

Rhetorical analysis of civil disobedience

Countries, United States



Individuals of good conscience should actively oppose unjust government policies through nonviolent resistance, such as refusal to pay taxes. If an individual felt that a law was unjust, he/she should then break it. According to Henry David Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience*, the United States government back in the time of slavery, and the era of the Mexican War, was corrupt, weak, and abused its powers. Thoreau had strong feelings toward the abolition of slavery, and he also felt that the Mexican War was an unjust conflict. He believed that individuals should stand up and take action against the group that promotes their own selfish interests at the expense of morality, ethics, and individual rights; otherwise known as the government. Throughout his essay, Thoreau talks about how the government is corrupt, weak, and they abuse their powers, and he feels that power should be in the hands of the people. He feels that the more power the people have, instead of the government, it gives a majority, which is not only fair, or right, but physically the strongest. He shows this when he says, " 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" (Thoreau 323). The people chose the government to render their wants and needs, but instead a few individuals use the standing government as he/she's tool to carry out unjust laws. Thoreau uses the example of the Mexican War, and if the choice were given to the people, they would not have approved of those kinds of measures. According to Thoreau, if even one single man acted on his opinions, he himself could take down the government. Thoreau thinks that

those who think with their heads and not their morals are likely to serve with the devil. His opinion of this is clear when he says, " Others, as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders, serve the State chiefly with their heads; and, as the rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God" (Thoreau 324). He feels that the people that follow the government, and leave their judgments and moral senses behind are compared to the worth of only horses and dogs. Thoreau compares the government to a machine several times throughout his essay, and the friction of the machine is unjust laws and policies. Two of the unjust policies that Thoreau criticizes throughout his essay are the continuation of slavery, and the Mexican War. Thoreau thinks that slavery is an evil institution that must be abolished, and that the Mexican War is an unjust conflict because it was being fought to acquire new territory to establish slavery. He feels that there are people who want to put an end to slavery but who don't put action behind their words. He shows this when he says, " 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 they know not what to do, and do nothing" (Thoreau 326). He feels that it should be common sense to abolish slavery, but yet no one is taking an effective stand to end it. One-sixth of the United States population was slaves, according to Thoreau, and the whole country was being unjustly overrun; therefore, people should begin to rebel and reform. Thoreau makes several strong statements about individuals standing up against the institution of slavery. Even if it something small, it is

better than not doing anything at all. He leads us to believe, "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 county jail therefore, 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" (Thoreau 331). Overall, Thoreau feels that those who think of themselves as abolitionist should effectively take action and resist the immoral and unjust policies of the government. Going along with the government's unjust laws and policies, Thoreau argues that if a law is unjust, it should be broken. An individual that says that he/she are against an unjust government policy does nothing to eliminate that policy, but backing up he/she's words with action will give results. One of the main ways to resist the government's unjust policies that Thoreau gives multiple times throughout his essay is to stop paying taxes. Thoreau claims that those who are against certain unjust policies and laws should stop paying taxes because if every person stopped paying taxes, they would then be imprisoned, and the government would have to reconsider their policies and laws. He leads us to believe, "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. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood" (Thoreau 332). Thoreau also argues that those who are against the government's unjust policies basically contradict themselves by paying taxes. This is because the tax money helps the government pay for the unjust and cruel

policy or law, such as slavery. Thoreau even states that people that pay their taxes are the government's biggest supporters. He feels that it is better to follow your morals and your conscience, and suffer bigger consequences than it is to obey the unjust laws and policies. He shows this when he says, "I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my property and life. It cost me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State, than it would be to obey" (Thoreau 334).

Primarily, Thoreau feels that taxes are one of the most efficient steps that a person can take towards taking action, standing up for ones beliefs, and putting an end to the unjust laws and policies of the government. Thoreau's system of ideology shows us a different view point on politics that we as Americans do not normally see. One way that he shows us this concept is by explaining how the government is corrupt, weak, and abuses its power.

Thoreau goes on to explain his position about the abolition of slavery, and what it stands for. He shows us this different view point lastly by explaining how people should resist the laws that are unjust by not paying their taxes. Henry David Thoreau's ideas had a strong impact on the people around him, whether it was a good or bad outcome Thoreau showed us how to speak our minds and make our opinions matter. His main point in writing Civil Disobedience is to show people that they alone are responsible for themselves politically, and he wants people to stand up for their beliefs so that way our government can no longer be cruel and controlling.