

Fugitive From a Ballot Box

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"Politics is full of grit and gravel."—Thoreau, "Life Without Principle"

Politics is full of grit and gravel." This sentence sums up Thoreau's deprecatory view of politics. One must, when considering Thoreau's thoughts on politics, realize that to him politics was not the party machinery and contests between factions which are the popular connotations of the word, but a broad, general term which embraced government and social interaction of the individual.

Thoreau lived and acted according to his beliefs. He detested the powers of government; he was jailed for his refusal to pay taxes (although the tax was for the support of the church, it did have legal sanction); he became embittered when his tax and fine were paid and his release was secured; he wrote a scathing and nearly treasonable essay in which he advocated civil disobedience; he lived in seclusion and monastic simplicity in the woods at Walden Pond. He was a non-conformist to the extreme.

Much of Thoreau's misanthropy may be attributed to his own personal failures in life. He was able to do nothing successfully—even to write, in the opinion of some. He was unable to support himself, going from job to job, and, in the end, living on the charity of his friends. It was this inability or lack of desire to cooperate with his fellow man which so colored his whole existence as to result, if not in hatred, at least in his dislike of governmental restriction and his challenge of public opinion. He was a social misfit.

To Thoreau, grit and gravel were unwelcome and unpleasant substances. Devoted as he was to his woods and to pastoral scenes, he would naturally deprecate the presence of "grit and gravel," desecrating his beloved greensward. His greensward was the uninhibited action of the individual, unfettered by the gravel of legislative limitations and uninfluenced by a public opinion which demanded either conformity or ostracism.

Much can be said about terming politics grit and gravel. Truly it is—but it is the grit and gravel—which, when cemented together by issues of common interest, common purpose, and common weal form the foundation upon which the edifice of our great government has been erected.

True, politics is not the concern of hermits, recluses, and those who live in ivory towers; but, to those who desire to live together, cooperate, and interact for the good of all, politics in all of its ramifications is a *sine qua non*.