True Story). Groups of individuals, when convinced that it is no longer acceptable to conform to the expectation of the ruler can make historical changes in the world in which they live. What causes one individual to become disobedient and another to remain obedient to the group rules?

Most people want to believe that they think for themselves; however, when an individual is part of a social group that person will began to assume the group’s ideas and rules. Individuals may then find themselves engaged in a

struggle in which they do not believe because of the social pressure to fit into a group. Additionally they may fear being an outcast. This is especially true if friends or family belong to the same group. Doris Lessing wrote " When we're in a group, we tend to think as that group does: we may even have joined the group to find " like-minded" people. But we also find our thinking changing because we belong to a group.

It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group". (724) Universities over time have done a lot of research trying to understand why people obey and disobey. Most people believe they are good and trustworthy. These individuals feel no matter what occurs they will always try to do the right thing in their day to day life. In *The Perils of Obedience*, Milgram tells of a woman " that the last shock she administered to the learner was extremely painful and reiterates that she did not want to be responsible for any harm to him". 695).

Despite her desires she still administered the shock, thus being obedient to the person in charge and not to what she believed. Individuals who still believe in the concept called into question by the disobedient group, often feel intense pressure to maintain loyalty to the old ruling entity. In Doris Lessing's article, *Group Minds*, she states " But the majority will continue to insist-speaking metaphorically-that black is white, and after a period of exasperation, irritation, even anger, certainly incomprehension, the minority will fall into line".

Pressure to conform can manifest itself in another way as well.. Individuals may feel compelled to follow the ideas and rules of someone else and follow

that group of people no matter what path it may lead them down or where those ideas and rules may take them. Social pressure comes from everywhere; family, church, friends, jobs, co-workers, and etc.. During the height of the segregation movement in many of the minds of the south there are only two sides in this fight; for segregation or against segregation no fence riding.

This concept is also apparent during times of conflict. For examples, during the Revolutionary War many colonists remained loyal to Great Britain. British sympathizers were called Tories. They often "agreed with the patriots about "no taxation without representation." But they wanted to solve the dispute in such a way as to remain in the British Empire" (US Anabaptists). Following what you believe to be right will have consequences. For example, those wanting freedom from England formed a new country and enjoyed many rights and freedoms.

All those remaining loyal to the king were considered traitors. "Most of the new states passed laws taking away the loyalists' property. Patriot mobs attacked prominent Tories. Those found helping the British were imprisoned" (US Anabaptists).. Most people want to believe that they think for themselves; however, when an individual is part of a social group that person will begin to assume the group's ideas and rules. Individuals may then find themselves engaged in a struggle in which they do not believe because of the social pressure to fit into a group.

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Inclusion in a particular group may be based on family culture as in the case of those loyal to the King in the Revolutionary War or those engaged in keeping in tact the segregated nature of the South before 1965. Other groups include religious groups, political groups, and special interest groups. While as a people we may like to believe that we think for ourselves, the facts point in a different direction. It would take a brave person indeed to stand on principles in the face of objections from the group to which he is most closely associated.

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