**“Great American Conversation”**

**TABE level 9 and above**

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- from: *Letter From Birmingham Jail*

By Dr. Martin Luther King

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all." Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. (word count = 465)

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| **Question** | **DOK** |
| Read the following sentences. Why does King use thalidomide as a representation of the word “wait”?  *This word “wait” has almost always meant “never.” It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration.*   1. To express his belief that waiting for justice requires patience. 2. To explain that when a person waits for something he or she will experience tranquil peace. 3. To compare the process of waiting to being pregnant. 4. To say the Negro experience of waiting is like receiving a dangerous drug to reduce certain symptoms but it causes more harm in the end.   The correct answer is D. Thalidomide was a commonly prescribed drug given to pregnant women during King’s lifetime. It helped reduce symptoms of morning sickness, but was found to be the cause of birth defects. | 2-3 |
| What is the reason King compares the goal of political independence of Asia and Africa to what was happening in the United States at the time he wrote this letter?  Your answer should include the following points: Dr. King was illustrating that third-world nations were able to achieve independence at a faster pace than Black Americans, yet the United States was more advanced than these nations in most other ways. | 2-3 |
| Which word would best be substituted for the words “horse-and-buggy” in the phrase below?  *We still creep at* ***horse-and-buggy*** *pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.*   1. old-fashioned 2. galloping 3. slow 4. gentle   The correct answer is C. In this passage, Dr. King is expressing frustration that laws against segregation are slow to pass and be enforced. | 1 |

**Assessment Target:**

*Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics*

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| From: *“On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”* by Henry David Thoreau, 1849  1This 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 5the 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. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery 10or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must 15all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character 20inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by which men would fain 25succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of india-rubber, would never manage to bounce over 30obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those 35mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.  But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not *at once* no 40government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.  Word count = 336 | From: *“Letter From a Birmingham Jail”* by Dr. Martin Luther King,1963  1We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the  oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged 5in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro 10with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We 15must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than  three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights. The nations of 20Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike  speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for 25those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you  have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen  30hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you are 35forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness" -- then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an 40abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.  Word Count = 326 |

1. What similar theme is expressed in these two passages? (DOK 2-3)

1. Forceful anti-government protest is the only effect means to change injustices by government.
2. The great need of all people to respect and follow the Constitution of the United States.
3. The problem of those in power oppressing the minority.
4. The need to reduce the size of the government to improve the economy.

The answer is C. Thoreau states, “*Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage*. “ Likewise, King notes, “*We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed*.” Both of these statements support the authors’ beliefs that those in power use their positions to oppress and impose injustice on individuals or minority groups.

2. Both Thoreau and King would agree that individuals must \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

take immediate action

always obey all laws

actively participate in government

to create effective change to unjust and unfair laws. (DOK 3)

The correct choice is A. Both authors express an urgency to take action against the injustices they are writing about. King describes the difficulty of Black Americans having to wait for rights to be recognized. Thoreau discusses the problem of government getting in the way of what is just and right.

3. What is the difference in the tone, or feeling between the two passages as you read them? (DOK 2-3)

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| Thoreau  Reasoned, Conventional, High-minded | King  Emotional, passionate, Outraged |

4. What can you conclude about Thoreau’s and King’s point of views? (DOK 3)

1. Neither Thoreau nor King would advocate that a person should disobey a federal law.
2. Both would agree that it is a moral duty to disobey a law that was unethical and unjust.
3. Both believed that government and elected officials were of utmost importance in creating a more humane and compassionate society.
4. Neither would be critical of people who recognized injustice but refused to fight against it.

The correct answer is B. Although these men expressed their beliefs with different styles and words, they both would agree it is imperative that people must take a stand against injustice, even if it means breaking a law.

Add additional assessment questions:

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3.