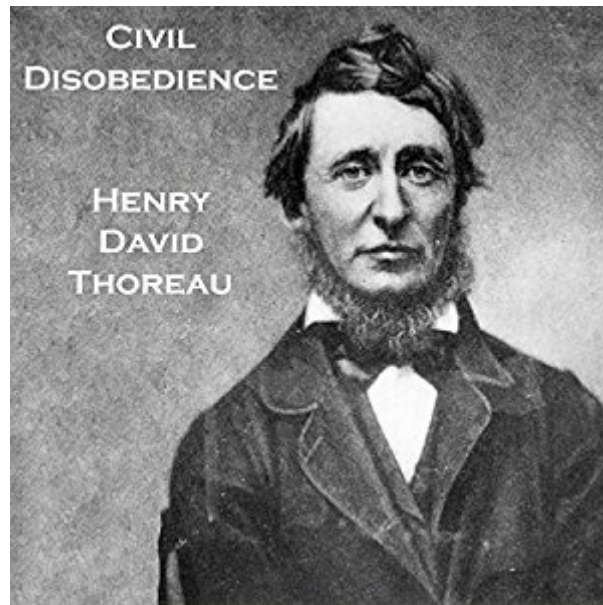


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Civil Disobedience



Synopsis

Henry David Thoreau's classic essay inspired Martin Luther King, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and many other activists.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American philosopher, poet, and naturalist who moved in the same intellectual and social circles as Ralph Waldo Emerson. This Dover Thrift edition contains several important Thoreau tracts: Civil Disobedience, Slavery in Massachusetts, A Plea for Captain John Brown, Walking, and Life Without Principle. Thoreau also wrote the famous "Walden," and several other influential pieces shaped by his sense of environment and his unwavering belief in the power of the individual. In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau discusses the role of the individual in society and government. Starting off with his famous statement, "That government is best which governs not at all," Thoreau waxes philosophic about the role of the United States government in the Mexican War and slavery. Thoreau argues that majorities in a democracy decide what the laws are because they are the strongest element in society. According to Thoreau, what is law is not necessarily right, and just because the majority decides an issue doesn't automatically make that issue palatable to a man's conscience. Individuals can, and sometimes should, oppose the majority, and they can be right even if they are in the minority. Ultimately, if laws are not reliable beacons of truth, one should appeal to one's conscience to decide what is right and wrong. However, merely deciding something is wrong is not enough if that decision is not followed by concrete action.

Thoreau criticizes the voting process in this context, since anybody can vote for something. Without action following a decision, voting or supporting something is useless. This essay also contains Thoreau's account of his stay in jail for failure to pay a tax.

Civil Disobedience sits quietly in the national psyche as one of the founding documents of modern American liberalism. It's well known to liberals but not well read. It is worth the reading and would likely surprise liberals and non-liberals alike - as it did me. Sure, it's anti-war and anti-slavery, but it's also a lot more. The confused hodgepodge of modern isms that dominate current political thought could use the purity, consistency, and clarity that were second nature to thinkers nearer the American Revolution. Consider, for example, Thoreau's political philosophy: "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." Or his take on government aid to societal improvement: "Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of the 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." Thoreau on economic policy: "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." 1848 was also the year of another seminal work, the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx. Where Thoreau looked back to the 18th century, Marx looked forward to the 20th. Where Thoreau recognized that the power of the state will not easily be compartmentalized, that power to do one thing will infect all things, Marx looked to the state to solve every problem.

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