"During my student days I read Henry David Thoreau's essay *On Civil Disobedience* for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau." --Martin Luther King

excerpts from "Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau

I 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, 5 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,[(1)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html#notes) the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would 10 not have consented to this measure. [ . . . ]

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men,[(2)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html#notes) 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 15 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 20 every man a 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 25 see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys,[(3)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html#notes) 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 30 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."[(4)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html#notes)

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*,[(5)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html#notes) etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment 35 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 40 heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great 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 45 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 Copernicus [(6)](http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil2.html#notes) and Luther,(7) and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

50 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….

**Notes:**

**1.** U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), abolitionists considered it an effort to extend slavery into former Mexican territory   
**2.** Anarchists, many of whom came from Massachusetts   
**3.** Boys who carry gunpowder for soldiers   
**4.** Charles Wolfe (1791-1823) *The Burial of Sir John Morre at Corunna*   
**5.** Group empowered to uphold the law, a sheriff's posse

**6.** Nicolas Copernicas (1473-1543) Polish founder of modern astronomy; was excommunicated by Catholic Church

**7.** Martin Luther (1483-1546) German monk and Protestant Reformation leader

1. Explain what Thoreau is stating when he says “That government is best which governs least”? What does he want from a government?

2. What is Thoreau trying to prove about government when he says it "abuses and perverts before the people can act through it"?

3. What proof does Thoreau provide to show the issues with American government? Provide an example from the text.

4. Does Thoreau believe in complete anarchy? Explain what he would like to see happen in American government.

5. He singles out majorities and their pull in government quite a bit. What is his criticism of majorities?

6. Instead of majority rules/votes what does Thoreau believe could lead better governments? Why?

7. What is Thoreau trying to prove by saying “we see soldiers, colonels, captains etc. marching in admirable order to wars against their wills and their common sense"?

8. What does Thoreau claim you can see about laws through visiting marines at the Navy Yard? What transcendental value is he trying to implore upon the audience with this example?

9. What are good citizens doing currently by serving with their heads and not their consciousness? Explain.

10. What does he say happens when good men try and rebel this evil? Who does he use as examples? Why?

11. What does he metaphorically compare government to? What is his provide as his solution?

12. Using your tone list, identify at least three words that describe Thoreau's tone and the diction he uses to build that tone.