

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

An Introduction to Thoreau and “Civil
Disobedience”

Thoreau's Life



- Born in 1817 in Concord, Mass.
- Son of a pencil maker
- Studied at Harvard
- Returned home to Concord where he met Emerson, who introduced him to the Transcendentalists

Walden

- Famously went to live at Walden Pond for two years
- An experiment in living simply, deliberately
- Wrote about this experience in his well-known book, *Walden*



Civil Disobedience

- Refused to pay his poll taxes in 1846 because of his opposition to the Mexican War and slavery
- Was jailed for a night
- Wrote essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” (today more commonly known as “Civil Disobedience”)

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

**“IF THE MACHINE OF
GOVERNMENT IS OF SUCH A
NATURE THAT IT REQUIRES YOU
TO BE THE AGENT OF INJUSTICE
TO ANOTHER, THEN, I SAY,
BREAK THE LAW.”**

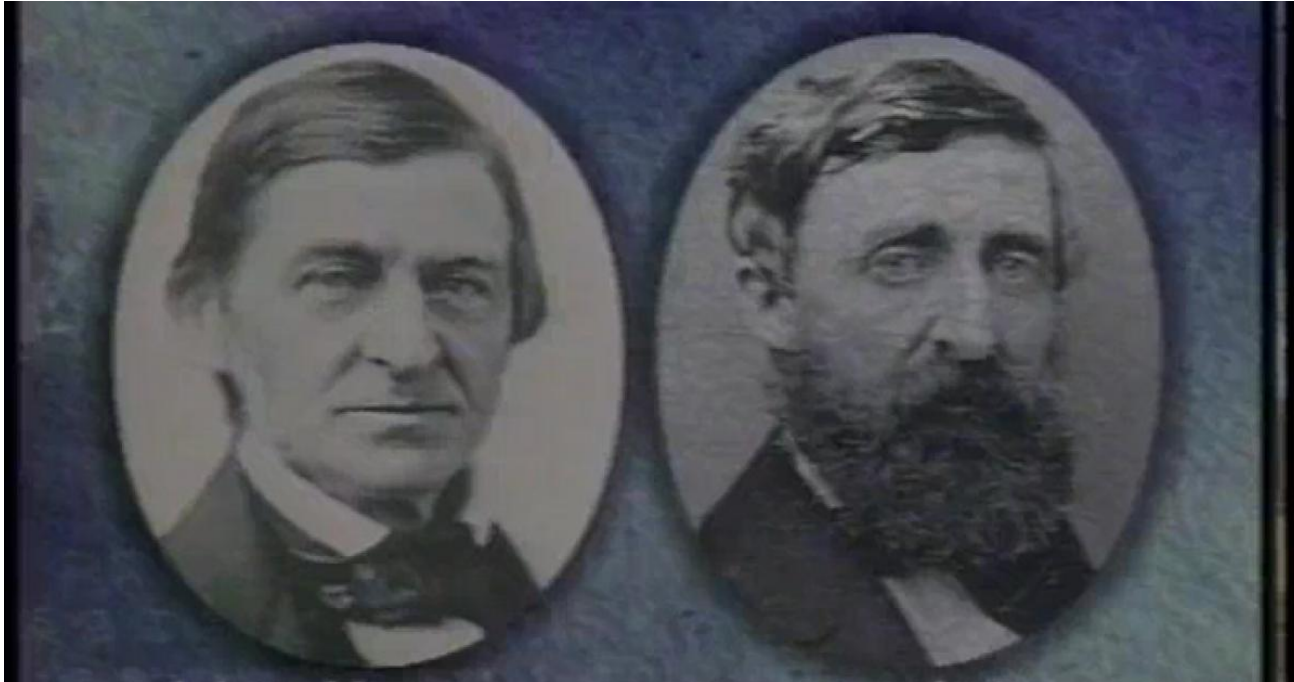
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Impact



- Essay highly influential on later non-violent resistance movements
- Gandhi in India; Martin Luther King, Jr. in U.S.

