

The Problem Is Civil Obedience

By Howard Zinn (November 1970) • Chapter 20 from *Voices of a People's History*



In November 1970, after my arrest along with others who had engaged in a Boston protest at an army base to block soldiers from being sent to Vietnam, I flew to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to take part in a debate with the philosopher Charles Frankel on civil disobedience. I was supposed to appear in court that day in connection with the charges resulting from the army base protest. I had a choice: show up in court and miss this opportunity to explain—and practice—my commitment to civil disobedience, or face the consequences of defying the court order by going to Baltimore. I chose to go. The next day, when I returned to Boston, I went to teach my morning class at Boston University. Two detectives were waiting outside the classroom and hauled me off to court, where I was sentenced to a few days in jail. Here is the text of my speech that night at Johns Hopkins.

I start from the supposition that the world is topsy-turvy, that things are all wrong, that the wrong people are in jail and the wrong people are out of jail, that the wrong people are in power and the wrong people are out of power, that the wealth is distributed in this country and the world in such a way as not simply to require small reform but to require a drastic reallocation of wealth. I start from the supposition that we don't have to say too much about this because all we have to do is think about the state of the world today and realize that things are all upside down. [Daniel Berrigan](#) is in jail—a Catholic priest, a poet who opposes the war—and J. Edgar Hoover is free, you see. [David Dellinger](#), who has opposed war ever since he was this high and who has used all of his energy and passion against it, is in danger of going to jail. The men who are responsible for the My Lai massacre are not on trial; they are in Washington serving various functions, primary and subordinate, that have to do with the unleashing of massacres, which surprise them when they occur. At Kent State University [four students were killed by the National Guard](#) and students were indicted. In every city in this country, when demonstrations take place, the protestors, whether they have demonstrated or not, whatever they have done, are assaulted and clubbed by police, and then they are arrested for assaulting a police officer.

Now, I have been studying very closely what happens every day in the courts in Boston, Massachusetts. You would be astounded—maybe you wouldn't, maybe you have been around, maybe you have lived, maybe you have thought, maybe you have been hit—at how the daily rounds of injustice make their way through this marvelous thing that we call due process. Well, that is my premise.

All you have to do is read the Soledad Letters of George Jackson, who was sentenced to one year to life, of which he spent ten years, for a seventy-dollar robbery of a filling station. And then there is the U.S. Senator who is alleged to keep 185,000 dollars a year, or something like that, on the oil depletion allowance. One is theft; the other is legislation. Something is wrong, something is terribly wrong when we ship 10,000 bombs full of nerve gas across the country, and drop them in somebody else's swimming pool so as not to trouble our own. So you lose your perspective after a while. If you don't think, if you just listen to TV and read scholarly things, you actually begin to think that things are not so bad, or that just little things are wrong. But you have to get a little detached, and then come back and look at the world, and you are horrified. So we have to start from that supposition—that things are really topsy-turvy.

And our topic is topsy-turvy: civil disobedience. As soon as you say the topic is civil disobedience, you are saying our *problem* is civil disobedience. That is *not* our problem.... Our problem is civil *obedience*. Our problem is the numbers of people all over the world who have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience. And our problem is that scene in *All Quiet on the Western Front* where the schoolboys march off dutifully in a line to war. Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world, in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves, and all the while the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem. We recognize this for Nazi Germany. We know that the problem there was obedience, that the people obeyed Hitler. People obeyed; that was wrong. They should have challenged, and they should have resisted; and if we were only there, we would have showed them. Even in Stalin's Russia we can understand that; people are obedient, all these herdlike people.

But America is different. That is what we've all been brought up on. From the time we are this high—and I still hear it resounding in Mr. Frankel's statement—you tick off, one, two, three, four, five lovely things about America that we don't want disturbed very much.

But if we have learned anything in the past ten years, it is that these lovely things about America were never lovely. We have been expansionist and aggressive and mean to other people from the beginning. And we've been aggressive and mean to people in this country, and we've allocated the wealth of this country in a very unjust way. We've never had justice in the courts for the poor people, for black people, for radicals. Now how can we boast that America is a very special place? It is not that special. It really isn't.

Historical Context

What was happening at the time when the author wrote this document? How does it help you understand it?

Intended Audience

What audience might have the author wanted to inform or influence? How does this impact the author's message?

Point of View

Who is the author? How might their background (race, gender, socioeconomic class) impact their perspective?

Purpose

Why did the author write this? What might have been their motivation?

Outside Information

What specific historical information outside of the document can you connect to the document? How does it help you better understand it?