

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Background Information:**

Henry David Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience* after spending the night in jail for refusing to pay his taxes to demonstrate his growing disapproval of the Mexican War and of slavery in the United States. In the essay, he urges other people to follow his example by resisting governmental policies with which they disagree. The essay has become one of Thoreau's most famous works, influencing a number of important historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

**From *Civil Disobedience*  
Henry David Thoreau**

I heartily accept the **motto** (adage): "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 I also 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** (device): but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, **inexpedient** (in excess). The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to **prevail** (exist), 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** (form) which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally **liable** (likely) to be abused and **perverted** (distorted) 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** (strength) 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 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 allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the **alacrity** (eagerness) 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** (fail to) 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 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...