

# Civil disobedience by henry david

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In his essay, *Civil Disobedience*, Henry David Thoreau introduced his audience to his personal thoughts regarding the injustice of the American government. Moreover, he sought to encourage individual action to boycott any law or institution instilled by the government that was in any way conflicting with a person's beliefs. A true revolutionary at heart, Thoreau put his words into action by refusing to pay his poll tax for 6 years and was forced to spend the night in jail because of it. Rather than seeking reform by cooperating with the corrupt institutions of his time, he refused to become a part of them and condemned their existence. "That government is best which governs least" is the quote Thoreau incorporated to his opening sentence. In a nutshell, he was attempting to convey that considering the fact the government exists to serve the people, it should not do much to interfere with the quotidian life of those under its spectrum of power. He sees the American government as an evil that only watches out for the interests of the majority and blatantly ignores those who are not part of that general consensus. He believes that a government in "which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice" (*Civil Disobedience*, Page 24) and that is essentially what a democracy represents in his eyes. Contrary to popular belief, he states that all of the achievements that had been accredited to the government were only made possible out of the character of the American people because they embraced the change and put it into action. Slavery was another social injustice that he thought was only in place because of the oppressive nature of the American government. Another one of his purposes throughout the course of his essay is to inspire others to stand up for their values and morals regardless of general opinions. He

compared the American government to a machine that when gone astray can only be stopped by the “ counter-friction” provided by a person’s dissent. Furthermore, he justified the complete disregard for norms instilled by the government by arguing that he thinks “ we should be men first and subjects afterwards” (Civil Disobedience, Page 26). He states that a democracy, although theoretically supposed to encourage reform, suppresses attempts that don’t match up to its ideals therefore making it hypocritical and untrustworthy. He backed up his statements by providing his own personal experience of getting arrested for refusing to pay poll tax. In this way he hopes to convince readers to act out against policies that they disagree with enacted by the government. Lastly, he wishes that a government arises that will not be plagued by the impurity of the one he currently a subject of. He believes that the only way a government can justly rule its subjects is “...until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived...” (Civil Disobedience, Page 348). Although Thoreau admits that democracy is a step forward from other forms of oppressive governments, it is not the final step. He believes that a “ perfect and glorious State” would cherish individuality and never impose ideas on the subjects it governs. Although not plainly stated in the essay, equality is one of the many things that it is unknowingly striving for. Overall, Civil Disobedience is a critique of the wrongful practices of the US government that seeks support in achieving change by refusing to participate in its corrupt practices. Thoreau emphasizes the idea of a government that doesn’t taint the ideas and

opinions of the individuals and forces them to conform to values that are not theirs.