

Government & Civil Disobedience

by Henry David Thoreau

How should a man behave toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant accept a political organization like my government which is the slave's government also.

There are thousands of Americans, who when asked, say they are opposed to slavery, and to the Mexican war; people who in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, claiming to be children of our Founding Fathers, sit down with their hands in their pockets and say that they know not what to do... and so do nothing.

If these injustices are part of the necessary workings of the machine of government, maybe the machine will one day wear out. But if the machine is of such a nature that it requires you to operate it, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counterpoint to stop the machine.

If a thousand Americans were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would be less violent and less bloody than it would be to pay them, and enable the government to go on committing violence and shedding innocent blood.

At any rate, what I have to do is to see that I do not participate in the wrong which I condemn. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution...