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THE CASE AGAINST CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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*This essay was
written in 1969.*

In this essay, which was completed a few days before the assassination of Martin Luther King, I examine and criticize, among other matters, King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance. There is a bitter sorrow in seeing part of my argument underlined with the blood of this American leader and the consequent civil disorder. While I find some personal satisfaction in what I believe was King's growing understanding of the limits of civil disobedience, this only increases my sense of the loss to the nation. We have lost not only an eloquent advocate of civil disobedience but a leader who was in the course of transcending civil disobedience in the direction of statesmanship. We may pay heavily for the loss.

As a teacher, however, Martin Luther King is not lost to us. He still speaks; we may listen and think. I have no better way of paying him honor and respect than to seek instruction in a critical examination of his principles, and that is what I have tried to do here.

The most striking characteristic of civil disobedience is its irrelevance to the problems of today. The fashion in civil disobedience seems likely to die out as quickly as it burst into flame with the actions of the Montgomery bus boycotters and the words of Martin Luther King. Moreover, today's rejection of civil disobedience comes not mainly from right-wing defenders of law, order, and the status quo, but from the very sources of radical

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