Speech

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1869, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a great believer in the power of using civil disobedience against governments that oppressed the poor and the disenfranchised. He spent seven years in South Africa leading and defending Indians born and living there without legal rights. It was there that he began practicing satyagraha, or passive resistance. Later, he returned to his homeland of India where he helped the country gain its independence from the British in 1947. He became known there as Mahatma, or “Great Soul.” India, though free from Britain, suffered from internal turmoil as religious factions fought for power. Gandhi was assassinated by a fanatic in 1948.

As you read “On Civil Disobedience,” consider how Gandhi might advise you to respond to an unjust law.

Excerpt from

ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

by Mohandas K. Gandhi

JULY 27, 1916

There are two ways of countering injustice. One way is to smash the head of the man who perpetrates injustice and to get your own head smashed in the process. All strong people in the world adopt this course. Everywhere wars are fought and millions of people are killed. The consequence is not the progress of a nation but its decline. . . . No country has ever become, or will ever become, happy through victory in war. A nation does not rise that way;
it only falls further. In fact, what comes to it is defeat, not victory. And if, perchance, either our act or our purpose was ill-conceived, it brings disaster to both belligerents\(^1\).

But through the other method of combating injustice, we alone suffer the consequences of our mistakes, and the other side is wholly spared. This other method is *satyagraha*\(^2\). One who resorts to it does not have to break another’s head; he may merely have his own head broken. He has to be prepared to die himself suffering all the pain. In opposing the atrocious laws of the Government of South Africa, it was this method that we adopted. We made it clear to the said Government that we would never bow to its outrageous laws. No clapping is possible without two hands to do it, and no quarrel without two persons to make it. Similarly, no State is possible without two entities, the rulers and the ruled. You are our sovereign, our Government, only so long as we consider ourselves your subjects. When we are not subjects, you are not the sovereign either. So long as it is your endeavour to control us with justice and love, we will let you to do so. But if you wish to strike at us from behind, we cannot permit it. Whatever you do in other matters, you will have to ask our opinion about the laws that concern us. If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner and without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute books\(^3\). We will never obey them.Award us for it what punishment you like; we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold\(^4\) and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us; we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We will gladly die and will not so much as touch you. But so long as there is yet life in these our bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary\(^5\) laws.

**Discussion Group:**

On separate paper, create a graphic organizer that illustrates Gandhi’s argument.

Who is Gandhi’s *audience*? What in the text tells you this?

---

\(^1\) *belligerents*: participants in a war

\(^2\) *satyagraha*: (Sanskrit) insistence on truth—a term used by Gandhi to describe his policy of seeking reform by means of nonviolent resistance

\(^3\) *statute books*: books of law

\(^4\) *scaffold*: a platform on which people are executed by hanging

\(^5\) *arbitrary*: illogical, unreasonable

---

**WORD CONNECTIONS**

*Belligerents* contains the root *-belli-*, from the Latin word *bellum*, meaning “war.” This root also appears in *bellicose, antebellum, and rebellion.*

*Suppressed* contains the root *-press-*, from the Latin word *premere*, meaning “to press.” This root also appears in *repress, impress, impression, and pressure.*