

# Comments on "civil disobedience"



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At the beginning of "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau expresses agreement with the idea "that government is best which governs least". When carried to its logical conclusion, this concept leads to the realization "that government is best which governs not at all". Thoreau believes government is the mode people have chosen to affect their will and is apt to be exploited before the people can act through it. Whatever the government assumes or promises, Thoreau argues, it does not keep a country free and it does not educate. He claims that all good that has been accomplished in America has been done not by the government, but by the people. He also argues that further accomplishments may have been reached if the government had not interfered. Thoreau states that as a reasonable citizen, he does not ask for no government at all, but an improved government. The first step in improving a government is for the people to identify what kind of government would earn their respect and loyalty. The problem is that not every individual has a say in how the government should perform, and many do not have the respect or even acknowledgement from the government. The majority can rule simply because it is more physically powerful, and the minority has essentially no say in shaping law. To Thoreau, a government based on majority rule is not based on justice. He asks, "Should an individual citizen have to resign his conscience to the legislator?" If this is so, why would a person even have a conscience? Thoreau states that we should be men first and subjects later. It is not desirable to develop a high opinion of the law, so much as for justice and right. For an individual to do what he thinks is right is the only duty which one has the right to assume. Thoreau makes a good argument; a group on its own has no conscience. However, a group of conscientious people is a conscientious group. Thoreau claims that

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when the people have respect for an undeserving government, the only natural result is that the people will be following the law against their wills, against their common sense, and against their conscience. So, Thoreau asks, are these people men at all? He states, "A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be clay". Thoreau states that most men do recognize the right of revolution when a government's tyranny or inefficiency are sufficiently great and unendurable. When most of a country is unjustly overrun, then this is the time for honest individuals to rebel and revolt. Thoreau refers to voting as "a game". He states that a person votes as he thinks is right, but that he is not necessarily bothered by whether or not his belief – his vote – is successful. The people, he believes, seem to be willing to leave this to the majority. Thoreau argues that a real wise man would not take the risk of what is right not prevailing and would also realize that there is not much virtue in the action of the mass. But as far as real men go, Thoreau believes that they are few and rare. He makes this clear in this essay; "How many men are there to a square thousand miles in the country? Hardly one." Thoreau believes that there are few real people, it seems, because we are hypocritical, inconsistent, and weak in our beliefs. He claims that many disapprove of the nature of the government but continue to support it. Such people, he argues, should be resisting the government. An individual cannot genuinely be content when he knows he is consciously being cheated or deceived. Thoreau believes that instead of obeying rules one knows to be unjust, the individual should attempt to alter those laws. He suggests that the power of governmental control is what causes people to perceive resistance as worse than obedience. The government and the mass do not seem to be aware of or appreciate the wise minority who would push

for reform, and those who choose to resist are punished and humiliated. Most people would rather wait until the majority agrees that laws should be revised via traditional process than to resist. Thoreau argues that if a government expects an individual to follow and carry out injustice, then that government is not one that should be followed. He makes a very good claim by saying that when one is under a government which unjustly imprisons people, then prison would be the appropriate place for a true, just individual. Thoreau evidently believes that an individual should not follow laws which he or she believes to be unjust. He states, " Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any society which I have not joined." He declares that a real man would find it less confining to be locked up in a prison cell knowing that he was doing what is right, rather than living " free" in a society while obeying laws he believes to be wrong. Thoreau tries to make it clear at the end of the essay that he does not hate the idea of government, but that it is in dire need of major improvement, and that it should only be followed if it is just and if it has the consent of those who it governs. He states that the state will never be progressive and free until it recognizes the individuals, rather than the mass, and respects them accordingly.