

# A SELECTIVE LIST OF Historic Civil Disobedience Actions



**T**here have been countless acts of civil disobedience throughout history in virtually every country by people opposed to oppressive laws, governments, corporations, institutions, and cultures. Below is a listing of just a few notable — *because sheer size or subsequent impact* — and disparate examples (mostly in the United States) since Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” essay. In **bold** are names of just a few of the organizers or participants, each of whom could merit a separate study by students.

1846 U.S.  
**WAR / SLAVERY**  
**Henry David Thoreau** refuses to pay taxes that support the Mexican-American War and slavery

1850s-1860s U.S.  
**SLAVERY**  
Underground railroad leads thousands of slaves to freedom; the one run by **Harriet Tubman** frees 300 slaves

1906-1914 South Africa  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
South African campaign for Indian rights organized by **Mohandas Gandhi** (5,000 arrested during the campaign)

1917 U.S.  
**WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE**

Inspired by similar actions in Britain, **Alice Paul** and 217 others (including **Dorothy Day**) are arrested for picketing the White House, considered by some to be the first nonviolent civil disobedience campaign in U.S. history; many go on hunger strikes while in prison and are brutally force-fed



*Suffragist pickets arrested at the White House, 1917. Photo: Harris & Ewing*

1918-1919 U.S.  
**WORLD WAR I**  
Draft resisters and conscientious objectors imprisoned for agitating against the war (**Eugene Debs, Evan Thomas, Julius Eichel, Ammon Hennacy, Max Sandin**)

1930-1931 India  
**INDEPENDENCE**  
**Gandhi’s** Salt March to the sea initiates a year-long campaign promoting nonpayment of taxes, sedition, and nonviolent overthrow of the government (over 100,000 arrested in what is probably the largest civil disobedience in history)



*Gandhi during the “Salt March,” at the start of the massive civil disobedience campaign in India, 1930. Photo via Wikipedia.*

1936-1937 U.S.  
**LABOR**

Autoworkers (CIO) organized 900 sit-down strikes — including 44-day sit-down in Flint, MI — to establish the right to unionize (UAW), seeking better pay and working conditions

1940-1944 India  
**INDEPENDENCE / WORLD WAR II**  
The Quit India campaign led by **Gandhi** defied the British ban on antiwar propaganda and sought to fill the jails (over 60,000 jailed)

1940-1945 U.S.  
**WORLD WAR II**  
Pacifists oppose the war by not registering for the draft, refusing induction, or walking out of camps set up for COs (**Dave Dellinger, Igal Roodenko, George Houser, Larry**

TOP PHOTO: CNVA protest (Dennis Weeks, Charlotte Keyes pictured) at armory missile display, Dec. 1961 (photo by Troy Mayr via Gene Keyes)

**Gara, Jim Peck, Ralph DiGia, Walter Gormly, Bayard Rustin, Corbett Bishop, Julius Eichel, Evan Thomas, A.J. Muste, Max Sandin)**

1942 Norway  
**OPPRESSION / WORLD WAR II**

About 75 percent of the country's teachers refuse Quisling's orders to join the Nazi teachers' union (1,000 are jailed)



1943 U.S.  
**SEGREGATION**  
Imprisoned conscientious objectors strike to protest segregated dining halls at Danbury Prison (**Ralph DiGia, Jim Peck**)

1947 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Journey of Reconciliation "freedom ride" through the upper South (**Jim Peck, Wally Nelson, Igal Roodenko, Bayard Rustin, Ernest Bromley, George Houser**)

1940s-1950s U.S.  
**WAR**  
Refusal to pay for World War II, Korean War, and subsequent military spending (**A.J. Muste, Wally Nelson, Juanita Nelson, James Otsuka, Maurice McCrackin, Ernest Bromley, Marion Bromley, Eroseanna Robinson, Walter Gormly, Marj Swann, Ammon Hennacy**)

1955-1956 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
**Rosa Parks** arrest for refusal to move from the white section of a bus touches off the year-long Montgomery bus boycott



*Rosa Parks being fingerprinted after her 1955 arrest in Montgomery, AL. Photo: Wide World*

1958-1962 Pacific Ocean  
**NUCLEAR WEAPONS TESTING**  
Sailing of *Golden Rule, Phoenix, Everyman I, II, III* into nuclear test zones (**Albert Bigelow, Jim Peck, Earle Reynolds, Barbara Reynolds, George Willoughby**)

1955-1961 U.S.  
**NUCLEAR WAR**  
Hundreds arrested for refusal to take shelter during the annual compulsory air raid drills in NYC and other places across the U.S. (**Dorothy Day, Jim Peck, A.J. Muste, Ralph DiGia, Bayard Rustin, Ammon Hennacy, David McReynolds, Eileen Egan**)

