

# from **Resistance to Civil Government**

Henry David Thoreau

## BACKGROUND

In July 1846, Thoreau was arrested because he refused to pay a tax to the state. He refused to pay the tax because he was against the United States' war with Mexico. He believed the war was an excuse to expand the region of America where slavery was allowed.

Thoreau wrote "Resistance to Civil Government" as a response to the night he spent in jail for tax evasion.

## IDENTIFY

Underline the phrase in the second sentence that contains a bold **paradox**. Why is this statement a paradox?

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## VOCABULARY

**expedient** (ek · spē'dē · ənt)  
*n.*: means to an end; something that is convenient.

I heartily accept the motto—  
"That government is best which governs least";<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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,



Henry David Thoreau (1856).  
Photograph by Benjamin D. Maxham.  
National Portrait Gallery/Smithsonian  
Institution/Art Resource, NY.

1. **That . . . least:** This statement, attributed to Thomas Jefferson, was the motto of the New York *Democratic Review*, which had published two of Thoreau's essays.

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  
 20 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.<sup>2</sup>

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  
 30 themselves; and, if ever 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  
 40 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<sup>3</sup> 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, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually

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- this measure:** On May 9, 1846, President James K. Polk received word that Mexico had attacked U.S. troops. He then asked Congress to declare war, which it did on May 13. Some Americans, including Thoreau, thought the war was unjustified. Because Thoreau would not pay taxes to support the war, he went to jail.
  - fain** *adv.*: archaic for “gladly; willingly.”

### INTERPRET

Thoreau uses a **logical appeal** to describe how government can be used in an inappropriate way (lines 18–24). Locate and underline the example he gives.

### IDENTIFY

What does Thoreau compare government to (lines 29–31)?

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### VOCABULARY

- perverted** (pə·vɜrt'ɪd) *v.*: misdirected; corrupted.  
**posterity** (päs·ter'ə·tē) *n.*: future generations.  
**alacrity** (ə·lak'rə·tē) *n.*: eagerness; quickness in responding.  
**inherent** (in·hir'ənt) *adj.*: inborn; built-in.

### IDENTIFY

Locate and underline the three things in lines 38–39 that Thoreau says the government does *not* do.

### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 52–54. Locate and underline what Thoreau wants.

### IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

According to Thoreau, when power is in the hands of the people, why does the majority rule (lines 57–61)?

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### INTERPRET

Underline Thoreau's idea about being a man versus being a subject (lines 69–70). What does he mean by this statement?

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### CLARIFY

Does Thoreau believe it's a person's duty to fight against wrongs? Underline the statements in lines 73–77 that support your answer.

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50 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.

60 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 conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects after-  
70 ward. 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 not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the **eradication** of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's  
80 shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, "I should like to have them

order me out to help put down an **insurrection** of the slaves, or to march to Mexico—see if I would go”; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at nought; as if the State were **penitent** to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of order and civil government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin, comes its indifference and from immoral it becomes, as it were, *unmoral*, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made. . . .

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, the most **effectual**, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensablest 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—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I 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 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—aye, if *one*

### VOCABULARY

**eradication** (ē·rad'ī·kā'ʃhən)  
*n.*: utter destruction;  
 obliteration.

**insurrection** (in'sə·rek'ʃhən)  
*n.*: rebellion; revolt.

**penitent** (pen'i·tənt) *adj.*:  
 sorry for doing wrong.

**effectual** (e·fek'chōō·əl)  
*adj.*: productive; efficient.

**impetuous** (im·pech'ōō·əs)  
*adj.*: impulsive.

### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 86–92.

According to Thoreau, how do men who refuse to fight for causes they do not support end up supporting those very causes?

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### IDENTIFY

Who is the representative of the government that Thoreau meets once and only once a year (lines 98–101)?

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### ANALYZE

Why does Thoreau think that it is foolish for him to be put in jail (lines 123–131)?

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### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 140–146. Thoreau says that locking up his body does nothing to lock up his mind. To what does he compare his jailers? Locate and underline the comparison.

### IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

What three reasons does Thoreau give for his loss of respect for the government (lines 146–149)?

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HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be  
120 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. . . .

I have paid no poll tax<sup>4</sup> for six years. I was put into a jail 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 that it should have con-  
130 cluded 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 be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and 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 blunder; for they thought that my  
140 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, 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 remaining respect for it, and pitied it. . . .

4. **poll tax:** fee some states and localities required from each citizen as a qualification for voting. It is now considered unconstitutional in the United States to charge such a tax.



### IDENTIFY

To what does Thoreau compare his night in jail? Circle the comparison in lines 188–189.

### INTERPRET

How does Thoreau's night in jail affect him (lines 192–202)?

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### WORD STUDY

What does the idiom *green enough* (lines 206–207) mean?

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### CLARIFY

Why is Thoreau released from prison the next day (lines 213–216)?

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I pumped my fellow prisoner as dry as I could, for fear I should never see him again; but at length he showed me which was my bed, and left me to blow out the lamp.

190 It was like traveling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the village; for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the middle ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old burghers that I heard in the streets. I was an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the adjacent village inn—a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen  
200 its institutions before. This is one of its peculiar institutions; for it is a shire town.<sup>5</sup> I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.

In the morning, our breakfasts were put through the hole in the door, in small oblong square tin pans, made to fit, and holding a pint of chocolate, with brown bread, and an iron spoon. When they called for the vessels again, I was green enough to return what bread I had left; but my comrade seized it, and said that I should lay that up for lunch or dinner. Soon after, he was let out to work at haying in a neighboring field,  
210 whither he went every day, and would not be back till noon; so he bade me good day, saying that he doubted if he should see me again.

When I came out of prison—for someone interfered, and paid the tax—I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth, and emerged a tottering and gray-headed man; and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene—the town, and State, and

5. **shire town:** town where a court sits, like a county seat.

country—greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet  
 more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent  
 220 the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neigh-  
 bors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather  
 only; that they did not greatly purpose to do right; that they  
 were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and supersti-  
 tions, as the Chinamen and Malays are; that, in their sacrifices to  
 humanity, they ran no risks, not even to their property; that,  
 after all, they were not so noble but they treated the thief as he  
 had treated them, and hoped, by a certain outward observance  
 and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular straight though  
 useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be  
 230 to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that most of them  
 are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in  
 their village.

It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor  
 debtor came out of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, look-  
 ing through their fingers, which were crossed to represent the  
 grating of a jail window, “How do ye do?” My neighbors did not  
 thus salute me, but first looked at me, and then at one another, as  
 if I had returned from a long journey. I was put into jail as I was  
 going to the shoemaker’s to get a shoe which was mended. When  
 240 I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand,  
 and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party,  
 who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in  
 half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled<sup>6</sup>—was in the midst  
 of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off;  
 and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

This is the whole history of “My Prisons.” . . .

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to  
 submit to—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can  
 do better than I, and in many things even those who neither  
 250 know nor can do so well—is still an impure one: To be strictly

### IDENTIFY

Thoreau has a harsh opinion of his “neighbors,” his fellow citizens. Re-read lines 219–232, and underline his description of them.

### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 238–245. What is the first thing Thoreau does when he gets out of jail?

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### INTERPRET

What does Thoreau mean when he says “the State was nowhere to be seen” (line 245)?

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6. **tackled** v.: harnessed.

