

Summary- Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* espouses the need to prioritize one's conscience over the dictates of laws. It criticizes American social institutions and policies, most prominently slavery and the Mexican-American War.

Thoreau begins his essay by arguing that government rarely proves itself useful and that it derives its power from the majority because they are the strongest group, not because they hold the most legitimate viewpoint. He contends that people's first obligation is to do what they believe is right and not to follow the law dictated by the majority. When a government is unjust, people should refuse to follow the law and distance themselves from the government in general. A person is not obligated to devote his life to eliminating evils from the world, but he is obligated not to participate in such evils. This includes not being a member of an unjust institution (like the government). Thoreau further argues that the United States fits his criteria for an unjust government, given its support of slavery and its practice of aggressive war.

Thoreau doubts the effectiveness of reform within the government, and he argues that voting and petitioning for change achieves little. He presents his own experiences as a model for how to relate to an unjust government: In protest of slavery, Thoreau refused to pay taxes and spent a night in jail. But, more generally, he ideologically dissociated himself from the government, "washing his hands" of it and refusing to participate in his institutions. According to Thoreau, this form of protest was preferable to advocating for reform from within government; he asserts that one cannot see government for what it is when one is working within it.

Civil Disobedience covers several topics, and Thoreau intersperses poetry and social commentary throughout. For purposes of clarity and readability, the essay has been divided into three sections here, though Thoreau himself made no such divisions.

Section One SUMMARY

Thoreau begins *Civil Disobedience* by saying that he agrees with the motto, "That government is best which governs least." Indeed, he says, men will someday be able to have a government that does not govern at all. As it

is, government rarely proves useful or efficient. It is often "abused and perverted" so that it no longer represents the will of the people. The Mexican-American War illustrates this phenomenon.

The American government is necessary because "the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have." However, the only times when government has been useful has been when it has stood aside. Thoreau says that government does not, in fact, achieve that with which we credit it: it does not keep the country free, settle the West, or educate. Rather, these achievements come from the character of the American people, and they would have been even more successful in these endeavors had government been even less involved. Thoreau also complains about restrictions on trade and commerce. However, Thoreau then says that speaking "practically and as a citizen," he is not asking for the immediate elimination of government. Rather, for the moment, he is asking for a *better* government.

Thoreau argues that by answering to the majority, democracies answer the desires of the strongest group, not the most virtuous or thoughtful. A government founded on this principle cannot be based on justice. Why can't there be a government where right and wrong are not decided by the majority but by conscience? Thoreau writes, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think we should be men first, and subjects afterward." He asserts that it is more important to develop a respect for the right, rather than a respect for law, for people's obligations are to do what is right.

Too much respect for law leads people to do many unjust things, as war illustrates: Soldiers become only a shadow of their humanity; the government shapes them into machines. Soldiers have no opportunity to exercise moral sense, reduced to the existence comparable to that of a horse or dog. Yet these men are often called good citizens. Similarly, most legislators and politicians do not put moral sense first, and those few who do are persecuted as enemies.

The question then becomes how to behave toward the American government. Thoreau's answer is to avoid associating with it altogether. He declares, "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also." Thoreau says that while everyone recognizes the right to revolution when faced with an intolerably tyrannical or inefficient government, most people say that such a revolution would not be warranted under current conditions. However, Thoreau argues that we have not only the right, but indeed the duty, to rebel. The enslavement of one sixth of the population and the invasion of Mexico represent tremendous injustices that we must not allow to continue.

Thoreau criticizes the attitude that civil obligation should be maintained for the sake of expediency and that government should be obeyed simply to preserve the services we enjoy. Expediency does not take precedence

over justice; people must do what justice requires regardless of cost--indeed, even if the cost is one's own life. Thus, Thoreau writes, "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself." The people of the United States must stop slavery and the war with Mexico, even if it costs them their existence as a people.