

What Do You Mean by the State?

By HIRAM B. LOOMIS

PRESIDENT WILSON wrote a book called *The State*. It was well received, and I take for granted that he used the term in the sense in which it is generally understood.

Henry Thoreau, who has a high reputation as a social philosopher, attacked the State in "Civil Disobedience," an essay greatly admired by Tolstoy and Gandhi. I admire Thoreau as a citizen who went to jail for refusing to pay taxes, though I think the act itself was foolish. In spite of this admiration, the philosophy of "Civil Disobedience" is not mine. Either Thoreau had a different idea of the State from President Wilson, or he was very careless in his statements.

What then was Thoreau's idea? In "Civil Disobedience" we find this statement: Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength.

Surprisingly enough, several important acts listed below (which I regard as acts of a State) would all have been ruled out by Thoreau's one word—*never*.

1. The Declaration of Independence.
2. The first ten amendments to the Constitution.
3. Adoption of our decimal system of currency.
4. Legislation establishing the Northwest Territory.
5. Establishment of our Coast and Geodetic Survey (charts and lighthouses for navigation—location of principal meridian and survey of most of the United States into townships).
6. Establishment of National Observatory which prepares and publishes the Nautical Almanac for navigators and astronomers.

I leave it to you—were these acts of the State? If not, what was the nature of the body enacting them?

If our objective is to convey plausible ideas we must use words in the sense in which they are commonly used. Those who take a different view of the State from that of President Wilson, will need to draw a sharp distinction between the State that seems to do nothing but the bad, and whatever it is that does the good things that are done, not by individuals, but by groups.