worse, more moral, and more religious men, at the head of your paper money "banks," and the evil of the present banking system will remain scarcely diminished. The only way to get rid of its evils is to change the system, not its managers. The evils of slavery do not result from the personal characters of slave owners. They are inseparable from the system, let who will be masters. Make all your rich men good Christians, and you have lessened not the evils of existing inequality in wealth. The gaudy show of this inequality do not result from the personal characters of either rich or poor, but from itself, and they will continue, just as long as there are rich men and poor men in the same community. You must abolish the system or accept its consequences. No man can serve both God and Mammon. If you will serve the devil, you must look to the devil for your wages, we knew no other way.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, by Henry Thoreau

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. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, "That government is best which governs not at all;" and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves non-governmental, I ask for, not at once a better government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in which all cannot be based on twice, even as far as men understand it. Can there be a government in which majorities do not vary decide right and wrong, but conscience — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of consummated men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of a undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, sailors, colonels, captains, corporals, privates, possum-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, eyes, against their common sense, and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a wholesome business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Most at all! Or small moveable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power.

How does it become a man to behave towards this American government to-day? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is the right to refuse allegiance to and to point the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and un-
enjoyable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '76. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them: all machines have their friction, and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us see what such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolution. What makes this duty the more evident is the fact that the country we overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in persons and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right so pervade through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbor, constitutes a majority of one already. I meet the American government, or its representatives the State governments, directly, and face to face, once a year, no more, in the person of its tax gatherer: this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it: and it is then says distinctly. Recognize me, and the simplest, the most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensable mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax gatherer, is the very one I have to deal with,—for it is, after all, with men and not with paper, that I quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he shall treat his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed, or as a marauder and dissembler of the peace, and set it he can get over this abomination to his neighborhood without a ruler and more important thought or speech correspond- ing with his science? I know this will, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten honest men only,—say, if one Hoosier man, in this State of Massachusetts, crying to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from the commonwealth, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well said is done for ever. But we have better to talk about it; that we say in our motion. Reform keeps many sorts of newspapers in its service, but not one man. If my named neighbor, the State's unfaithfulness will devote his days to the settlement of the question of human rights in the Council Chamber, instead of being threatened with the prison of Carolina, where to us down the prison of Massachusetts, that State which is so anxious to forestall the sin of slavery upon her sister, —though at present she can discover only an act of inhospitality to be the ground of a quar- rel with her,—the Legislature would not wholly waive the subject the following winter.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a poor man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her free and less depend- ing spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the
fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian to plead the wrongs of his race, should find them, on that separate, but more free and insensible ground, where the State places those who are not with her but against her, — the only house is a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices so long or effect the rest of the State, that they would not be an entity within in walls, they do not know how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a wisp of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clings by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This, in fact, the definition of a peaceful revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public official, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refined allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now. . . .

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. "Pay it," it said, "or be locked up in the jail." I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it. I did not see why the schismatics should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the schismatics; for I was not the State's schoolmaster, but I supported myself by voluntary subscription. I did not see why the freemasons should not present its tax-bills, and have the State to back its demand, as well as the church. However, at the request of the telegraph, I contrived to make some such statement as this in writing: — "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined." This I gave to the town- clerk; and he has it. The State, having thus learned that I did not wish to be regarded as a member of that church, has never made a like demand on me since, though it said that it must adhere to its original presumption that time. If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find a complete list. I paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night, and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I went more flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up, I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a month feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who
are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a tamer; for they thought that my chief virtue was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the doors on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timed as a love woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and passed it... I know that most men think differently from myself; but those whose lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred subjects, content themselves as little as any. Statist and legislators, standing so completely within the limitation, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it. They may be men of a certain experience and discrimination, and have no doubt invented ingenious and useful systems, for which we sincerely thank them; but all their wit and usefulness lie within certain very wide limits. They are wont to forget that the world is not governed by policy and expedience. Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are bombast to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject. ... Comparatively he is always wrong, original and above all, practical. Still his quality is not wisdom, but prudence. The lawyer's truth is not Truth, but consistency, or a consistent expedience. Truth is always in harmony with herself, and is not contented chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing. He well deserves to be called, as he has been called, the Defender of the Constitution. There are really no blows to be given by him but defensive ones. He is not a leader, but a follower. His leaders are the men of 'By... They who know of no pure sources of truth, who have traced up its street no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at its fount with reverence and humility; but they who behold where itorton trickling into this lake or that pool, give up their leons once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head. The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to, — for I will, cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well, — it is still an important one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The powers from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Is a democracy, no, as we know it, the best improvement possible in government?...