

First Place – Senior Division

The Noble Doubter: Henry David Thoreau and the Gestation of “Civil Disobedience”

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Social conflict presents individuals with moral and ethical questions: What shall I do? What is right? People constantly ask themselves these questions when they are faced with a conflict that forces them to take a stand about what they believe. These questions were very familiar to Henry David Thoreau. For many people, the phrase “civil disobedience”, immediately conjures the genius of Thoreau, one of the great intellects of the Transcendentalist movement of Nineteenth Century American literature.

Those two words are the title of what may be Thoreau’s best-known essay, published in 1849, which established Thoreau’s principles and his views against the American Government after the United States’ involvement in the Mexican War, between 1846 and 1848. That war, America’s first controversial war, was fought entirely outside the borders of the U.S.

The war with Mexico bitterly divided American public opinion, because the United States’ territorial ambitions, realized at Mexico’s expense in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on 2 February 1848, had significant implications for the expansion of slavery into the new territories. Thoreau not only opposed the government’s involvement in the war, but radically acted on his dislike for it by refusing to pay taxes. His protest made him a great influence for those who face social conflicts or the struggle of staying true to individual values. Thoreau had a noble doubt and took a stand.

Henry David Thoreau was born 12 July 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, where he spent

most of his life.¹ Thoreau was an American author, philosopher, and naturalist who was part of the Transcendentalist movement. He never married, nor did he have any children; he lived alone throughout his adulthood. Thoreau was a very different character, which sometimes led people to believe he was crazy. In the *New England Quarterly* for June 1839, Hubert H. Hoeltje wrote that “[Thoreau] might almost have well have been a citizen of Timbuctoo come with compass and chains to run a line occasionally in the fields of Concord and then to disappear into an uncared for oblivion.”²

Not everyone viewed Thoreau in that way. Thoreau, according to Richard J. Schneider, believed in “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand ... Simplify, simplify.”³ He tried to keep his life simple in every way possible, which ultimately affected the way he felt about government.

Henry David Thoreau was not only an author, philosopher, and naturalist, but an avid abolitionist. Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia Dunbar, and sister, Helen, were among the founding members in 1837 of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. They often included Thoreau in their anti-slavery efforts, and the family was also involved in the Underground Railroad hiding fugitive slaves in their home. Thoreau personally assisted runaways by purchasing railway tickets for them, driving them to the train station, often riding with them to the next station, nursing them back to health if they were unable to travel, and also financially assisting their flight to Canada. A Concord resident, Ann Bigelow, recalled years later while discussing the town’s participation in the Underground Railroad that “Henry Thoreau went as escort probably more often than any other man.”⁴ Thoreau’s passionate commitment in opposition to slavery is well documented throughout his published works, from his 1844 essay praising the antislavery weekly, the *Herald of Freedom*, to his increasingly enraged Journal commentary in the 1850s.

These beliefs motivated Thoreau to unite with other radical voices in Framingham, Massachusetts in the summer of 1854, for the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society – the largest gathering of abolitionists anywhere in the country.⁵ There he gave his famous speech, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” which attacked the support of slavery in his home state. Thoreau’s fight against slavery is just one example of how Thoreau took a stand and fought through peaceful means for something in which he believed.

The mindset behind Thoreau’s abolitionist sympathies forms the foundation for Thoreau’s protest against the United States’ provocation, in 1846, of what Thoreau viewed as an unjust war with Mexico. One commentator has asserted that the Mexican War, which was fought from 1846-1848, was fundamentally a dispute over the annexation of Texas.⁶ However, the origins of hostility extend as far back as 1836, when the United States supported the Texas patriots’ revolution against the Mexican regime. James K. Polk, President of the United States from 1845 to 1849, wanted to annex the Republic of Texas and expand slavery into it, a deeply controversial plan in a nation which was rapidly polarizing over the issue of extension of the “peculiar institution.” Some contemporary commentators, like Thoreau, believed the Mexican War was an expansionist power play dictated by aggressive Southern slave owners, intent on acquiring more slave states. Thoreau believed that the war was the work of only a few individuals who used the government as their tool. As Frances Leonard wrote, Thoreau felt that “[b]ecause peace-loving citizens respected the law, they gave support to a governmental decision that was turning men into ‘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 will, ay, against their common sense and consciences ... ’”⁷ Thoreau believed that since the government was supporting a war over the expansion of slavery into territories, which he did not

agree with, he should not have to support the government, and he did so by refusing to pay his poll tax . Thoreau strongly believed that “I cannot for an instant recognize ... as my government [that] which is the slave's government also.”⁸

Henry David Thoreau was arrested and imprisoned on 23 July 1846 by Sam Staples, the Concord constable, tax collector, and jailer, for refusing to pay the poll tax; for his act of civil disobedience, Thoreau spent a night in jail. Thoreau had moved, on 4 July 1845, into a one-room cabin he had built on land his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, owned on the shores of Walden Pond. “I went to the woods,” Thoreau wrote, “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”⁹ He lived at Walden for a little over two years, and left only two times: once a trip north into the Maine forest, and the other his one-night stay in the Concord jail. Thoreau was on an errand in town when he encountered Staples. Staples took the opportunity to ask Thoreau to pay his back taxes, but the independent-minded, highly principled naturalist refused, so Staples escorted him to jail. Thoreau was well prepared to spend a lot more time in jail for his principles, but he was chagrined to find out that one of his aunts had paid his tax bill, the was accumulation of six years of taxes he refused to pay, for him.

