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## On the Duty of Civil Disobedience

By *Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862)*

Read by: Gordon Mackenzie      Language: English  
 Length: 1 hour and 21 minutes      Style: Solo  
 Genre(s): Non-Fiction, Essays, Political Philosophy

### Product Formats and Options

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In July of 1846, Henry David Thoreau was on his way to Concord to run an errand when he was arrested by sheriff Sam Staples for failure to pay a poll tax. Thoreau had stopped paying the tax four years earlier, believing that it supported the Mexican American War and the expansion of slavery into the southwest territories. That turned out not to be true; the tax was strictly local and nothing to do with the federal government or that of the state of Massachusetts. News of the arrest spread quickly, and an unidentified woman promptly visited the jail to pay the tax. Staples, however, decided to keep Thoreau overnight. To his surprise, when he went to Thoreau's cell to release him, he didn't want to go. And was "mad as the devil" when he learned that someone had paid the tax and he was free to go. The experience led to a series of lectures in at the Concord

Lyceum entitled "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in relation to Government". The essay was first published in 1849 as *Resistance to Civil Government*. The central idea is that individuals should not permit government to overrule their consciences, and that there is a duty to refuse to acquiesce when governments seek to make them agents of injustice. The essay was reprinted four years after his death in 1866 under the title *Civil Disobedience*. The use of the word "civil" in the title can be misleading. Thoreau used the word in the sense of "relating to citizens and their relations with others and with the state". Civil can also mean "socially acceptable; polite", a reading which leads to the impression that the argument is for nonviolent resistance. That was not his intent.

**Henry David Thoreau** (July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862) is best known as the author of *Walden* and the essay *Civil Disobedience*. He was born into a freethinking but poor family in Concord, Massachusetts engaged in the pencil-making business. He attended Concord Academy and Harvard College, graduating in 1837, returning to Concord to work in the family business and found a progressive school, among other endeavors. He became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson, already a prominent philosopher, essayist and poet who had settled in Concord. Emerson was the figurehead of the Transcendentalist movement, which emphasized the individual soul, personal truth and self-reliance, and correspondingly discounted the value of social norms and traditions. Thoreau's irreverent views were encouraged by the followers and he found modest success publishing nature writings and book reviews in the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. In 1845 he built a cabin on Walden Pond and set out on a "personal experiment" to contemplate nature and human nature in relative isolation for two years, famously documented in *Walden*. He lived off and on as a pensioner at the Emerson's residence, but returned to the family home and business in the 1850's after the friendship with Emerson cooled. He took on an active role in abolitionist movement in the 1850's before contracting tuberculosis, which felled him at age forty-four.