1957ff U.S.  
**NUCLEAR WAR**  
Trespassing onto military bases (e.g., Omaha, NE, Cheyenne, WY, Nevada test site), boarding of Polaris nuclear submarines, engaging in long distance marches organized by Committee for Nonviolent Action among other groups (**A.J. Muste, Bradford Lyttle, Marj Swann, Erica Enzer, Karl Meyer**)

1960 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Lunch counter sit-ins beginning in Greensboro, NC, spread throughout the South, and led to the formation of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (3,600 arrests across the country)

1961 Britain  
**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**  
Direct action against nuclear weapons was spearheaded by the Committee of 100; 17,000 participated in a sit-down in Trafalgar Square, where 1,300 were arrested (**Bertrand Russell**)

1961 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Freedom Rides to desegregate interstate bus travel throughout the South resulting in beatings and the arrests of hundreds (**Jim Peck, Albert Bigelow, John Lewis**)

1963 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Southern Christian Leadership Conference campaign to desegregate



*Police dogs used to against demonstrators in Birmingham, AL, 1963. Photo: Bill Hudson/AP.*

downtown Birmingham, AL, by filling the jails resulted in 3,500 arrests during the 2-month campaign, as well as beatings, attacks by police dogs, and fire hoses (**M.L. King, Fred Shuttlesworth**)

1964 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Organized by the NAACP, sit-ins at auto dealerships in San Francisco to protest discrimination led to hundreds of arrests over a two-month period including 226 in one day (4/11/64)

1964 U.S.  
**FREE SPEECH**  
Free Speech Movement occupation of administration building at UC Berkeley, where almost 800 were arrested, at the time the largest single-day mass civil disobedience in U.S. history (**Mario Savio**)

1964ff U.S.  
**VIETNAM WAR**  
Draft card burnings (**David Miller, Tom Cornell, David McReynolds**); first done in 1947 to protest peace-time draft

1965 U.S.  
**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights result in arrests and beatings (**M.L. King, James Bevel, Hosea Williams**)

1960s-70s U.S.  
**VIETNAM WAR**  
Widespread draft resistance as well as counseling violation of draft laws; estimates of draft resistance range from a 500,000 to two million men, 3,000 of whom were ultimately jailed (**David Harris, Randy Kehler, Benjamin Spock, William Sloan Coffin**)



Burning of draft cards in NYC to protest Vietnam War, 1965. Photo: Neil Haworth.

1967 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

Stop the Draft Week actions held across the country, with 123 arrests in Oakland, CA, and 264 in New York (**Joan Baez, Benjamin Spock, Jim Peck, Kay Boyle, David Harris, Randy Kehler, David McReynolds, Igal Roodenko**)

1967 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

Confront the Warmakers action at the Pentagon (683 arrested, including **David Dellinger, Jim Peck**)

1967-1972 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

Destruction of draft board files as well as property of war corporations (**Phillip Berrigan, Daniel Berrigan**)

1968 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

The Presidio 27 — military prisoners in San Francisco stockade — protest inhuman conditions (charged with mutiny and given 2-year sentences)

1968 Czechoslovakia  
**REPRESSION**

Lightening Warsaw Pact invasion undermined by eight months of spontaneous nonviolent noncooperation and resistance by students and others

1960s-70s U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

A half million people participate in telephone and/or income tax refusal to protest Vietnam War (**Joan Baez, Karl Meyer, Martha Tranquilli, Brad Lyttle, Gloria Steinem, Dave Dellinger, Barbara Deming**)

1971 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

May Day actions were designed to shut down in Washington, DC, by blocking traffic and key facilities throughout the city (13,500 arrested in the largest civil disobedience in U.S. history, including **Benjamin Spock, Barbara Deming, Grace Paley, David Dellinger, Ralph DiGia, David McReynolds, Jim Peck**)



Part of 1971 May Day actions in Washington, DC. Photo: Ed Hedemann.

1971 U.S.

**VIETNAM WAR**

Release of the "Pentagon Papers" to press by **Daniel Ellsberg**

1976-circa 1982 U.S.

