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Engl 400

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Journal on Civil Disobedience

1. The historical context of the essay is that Thoreau was protesting the Mexican-American War by not paying taxes because he felt that his taxes were funding the war. I believe Thoreau named the essay “Civil Disobedience” because he knew that to instill change in the hearts and minds of the American people, radical changes would need to be done; he would need to go against the norm.
2. Thoreau describes the government as a way for the American people to express their thoughts, wants, and needs. However, he also says that is an unbendable structure that no one man can control; it a rigid “wooden gun” for the people (Thoreau, Page 1).
3. The main difference is the idea of allegiances. Men will think for themselves and go where they please; living the life that they choose. Subjects are those who act much like sheep and blindly go wherever a more powerful being tells them to go. He makes this suggestion because he felt that the people had gotten into a habit of merely accepting certain things like war as an inevitable truth with no critical thought on the matter. He is suggesting that the American people take the time to critique the actions of the government and reflect on if the actions of the government are representative of the people’s feelings and wants.
4. Thoreau does look down upon soldiers bas more machine than man; created by the government to carry out its bidding. He says that they exercise no “judgement or of the moral sense” (Thoreau, Page 2). He discusses that “you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences” (Thoreau, Page 2). Here Thoreau describes the military as unthinking pawns in the game of war. They are ones who simply follow orders and do not think for themselves what might become of them.
5. He cites the trials and tribulations of Ben Franklin and George Washington. He discusses how people hold them in such high regard but choose not to adopt their ways of thinking for they feel that they will be ostracized by the public. He touches on the contradictory premise of the American people and their thought processes; they will say one thing but then they choose not to adopt the same actions that reflect their previous tone and rhetoric.
6. In protest of the war, Thoreau chooses not to pay poll tax for six years and is subsequently put into prison as punishment. I don’t believe it fits the model of active citizenship for me per say however it does show the effectiveness of critical thought and how as citizens we should not just blindly go wherever the country chooses to take us. I probably would not have evaded taxes for six years but I would have started writing more for the paper in terms of critical think pieces that would stir conversation; turning the public into thinkers and not followers.