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 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

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)

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 CIVIL RIGHTS Journey of Reconciliation “freedom ride” through the upper South (Jim Peck, Wally Nelson, Igal Roodenko, Bayard Rustin, Ernest Bromley, George Houser)


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


1957ff CIVIL RIGHTS 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 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 CIVIL RIGHTS 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 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 CIVIL RIGHTS Southern Christian Leadership Conference campaign to desegregate downtown Birmingham, AL, by filling the jails resulting 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)

1964-1965 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 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 VIETNAM WAR Draft card burnings (David Miller, Tom Cornell, David McReynolds): first done in 1947 to protest peace-time draft

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

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

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

1967-1972  U.S.  VIETNAM WAR
Release of the “Pentagon Papers” to press by Daniel Ellsberg

1967  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)

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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)

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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  REPRESS
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  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 — mainly 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)

1989 West Bank

Romero’s assassination (Mar. 24, 1990)

1990 House on the 10th anniversary of Oscar 1989); 620 were arrested at the White

1990 Protesters at the Penta-

1990 protests against the embargo of Nicaragua

1990 1,000 were arrested at Federal buildings

1990 Pledge of Resistance organized civil

1990 occupations of Congressional offices, military

1990 policies 240 were arrested at the Penta-

1990 protesting the embargo of Nicaragua

1990 1989ff U.S.

1990 Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq (U.S. wars and military spending, esp.

1990 pay some or all of income tax to protest

1990 Hundreds of antiwar activists refuse to

1990 1980s-present U.S.

1990 The Power of the People, Robert Cooney & Helen


1990 My Experiments with Truth, Mohandas Gandhi, Beacon, 1993


1990 Shoulder to Shoulder, Midge Mackenzie, Vintage, 1988


1990 Nonviolence in America, Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, Orbis, 1995

1990 Stride Toward Freedom, M.L. King, Beacon, 2010


1990 Why We Can’t Wait, M.L. King, Signet Classics, 2000


1990 Do It!: Scenarios of the Revolution, Jerry Rubin, Touchstone, 1970

1990 We Won’t Go!, Alice Lynd, Beacon, 1968

1990 Armies of the Night, Norman Mailer, Plume, 1995


1990 We Won’t Pay!: A Tax Resistance Reader, Dave A. Gross, 2008


1990 “Bodies Upon the Gears” speech, Mario Savio, 1964


1990 MAGAZINES/NEWSLETTERS:

1990 The Conscientious Objector (1939-1946)


1990 The Peacemaker, Peacemakers (1949-1992)

1990 Liberation Magazine (1956-1977)


1990 The Nuclear Resister (1980-present)


1990 More Than a Paycheck, NWTRCC (1994-present)

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8/24/10

4 • HISTORIC CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE ACTIONS