When the Massachusetts essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau strolled from his Walden Pond retreat to the town of Concord in July 1846, he intended nothing more than a little shoe repair. He managed to complete his errand--and sparked an international movement in the bargain. Thoreau had for several years neglected to pay his poll tax (the rough equivalent of today's income tax) to protest government spending that supported slavery and the Mexican War. When the town constable asked for payment as Thoreau left the cobbler's shop, the writer flat-out refused. It may have been nothing more than a stunt--the constable himself offered to pay, and someone, most likely Thoreau's aunt, eventually did--but Thoreau insisted on spending a night in the local lockup anyway. And he leveraged the potentially minor incident into one of the most important statements of political philosophy in American history, his *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*.

America is a country--and a culture--founded on dissent. The nation was born in the most obvious form of protest, an armed rebellion against the legal authority of the day. Several of our national celebrations--Columbus Day, Independence Day, Martin Luther King Day, maybe even April Fools' Day--mark the power of rebellion and thumbing one's nose at the accepted order of things.

**Competing impulses.** But to suggest that this is a nation of dissenters is to disregard broad swaths of American history and political and cultural development. Dissent helped shape America, but America is also a nation built on cohesion and the enforcement of common goals and shared values. Those two competing impulses--which drove the Massachusetts Bay colonists to flee the religious restrictions of England and then establish one of the most strictly conformist societies in history--appear again and again throughout our history. Defining national character is never an easy task, but recognizing the sometimes schizophrenic interplay of individualistic idealism on the one hand and the recurrent...
desire to "go along to get along" on the other is surely a crucial part of understanding the American way of seeing ourselves and our roles in civil society.

Dissent, of course, is hardly a uniquely American province. Perhaps the most iconic single image of dissent comes from China, in the person of the lone man who stood defiantly, yet apparently calmly, blocking the advance of People's Liberation Army tanks. ("Just saying no" takes on more meaning when the consequences are more severe--it's no accident that the term "dissident" is most often used to describe those who opposed the totalitarian governments of the Warsaw Pact nations during the 20th century.) But, suggests Brandeis University philosophy Prof. Andreas Teuber, transforming a moral sense that things just aren't right into a potent political tool--and a natural right and civic duty--traces one of its meatier roots to Thoreau's stubbornness and, especially, his subsequent eloquence.

"Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" Thoreau asked in Civil Disobedience. His conclusion, that citizens certain that the government is dead wrong on critical issues such as slavery "should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government," is "one of America's most successful political exports," says Teuber. Thoreau's ideas, he says, formed the basis for Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to British rule in India, which later inspired Martin Luther King Jr. and the American civil rights movement. "Thoreau plants the seed in Gandhi's mind," says Teuber, "in turn transforming the lives of millions."
How then to square America's tradition of dissent with the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville? In *Democracy in America*, the astute French chronicler of early America wrote, "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America." The obvious fact is that this has been, at most times, a civil society more characterized by hewing to the majority opinion than by chaotic fighting for divergent personal beliefs.

The answer may lie in Teuber's observation that dissent in American history is very episodic, with short bursts of activity interspersed by long periods of going along with the prevailing conditions. "We are most active as citizens when our liberty is at stake," Teuber says. "The Minutemen were ready to take their guns down from above the fireplace, but as soon as liberty was assured, they very quickly went back to going about their business."

Citizenship, and especially active dissent, can be quite a hassle, after all. For most Americans, it takes more than a minor annoyance to move beyond yelling at the television to taking to the streets--or even the local polling station. In a way, our ambivalence about devoting much energy to active citizenship creates something of a self-regulating system. As more people stop voting (whether as an act of defiance or laziness), fewer people end up making the important decisions. That eventually decreases people's feeling of freedom, and as the system inches toward the tyrannical, we tend to find the energy to get involved again.

**Heroes or not.** The high points of dissent are obvious in America's early years, from Roger Williams's departure from Massachusetts Bay to Rhode Island, to the Boston Tea Party, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and Susan B. Anthony and the fight for women's suffrage, abolition, and temperance. And while many early dissenters are remembered as heroes, many were widely condemned, and depending on which way history went, many still are. More recently, dissent has taken the form of everything from antiwar protests in the Vietnam era to the taxpayer revolts of the 1980s. "The dissident tradition is stronger at some points in American history than at others," says Joseph Peschek, a political scientist at Hamline University, "but even in times of conformity, the undercurrent of dissent is always there."
Sometimes, dissent is most obvious in its absence. Americans have always been quick to rally around the flag in times of national emergency, and some have been no less ready to use that impulse to try to drown out dissent and silence the political discourse that democracy is built upon. In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, for example, suggestions that we try to understand the terrorist mind-set and signs calling for a peaceful response to the attack were harshly condemned for being unpatriotic or even treasonous. Dissent can cross over into sedition, but as shown by the current spate of media self-examination over an obvious lack of questioning of the government before the Iraq war, sometimes non-dissent can be just as harmful to the state.

"Both mainstream liberals and conservatives share many assumptions," says Peschek. "If citizens don't challenge the framework of American politics, the discussion goes on within overly narrow parameters." Any nation needs common purpose to thrive, but democracies also rely upon debate, discussion--and dissent--to determine the nation's best course. "Democracy is enhanced when more people are asking questions and thinking critically," says Peschek. Especially at a time when we're trying to sell democracy to uncertain customers around the world, we might do well keep that in mind.