

Q: Should the United States, in 1846, wage war on Mexico?

The answer from **Henry David Thoreau**: No

Directions: Read the following document, answer the questions presented and then begin to build a rationale to explain *why* **Henry David Thoreau** does not support war against Mexico in 1846.

Henry David Thoreau¹. 1848. Excerpts from *Civil Disobedience*.

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 perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present 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...

If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to (some), would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people...

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 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, 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 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? 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...

Questions: The following answers will help you build a rationale to explain *why* **Henry David Thoreau** does not support war against Mexico in 1846.

1. In the first paragraph, Thoreau is explaining his view of the danger of a standing army. Why does he feel a standing army is leading to a war with Mexico?
2. What is Thoreau's position on a government going to war against the majority of the people's wishes?

3. Why does Thoreau encourage others to break the law (not pay taxes)? What does he suggest would come from that law-breaking?
4. Why do you think Thoreau claims that we should not take “a plank from a drowning man?” How does Thoreau use his phrase that someone can “save his life...(but really) lose it” in relation to the Mexican war?
5. What does Thoreau mean by his question, "Is there not a sort of bloodshed when the conscience is wounded?" What action in relation to the Mexican War would wound a man's conscience? What does Thoreau believe to be the consequences of this?

¹ In 1846, Thoreau spent a night in a Massachusetts jail for refusing to pay his taxes in protest against the Mexican American War. He wrote much of this essay during that experience. Thoreau was known to follow a movement called Transcendentalism, where people tried to build their lives NOT on what their five senses experiences or through their human reason, but rather from their inner, spiritual absolute goodness, which is characterized as something beyond description and knowable ultimately only through intuition.