Emerson and Thoreau



- In many ways, Thoreau is Emerson put into practice
- Emerson's work is philosophical, quasi-religious
- Thoreau took Emerson's ideas and applied them politically, as a way of reacting to government, of making change

Reading “Civil Disobedience”

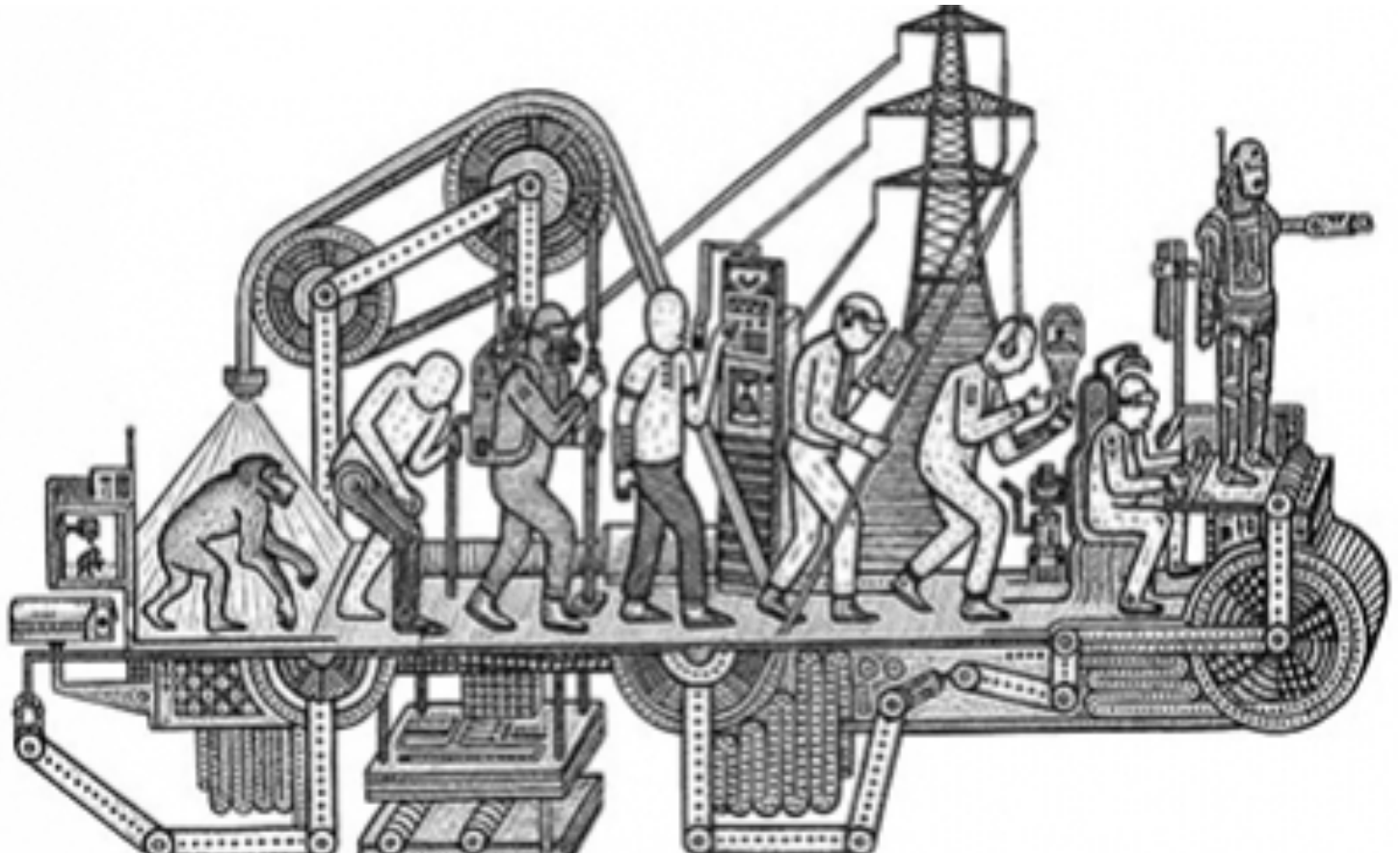
- The word “expedient”

**Government is at best but an
expedient; but most governments are
usually, and all governments are
sometimes, inexpedient.**

Henry David Thoreau

Government as a Machine

- All machines have their friction



Breaking the Law

- Thoreau's problem with William Paley
 - Wresting the plank from the drowning man
- Does Thoreau advocate breaking the law whenever you want?
- Does he offer safeguards?

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.

Henry David Thoreau