**NUCLEAR POWER**

Nuclear power stations across the country are occupied by demonstrators (1,415 arrested at Seabrook, NH, 1977, and 1,953 arrested at Diablo Canyon, CA, 1981), inspired by similar actions in Europe (**Sam Lovejoy**)

1977 South Africa

**REPRESSION**

Protests opposing apartheid and the murder of **Stephen Biko** spread from Univ. of Fort Hare (more than 1,200 arrested)

1978 U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS / POWER**

Sit-in for Survival blockade of the U.S. Mission during the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in NYC (400 arrests)

1978-1979 U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

Rocky Flats Truth Force year-long blockade of the railroad tracks supplying the Rocky Flats plutonium bomb factory

in Colorado (**Daniel Ellsberg, Allen Ginsberg**)

1979 U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS / POWER**

Wall Street Action during which activists block the streets to the NY Stock Exchange (1,045 arrested)

1980 U.S.

**WAR / MILITARISM**

The Pentagon is blockaded by activists after a march of 1,500 organized by the Coalition for a Non-Nuclear World (600 arrested, including **Dan Ellsberg, Grace Paley, Jim Peck, Dave Dellinger, Ben Spock, David McReynolds**)

1980 to present U.S.

**WAR / MILITARISM**

"Plowshares actions" committed by small groups of mostly Christian activists who enter military (and other) installations to damage military hardware, then await arrest; more than 100 such actions worldwide (**Daniel Berrigan, Phillip Berrigan**)

1980 and 1981 U.S.

**WAR / MILITARISM**

Approximately 2,000 women in 1980 and 3,500 in 1981 surround, blockade, and stretch yarn across the entrances to the Pentagon as part of the Women's Pentagon Action (145 and 65 arrested, including **Grace Paley**)

1981ff Europe / U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

Beginning with Greenham Common in Britain, peace encampments — many women-only — were established outside all Euromissile bases as well as in the U.S. with the intent to disrupt military exercises and war games

1982 U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

Blockade the Bombmakers human obstructions at five nuclear missions to the UN during the second Special Session on Disarmament (1,691 arrested — largest single-day CD action in NYC history)

1982-1987 Europe / U.S.

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

Demonstrators block European

installations of U.S. "Euromissiles" (Pershing/cruise missiles) precipitating more than 5,000 arrests annually until the 1987 INF Treaty (**Petra Kelly, Daniel Ellsberg**)

1983-1985 U.S.  
**NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

The White Train campaign, initiated by Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action (near Seattle) blocked rail shipments of nuclear weapons across the U.S. and forced the Dept. of Energy to switch to trucks (**Jim Douglass, Shelley Douglass**)

1985-1990ff U.S.  
**CENTRAL AMERICA**

Pledge of Resistance organized civil disobedience actions in response to U.S. military intrusion in Central American; 1,000 were arrested at Federal buildings protesting the embargo of Nicaragua (May 1985); protesting U.S. El Salvador policies 240 were arrested at the Pentagon (Oct. 1988); 1,100 were arrested occupying Congressional offices, military bases, and the White House to protest the San Salvador Jesuit murders (Nov. 1989); 620 were arrested at the White House on the 10th anniversary of Oscar Romero's assassination (Mar. 24, 1990)

1989 West Bank  
**OPPRESSION**

The residents of Beit Sahour refused their taxes to protest the Israeli occupation; Israel responded with arrests, property seizure, cutting phone lines, putting the town under curfew for 42 days

1987ff U.S.  
**AIDS / HOMOPHOBIA**

ACT UP, among others, organize actions across the country at which hundreds are arrested, including 600 on Oct. 13, 1987, at the Supreme Court in Washington, DC

1980s-present U.S.  
**WAR / MILITARISM**

Hundreds of antiwar activists refuse to pay some or all of income tax to protest U.S. wars and military spending, esp. Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq (**Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, Randy Kehler, Betsy Corner, J. Tony Serra, Julia Butterfly Hill**)

1990s U.S. / Canada  
**FOREST DEFENSE**

Many nonviolent direct actions, including tree-sits (**Julia Butterfly Hill**) and sit-ins, roadblocks, and the largest civil disobedience in Canadian history of 900 people opposed to old growth logging of Clayoquot Sound in 1993

1999 U.S.  
**ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION**

Over 40,000 demonstrators gathered in Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle; a loose coalition of groups — the Direct Action Network — formed human blockades in streets and intersections to disrupt the meetings (157 arrested); the success of this protest encouraged many subsequent actions at WTO events around the world

1995-2005ff IRAQ  
**IRAQ WAR**

Illegal shipments of medical supplies, food, and humanitarian aid into Iraq by groups such as Voices in the Wilderness, Code Pink, among many others; activists were arrested and Voices was fined thousands of dollars by U.S. government for violating U.S. sanctions (**Kathy Kelly, Medea Benjamin**)

2004 U.S.  
**IRAQ & AFGANISTAN WARS**

Among the many actions against the Republican National Convention in NYC was a day of civil disobedience coordinated by the A31 Coalition where streets and intersections were blocked (1,781 arrested, the most ever at a U.S. political convention)

## SOURCES

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