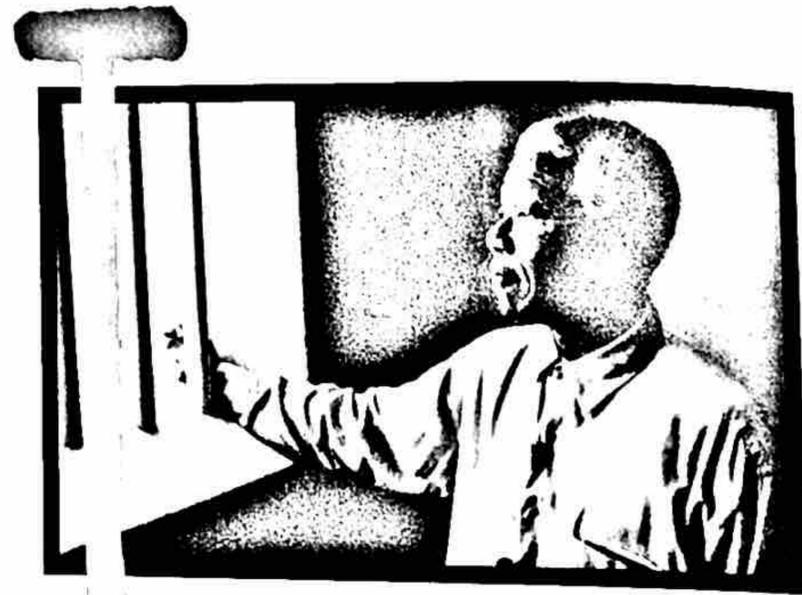


from

Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau



heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least;" and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure. . . .

Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 27 years by the South African government for his antiapartheid activities, recalls his confinement in this 1994 photo.

GUIDE FOR READING

8 expedient (ĭk-spĕ'dĕ-ant): a means to an end.

1-9 How would you restate Thoreau's attitude toward government?

16-17 the present Mexican war: the 1846-1848 war between the United States and Mexico.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

inexpedient (ĭn'ĭk-spĕ'dĕ-ant) adj. not useful for achieving a goal

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.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a

29-37 What position does Thoreau take on the conflict between majority rule and individual conscience?



In Tiananmen Square in 1989, Chinese demonstrators support prodemocracy students on a hunger strike



A young man strapped to logs protests the cutting of California redwoods in 1990

conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. 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. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy-Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts—a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniments, though it may be,—

“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.”

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*, etc. 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. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without *intending* it, as God. A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great

42 corporation: group.

43 a whit: the least bit.

43-45 What can be the consequences of having too much respect for the law?

47 powder-monkeys: boys with the job of carrying gunpowder to artillery crews.

51 palpitation (pāl'pī-tā'shan): irregular, rapid beating.

54 magazines: places where ammunition is stored.

57 black arts: witchcraft.

61-64 “Not a drum . . . we buried” the opening lines of “The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna” by the Irish poet Charles Wolfe.

65-82 Which way of serving the state does Thoreau approve of? Which ways does he condemn?

67 *posse comitatus* (pōs'ē kōm'i-tōt'əs) Latin: power of the county—a term used to refer to the group of people that can be called on by a sheriff to help enforce the law.

WORDS
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conscientious (kōn'shē-ēn'shas) *adj.* guided by conscience, honest
unscrupulous (ūn-skrōō'pye-ləs) *adj.* without principles, dishonorable

sense, and *men*—serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. . . .

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate

Let your life be

a counter-friction

to stop the machine.

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 the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but 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. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. . . .

I meet this American government, or its representative, the state government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensable mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with,—

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endeavor (ēn-dēv'ər) *v.* to make an earnest effort, strive

Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels? . . .

96-97 Copernicus (kō-pūr'nā-kəs) and Luther: Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), a Polish astronomer who theorized that the sun rather than the earth is the center of our planetary system, and Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German theologian who was a leader in the Protestant Reformation. Both men were excommunicated (barred from participation in religious rites) by the Roman Catholic Church.

100-106 In this metaphor Thoreau compares injustice within government to friction in the workings of a machine—both are often unavoidable byproducts of the workings of a complex system.

114-122 What does Thoreau consider the most effective way of expressing his displeasure with the government?

119 posture of affairs: situation.

for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I
 125 quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the
 government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does
 as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged
 to consider whether he shall treat me, his neighbor, for whom
 he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a
 130 maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over
 this obstruction to his neighborliness without a ruder and more
 impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I
 know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men
 whom I could name,—if ten *honest* men only,—ay, if *one*
 135 *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
 forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our
 140 mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service,
 but not one man. . . .

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true
 place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place
 145 today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her
 freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out
 and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have
 already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that
 the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the
 Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them;
 150 on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where
 the State places those who are not *with* her, but *against* her,—
 the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide
 with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost
 there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that
 155 they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not
 know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much
 more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who
 has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole
 vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A
 160 minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is
 not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by
 its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in
 prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate
 165 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. This is, in fact, the definition



132-139 Note that Thoreau advocates refusing to go along with the "copartnership of the individual and government if the government acts against an individual's conscience." Although abolitionists in Thoreau's time did not act on his suggestion, civil rights leaders more than one hundred years later, in the 1960s staged protests and went to jail to oppose unjust segregation laws and practices.



A 1981 march for nuclear disarmament in London's West End. Rosa Parks, whose arrest for refusing to move to the back of a segregated bus touched off the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955. In the early 1900s, suffragists demonstrate for women's voting rights outside Buckingham Palace in London.

of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-
 gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done,
 170 "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do
 anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused
 allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the
 revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow.
 Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is
 175 wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and
 immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I
 see this blood flowing now. . . .

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail
 180 once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood
 considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the
 door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating
 which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the
 foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were
 mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered
 185 that it should have concluded at length that this was the best
 use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of
 my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of
 stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more
 difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to
 190 be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and

178-205 Why do you think Thoreau includes this personal anecdote about his one night in jail?

178 poll-tax: a tax that one had to pay in order to vote.

WORDS
 TO
 KNOW **conclude** (kən-klōōd') v. to arrive at a judgment or decision

the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I
 alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did
 not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are
 underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a
 195 blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the
 other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how
 industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which
 followed them out again without let or hindrance, and *they*
 were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me,
 200 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 half-witted, 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
 205 remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense,
 intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not
 armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical
 strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my
 210 own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a
multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than
 I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of
men being *forced* to live this way or that by masses of men.
 What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government
 215 which says to me, "Your money or your life," why should I be
 in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and
 not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do
 as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not
 responsible for the successful working of the machinery of
 220 society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when
 an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not
 remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their
 own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can,
 till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a
 225 plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

194 underbred: ill-mannered

198 without let or hindrance
 (hīn'drəns): without encountering
 obstacles.

201 spite: grudge.

220-225 What message does
 Thoreau convey through this
 example of the acorn and the
 chestnut?

If a plant cannot live according to its nature; it dies;
 and so a man.

WORDS TO KNOW
blunder (blūn'dər) n. a mistake
meditation (mēd'ī-tā'shən) n. a thought or reflection
confront (kən-frūnt') v. to come up against; meet face to face
multitude (mūl'tī-tōōd') n. a great number of people
flourish (flūr'īsh) v. to thrive