

Civil Disobedience
Comparing the Works of Thoreau, Gandhi, and MLK, Jr.

The questions on this page ask you to analyze the views on civil disobedience that were expressed in the following selections:

- Henry David Thoreau’s *Resistance to Civil Government*
- Mohandas K. Gandhi’s *On Nonviolent Resistance*
- Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*

Comparing Political Assumptions

1. In “Resistance to Civil Government,” what does Thoreau mean by saying that he must not pursue his own interests while “sitting upon another man’s shoulders. . . . I must get off him first” (p. 250)? What details from the speech and letter show that Gandhi and King held this same idea?
2. Look back over the three texts, and list in chart form the logical, ethical, and emotional appeals you find in each one. Which one of these arguments do you think is the most effective? Which is the weakest?

Kind of Appeal	Thoreau	Gandhi	King
Logical			
Ethical			
Emotional			

3. King and Gandhi drew their inspiration from Thoreau, who argues that if one honest man truly protested slavery and willingly to jail for his belief, “it would be the abolition of slavery” (p. 251). Explain how that single night in jail serves as the “small beginning” that expanded the campaigns of Gandhi and King?
4. Each writer you have read had specific ideas about the consequence of disobeying laws. Consider the following statements:
 - a. “I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste. . . .” (Thoreau)
 - b. “Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise.” (Gandhi)
 - c. “[Stay] in jail to arouse the conscience of the community. . . .” (King)
 What do these statements assume about the power of ideas and moral action versus the power of walls and physical punishment?
5. Consider the consistency of the political assumptions underlying Thoreau’s essay, King’s letter, and Gandhi’s speech. What do all three writers believe about these questions:
 - a. What is the ultimate source of any government’s power?
 - b. What makes a practice or a law just or unjust?
 - c. What ways of resisting injustice are appropriate?
 - d. Must someone accept the consequences for acts of civil disobedience?
6. Do you think the principles endorsed by Thoreau, King, and Gandhi are still relevant in the twenty-first century? Could these principles lead to a resolution of the violent political conflicts in the world today?