

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Henry David Thoreau

BACKGROUND The Mexican War was a conflict between Mexico and the United States that took place from 1846 to 1848. The war was caused by a dispute over the boundary between Texas and Mexico, as well as by Mexico's refusal to discuss selling California and New Mexico to the United States. Believing that President Polk had intentionally provoked the conflict before gaining congressional approval, Thoreau and many other Americans strongly objected to the war. In protest, Thoreau refused to pay his taxes and was forced to spend a night in jail. After that experience, Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience," urging people to resist governmental policies with which they disagree.

Vocabulary

expedient
(ek spē dē ent)
n. resource

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least";¹ 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.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever

1. "That . . . least" the motto of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a literary-political journal.

they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber,² would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

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. . . .

2. India rubber a form of crude rubber.

Vocabulary

alacrity (ə lak' re tē) *n.*
speed

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** What kind of government commands your respect? Why?
2. (a) How does Thoreau define the best possible kind of government?
(b) **Draw Conclusions:** According to Thoreau, when will Americans get the best possible kind of government?
3. (a) **Summarize:** What is Thoreau asking his readers to do?
(b) **Evaluate:** Does Thoreau present a convincing argument for acting on one's principles?
4. (a) **Criticize:** What arguments might you use to counter Thoreau's objections to the idea of a standing government?
(b) **Support:** What examples might support an argument that government benefits individuals?



How does literature shape or reflect society?

Do you find it surprising that the goals Thoreau tried to achieve have influenced generations of people around the world? Explain. In your response, use at least two of these Essential Question words: *self-reliance, vision, freedom, principle.*