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"Resistance to Civil Government" (May 1849)

"Slavery in Massachusetts" (*The Liberator*, July 21, 1854)

Resistance to Civil Government

I heartily accept the motto, — "That government is best which gov-
erns least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and
systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also
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. The objections which have been brought against a
standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to
prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government.
10 The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The
government itself, which is only the mode which the people have
chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and per-
verted before the people can act through it. Witness the present
15 Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using
the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people
would not have consented to this measure.

20 This American government, — what is it but a tradition, though
a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity,
but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality
and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to
his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and,
if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other,
it will surely split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the
25 people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear
its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. (•••)

I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men
whom I could name, — if ten *honest* men only, — ay, if one HONEST
MAN, in this state of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actu-
ally to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the
country jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.
30 For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what
is once well done is done for ever. But we love better to talk about
it: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of news-
papers in its service, but not one man. (•••)

35 Under a true government which imprisons any unjustly, the true
place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the
only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less
desponding 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
40 out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the
Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the
wrongs of his race, should find them; on that separate, but more
free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are
not *with* her but *against* her, — the only house in a slave-state in
which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their
45 influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the
ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its
walls, they do not know by 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
50 whole vote, not a strip 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 clogs by its whole
weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give
up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If
55 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 is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such
is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me,
60 as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you
really wish to do any thing, resign your office." When the subject
has refused 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 the conscience is wounded?
65 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.