



WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE TODAY?

Background for teachers:

Civil disobedience has its roots in antiquity, but its more recent application can be traced to American essayist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). Thoreau was arrested for refusing to pay a poll tax, since he believed the money generated from the tax would be used to fund the Mexican War, a campaign with which he was at odds.

Thoreau saw the war as one that would simply lead to the expansion of slave territory in the United States, and therefore in his view was an immoral undertaking

As a result of not paying the tax, Thoreau was arrested and spent a night in jail, an experience that later proved seminal to his famous essay, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*.

Two key figures in the history of civil disobedience were inspired by Thoreau's action -- Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), also known as Mahatma ("Great Soul") Gandhi, who through the practice of satyagraha (Sanskrit for "holding to the truth") helped lead India out from under the yoke of British occupation, and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), who led the nation's peaceful civil rights movement until his assassination.

Other famous practitioners of civil disobedience include Dorothy Day (1897-1980), founder of the Catholic Workers Movement and a champion of the dispossessed, and Cesar Chavez (1927-1993), a son of migrant workers and founder of the United Farm Workers Union; both used non-violent, yet often illegal, means to draw attention to their causes and create change in institutional policies.

More recent acts of passive resistance include the protests of anti-Iraq war activist Cindy Sheehan and her followers. Sheehan's son died in Iraq. Outraged by the government's justification for the war, Sheehan camped outside President Bush's Texas home in the summer of 2005, hoping to meet with the president and draw attention to her cause.