Thoreau asserted, in *Civil Disobedience*, that “If the government requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law ... What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”¹⁰ Walter Harding, writing in *American Heritage* magazine in 1975, made the point that Thoreau’s arrest and imprisonment were unnecessary and illegal because the Constitution of Massachusetts, adopted in 1780, stated that someone who lived beyond civilized government did not have to pay the poll tax.¹¹ In Harding’s analysis, because Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, away from civilization, he was exempt from

paying the poll tax, and therefore should not have been arrested. Illegal or not, unjust or not, Thoreau's arrest did not bother him, because it gave him an opportunity to protest.

Thoreau's experience of being cast into jail led him to write the powerful lecture, "Resistance to Civil Government," on the relation of the individual to the State, which became the foundation for "Civil Disobedience." In the first paragraph, Thoreau "heartily accept[ed]" the motto, "that government is best which governs not at all," and claimed that "when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have."¹² He also addressed his opposition to the Mexican War.

Another important theme in "Civil Disobedience" is Thoreau's assertion of how the existing government fell short of his ideal. He wrote, "when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize."¹³ By explaining his resistance to the government in the first part of the essay, Thoreau drew a distinction between separating himself from a state he does not recognize, (which in fact he specifically stated he was not doing) and that of joining himself as a citizen to a state that he wishes to improve. Therefore, Thoreau asserted, he would pay no tax until the country he sought to improve did away with slavery and stopped waging unjust wars.

Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" had a profound, formative influence on two of celebrated activists of the Twentieth Century: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. King took comfort in Thoreau's essay during the Montgomery bus boycott, writing

I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, "We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system."¹⁴

Gandhi encountered Thoreau's essay in 1906 in South Africa. The concepts expressed in "Civil Disobedience" also influenced the development of the techniques Gandhi employed to, first, gain Indian rights in South Africa, and later to win independence for India.¹⁵

Thoreau was a man of simple and high thinking whose writings and philosophies have influenced generations of activists and great leaders. His strong set of principles led him to the belief that government should not be above individual rights. Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is a great work by a principled citizen who, driven by noble doubt, took a stand against what he saw as the immorality of government.

NOTES

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- ¹ Richard J. Schneider, "About Henry David Thoreau." The Thoreau Society, 2007. Accessed at <http://www.thoreausociety.org/news_aboutthdt.htm>.
- ² Hubert H Hoeltje, "Thoreau in Concord Church and Town Records." *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2. (June 1839), 349-359.
- ³ Schneider, *op. cit.*
- ⁴ Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "Editorial Savoir Faire: Thoreau Transforms His Journal into 'Slavery in Massachusetts.'" *The Thoreau Reader*. An EServer web publishing project at Iowa State University: 2007. Accessed at <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/theory.html>>.
- ⁵ Petrulionis, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ S. Mintz, "The Mexican War." *Digital History*. Accessed 26 October 2007 at <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=316>.
- ⁷ Frances Leonard, "The Mexican War, 1846 - 1848." First published 1976. Texas Council for the Humanities Resource Center. Accessed at <<http://www.humanities-interactive.org/invasionyanqui/mexicanwarenglish.html>>. The internal Thoreau quote is from "Civil Disobedience."
- ⁸ Mary Babson Fuhrer, "Henry David Thoreau Spends Night in Jail July 23, 1846." *Mass Moments*, 2005. Accessed at <<http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=214>>.
- ⁹ Henry David Thoreau, Walden; or, A Life in the Woods. (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 41.
- ¹⁰ Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience." *American Transcendentalism Net*. Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999. Accessed at <<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/thoreau/civil/>>.
- ¹¹ Walter Harding, "Thoreau in Jail." *American Heritage*, August 1975. Accessed at <<http://users.aol.com/vlntryst/wn71.html>>.
- ¹² Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," *op. cit.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Stride Toward Freedom," in A Testament of Hope, ed. James Melvin Washington. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 429. Quoted in Lawrence Rosenwald, "The Theory, Practice, and Influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience." *The Thoreau Reader*. An EServer web publishing project at Iowa State University. Ames, Iowa: 2007. Accessed at <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/theory.html>>.
- ¹⁵ Rosenwald, *op. cit.*