

The importance and significance of civil disobedience history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. • Martin Luther King Jr. Civil disobedience has been defined as the refusal to comply with certain laws or to pay taxes and fines, as a peaceful form of political protest (oxforddictionaries. com). Civil disobedience has been the cause for infinite protests, abundant rebellions, countless uprisings, and numerous revolutions and revolts around the globe; in which almost all were due to unjust and unfair governments and their rules. Civil disobedience is seen by many as an expression of an individual's right to free speech, although it is accounted as a unlawful and illegal in many countries which have given its citizens' these rights in the first place. Even in a democratic country like the United States of America individuals who have been guaranteed their right to free speech in the first amendment cannot protest an unfair government and its laws, and if one were to do so he might get sentenced for being a law-breaker and a rebel.

Civil disobedience has been seen in many countries whether democratic or dictator ruled, and although both these form of governments are completely different from each other they are common in punishing any form of disobedience that affects their government. Most people understand as to why a dictator ruled country would be so against any form of civil disobedience, the real questions that arise are that why would a democratic country, such as the united states, punish individuals for exercising their rights that are guaranteed in their constitution? And is civil disobedience even that important of a right in a democratic country for a person to put his own self in harm's way? The answer to the former question is only properly answered by individuals who are deeply affected by civil disobedience; the

answer to the latter question can, however, be answered by any individual who has the right to speak against their government. This paper is going to help identify and understand the importance of civil disobedience in a democratic country and its role towards the success of that country, and more specifically the role of this form of rebellion in the United States. Civil disobedience is an important part of a democratic country because it is one of the driving factors that allow individuals to exercise their rights to free speech and speak up against an unfair and unjust government and its laws. Many people have performed civil disobedience in many countries and have almost always succeeded in gaining their goals. Civil disobedience allowed these people to overthrow unjust laws and is extremely vital for a democratic country. As Howard Zinn said " Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it."

Any form of nonviolent protests or rebellions that refuse to accept any given policy or law because it is unjust is viewed as civil disobedience. The word civil disobedience was first coined by David Henry Thoreau in his essay ' Civil Disobedience' in 1848, and has since been used to term any such activities (stanford. edu). Many activities as these have been proven to be vital in overcoming an unjust law and can be seen in Gandhi's salt march, or Jose Bove's anti-globalization movement in dismantling unwanted enterprises in France (sojo. net). In both these cases the citizens protested against unjust laws with non-violent movements and were able to succeed in getting their voices hear, and were thus classified as civil disobedience. Another view on the meaning of civil disobedience is it being a ' public, non-violent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of

bringing about a change in the law or policies of a government (Rawls 320). Although both, Thoreau's and Rawl's definition identify civil disobedience to protest a given law, Rawl explains it to be more of a political act to bring about changes as opposed to it just being a protest, and such thinking is vital in understanding the role of civil disobedience in a democracy as being a changing factor and not just as an opposing one.

Civil disobedience has shown its colors in almost every corner of the earth from India to Spain, England to South Africa, and Palestine to Spain; all these countries witnessed individuals speaking up against oppression from their government. India's Mahatma Gandhi was amongst the first few people who adopted civil disobedience on such a high level and used it for their ideologies and lives. Gandhi was imprisoned time and time again for his unwillingness to obey unjust laws but he never gave up his acts or beliefs. Gandhi's nonviolent salt march against the British is recognized today as one of the most compelling and fructifying acts of civil disobedience, and this march also resulted in gaining freedom of India from the British (crf-usa.org). "It was civil disobedience that won them their civil rights" •Tariq Ali. Another example of civil disobedience's importance in a democracy would be the 1990 London riots against a poll tax levying taxes on all individuals regardless of their means (bbc.co.uk). If civil disobedience had not been in place in the country all the protestors would have been given the worst punishment but since individuals have a right to speak up against unfair laws and taxes, the government of England replaced that policy with the council tax levying tax on the value of a house (bbc.co.uk). Such protests allowed the people to get rid of an unwanted tax and also gave them the power to

express their opinions which merely understates the importance of civil disobedience in a democracy.

Civil disobedience also plays a really important role in the United States because after all this idea gave birth to the country itself and the term 'Civil disobedience' was also formed in this place. The US was built when the American colonists refused to listen to their British leaders and started disobeying them and their rules. Their acts of civil disobedience such as the Magna Carta, the Boston Tea Party and the Declaration of Independence allowed the colonists to take control of their own lives and thus a new country was formed based on the foundation of these disobedience acts. Civil Disobedience is as old as our species, as old as war and peace. "War lords and priests have always differed over the holy and the profane - City of God and City of Man. Popular protests are chronicled in Homer and Rig-Veda, Bible and Scripture, Talmud and Koran. Establishments have been in constant fear of protesters: Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Father Daniel Berrigan, and Civil Disobedience - Vietnam; WTO. Civil Disobedience has never been easy or safe; but in America it is constitutional: Civil Disobedience is at the heart of both British and American constitutionalism. It is as hallowed as Magna Carta and as powerful as the deposition of President Richard Nixon"- Harvey Wheeler. Civil disobedience has been in place for many centuries and has always led to something good and better. In America it led to firstly its freedom, then women's rights, desegregation for African Americans, the ending of the Vietnam War, and countless other things (constitution. org). Civil Disobedience allowed Americans to speak up against the British's and its

unjust laws and rules, and then against its own government during the Mexican-American, Vietnam-American and the Iraq-American war and other issues, and although people did suffer from protesting in a non violent way it did enable them to get their voices heard which did have an impact in the long term.

David Henry Thoreau the man behind the term civil disobedience performed this act when he refused to pay taxes that would fund the American-Mexican war and ended up in prison stated that “ If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law”. Civil disobedience can be viewed by many as a weapon against injustice and cruelty. It enables people to help out others by standing up against their oppressors. It gives them an opportunity to allow someone a fair and just chance at life. It allowed people to end slavery in the United States, and wars in Mexico. It enabled the freedom of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, United States of America, Germany, the Baltic countries, and many others. It helped end numerous unnecessary wars, and taxes, and even had a role in protecting the environment through protests and sit-ins and all the movements carried out were nonviolent movements that brought about social changes (civilliberties. org). Even though Civil disobedience has had such a huge impact on American’s lives, there are still a few people who question the importance of this act. For them Civil disobedience is no less than treason against state but what they do not realize is that civil disobedience is a non-violent movement that is meant to hurt or destroy no one other than the unjust law its opposing, and is ‘ the opposite of violence’ (Herngren 1993). Civil disobedience is looked as something important for a

country and is recognized as a driving factor for the improvement of a country, and is not meant at all to be harmful to the county in any way. “ Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good”- Gandhi.

Many people have talked about resisting a social change that would result in the demise of a country but only a few have actually stood up and spoken against it, many sacrificing their lives in the process, but they have all achieved one thing and that is resisting unscrupulous, and fraudulent government and their laws. These people allowed millions of others to have a chance at a better future only because they stood up against oppression and established the importance of civil disobedience in a country. “ Human history begins with man’s act of disobedience which is at the very same time the beginning of his freedom and development of his reason” -Erich Fromm.