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Eng. 101

Essay 3

2/23/05 Henry David Thoreau: What Is
Just?

Henry Thoreau lived from 1817-1862.
During that time, Thoreau wrote a journal of
25 years of his life. He also wrote some

famous works such as “Walden” and “Civil Disobedience.

It is apparent that Thoreau didn't like the government of the day too much. Thoreau speaks against the Mexican War and some of the taxes of the day because the government was using the revenues for the above war and slavery. Thoreau quotes John L. O'Sullivan when he said, “That Government is best which governs least”.

(para. 1) Thoreau goes even further with his

own quote “That government is best when it governs not at all”. (para 1)

Thoreau in his essay says “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or endeavor to amend them and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (para. 16)

Thoreau said that many men think that amending and obeying is right and that he disagreed. Thoreau said “but if it (the law) is of such a nature that it requires you to be

the agent of injustice to another, I say break the law”. (para 16)

Thoreau is talking in his essay about the majority ruling the minority. Thoreau didn't like the majority rule very much if it meant participating in the injustice an idea that the individual considers to be unjust; let's say slavery or the Mexican War. Thoreau calls people who didn't support the government in these ways the “wise minority” (para. 16).

Another thing that Thoreau had a problem with was paying the church tax.

Thoreau didn't see why he should pay a tax on something that he himself wasn't a part of. So, Thoreau did not pay and got in trouble with the state there. Thoreau didn't go to prison because of the lack of paying this tax, but he did go to prison for not paying the above stated poll tax. Thoreau spent only one night there. To his chagrin, Thoreau's aunt paid his tax for him. Since Thoreau was standing up for what he believed in, this is understandable. In this

essay Thoreau quoted the Bible---Mat.

22:15-22.

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words.

They sent out their disciples and the Herodians. 'Teacher', they said, 'we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You are not swayed by men because you do not pay attention to who they are.

Tell us then what is your opinion? Is

it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, ‘you hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this and whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s’, they replied. Then he said to them, ‘give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed. So,

they left him and went away. (para. 23)

As one can see the Pharisees in this above passage, were made out to be fools.

Thoreau thought that not paying the tax was God's will apparently. In short, Thoreau thinks that paying what he perceived as an unjust tax, to be against God and not for Him at all.

The individual has the right to disobey the many if the individual sees fit in his/her own conscience, if the laws are hurting

people or helping grossly unjust causes. A law is needed to be broken, says Thoreau if the law is not part of “the necessary friction of the machine” (para. 18). “Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.”

(para. 18) This probably includes causes as in government waste spending that doesn't help the people one bit. Thoreau may have thought that the government was wasting its money on the Mexican War and not using the revenue to help fellow man in addition to the war being unjust to begin with.

An illustration of government waste might be building a new sports stadium for a team when the old one would be adequate.

A stadium's lifespan is about 30 years or so.

What if the new stadium is replacing a stadium that is 10 years old? This may not help the revenue especially if the team in question is performing badly; of course, this is an example and may not have happened.

If this above example does happen, the government might have a budget crunch and have to cut funds to humanities programs

such as: education, homeless shelters (if government supported), charities subsidized by government funds, etc. This is probably a very rare occurrence even if this above stadium is built and revenue to pay the bill is not gotten. This kind of stadium should be protested and the team (with all due respect) would need to make do. Unfortunately an act like this stadium could be the herald to laws that hurt these very humanities issues above. This would include laws for funding limits, personnel numbers, paychecks, and

of course cost of living laws that wouldn't give needed help to poor people who need the extra money.

I am of course, talking about city and state issues, but this would affect the federal government as well. The state would plead for federal help, which in turn, might cause a federal funds crunch indirectly and contribute to problem laws there. Thoreau would probably rebel against such this stadium because of potential problems it could cause later.

I see that Thoreau is trying to do the right thing by standing up for what he believes is just. I believe he wants what God wants over any government. This would include breaking any laws that would be unjust in the sight of God.

As for me, I would probably try to actively organize a protest on any matter of that importance to me. As for breaking those laws that are unjust, I don't think I would unless I had to because I may not have the same pull in prison.

Some of the issues of my day are social security, the poor, and the war on terrorism, and the Iraqi conflict. I think that the poor could easily get hurt if the government takes money away from SSI and other block grants for entitled persons. I don't exactly know how to protest this potential disaster as I am one of those poor and may not have much influence. It may be a plain lack of self-confidence, but I wouldn't know how to go about a protest. As for the war, I think, in part, that it is just. I think so, because I

think tyranny and terrorism are despicable; however, I don't think that the U.S. can get rid of all of it. This means there has to be an end to it sometime and we should give the war money eventually back to low-income people and those who cannot help themselves very well.

Thoreau might do something like this; he would pay the taxes to help the less fortunate and he would go to prison against the war. I, on the other side, would just stage a legal protest if needed.

In conclusion, I disagree with Thoreau about going to prison, but I do agree that unjust laws need to be fought against in some way to stop the machine. I think Thoreau was a man of character and honor and fears God. I think that these qualities are admirable and not to be condemned so easily; however, I just disagree with his methods.