A SELECTIVE LIST OF

Historic Civil Disobedience Actions

There 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

WAR / SLAVERY
Henry David Thoreau refuses to pay taxes that support the Mexican-American War and slavery

1850s-1860s

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

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

1918-1919

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)

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

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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 Gara, Jim Peck, Ralph DiGia, Walter Gormly, Bayard Rustin, Corbett)

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

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 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)

1966ff
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)

1968
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)

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

Police dogs used against demonstrators in Birmingham, AL, 1963. Photo: Bill Hudson/AP.
VIETNAM WAR
Release of the “Pentagon Papers” to press by Daniel Ellsberg

1976-circa 1982

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

1971ff

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

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

CENTRAL AMERICA
Pledge of Resistance organized civil disobedience actions in response to U.S.
military intrusion in Central America; 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 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
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)

2011-2012
U.S.
OCCUPY WALL STREET
Began in Sept. 2017 as an occupation of Zuccotti Park (near Wall Street) to protest economic and social inequality, the movement emphasized consensus decision making and direct action, resulting in dozens of marches and hundreds of arrests. The movement, which popularized the slogan “We are the 99%,” spread to 1,000 cities around the world and resulted in thousands of arrests

2013ff
MORAL MONDAYS
North Carolina religious activists, upset by discrimination and cutbacks in key social programs, began conducting civil disobedience actions, such as occupying the state legislature building, resulting in the arrest of 1,000 people in 2013. The protests spread to other states, notably Georgia, South Carolina, Illinois, and New Mexico (Rev. William Barber)

2016ff
U.S.
PIPELINE PROTESTS
The Standing Rock Sioux tribe blockaded the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which threatens water sources and burial grounds in their South Dakota reservation. The addition of other tribes made this the largest Native American assembly in over 100 years. Protests of gas and oil pipelines continue from the Dakotas to Massachusetts to Georgia resulting in hundreds of CD arrests

SOURCES
Besides Wikipedia and other online sources as well as the Peace Collection at Swarthmore College, the following books and magazines (many out of print but available in some libraries) provide more in depth information on the above mentioned individuals and civil disobedience actions:
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