

The Problem is Civil Obedience: Transcript of a Speech Delivered by Howard Zinn at a peace rally on Boston Common on May 5, 1971

Six young people who were in jail with me yesterday in Washington, DC were arrested for walking down a street together singing "America the Beautiful". If Thomas Jefferson were in Washington yesterday walking down the street, he would have been arrested. He was too young, and he had long hair. And if Jefferson had been carrying the Declaration of Independence with him in Washington yesterday, he would have been indicted for conspiring to overthrow the government along with his co-conspirators George Washington, John Adams, Tom Payne and a lot of others. So, obviously the wrong people are in charge of the machinery of justice, and the wrong people are behind bars and the wrong people are calling the shots in Washington. The whole world seems to be topsy-turvy. And what we want to do is try to set it right.

A lot of people are troubled by civil disobedience. As soon as you talk about committing civil disobedience they get a little upset. But that's exactly the purpose of civil disobedience, to upset people, to trouble them, to disturb them. We who commit civil disobedience are disturbed to and we need to disturb those who are in charge of the war, because the president, by his lies, is trying to create an air of calm and tranquility in people's minds when there is no calm and tranquility in Southeast Asia, and we mustn't let people forget that.

And those people who get troubled and excited about civil disobedience have got to have some sense of proportion. The people who commit civil disobedience are engaging in the most petty of disorders in order to protest against mass murder. These people are violating the most petty of laws, trespass laws and traffic laws, in order to protest against the government's violation of the most holy of laws, "tho shalt not kill". And, these people who commit civil disobedience don't do harm to any person. They protest the violence of government.

We need to do something to disturb that calm, smiling, murderous president in the White House. Now they say we disturb even our friends when we commit civil disobedience, and that's true. But the history of civil disobedience in this country and in other parts of the world shows that people may at first sight be put off by civil disobedience, but at second sight, at second thought, they learn that the protesters against war are right, and after a while they join us in their own way, and that's why we must carry on.

The Congressmen, you see this in the newspapers, while seven thousand people are arrested in Washington, you see Congressmen coming out in the headlines saying, "Oh, that's bad. You're upsetting those of us in Congress who have worked so hard. You're rocking and so on and so forth." Well, we need to upset Congress. We need to disturb Congress, because for six years the President has carried on an unconstitutional war, and for six years the bodies of Americans have been coming home in plastic bags, and

for six years the villages and countryside of Vietnam have been destroyed, and these members of Congress have been sitting there silently, passively, voting the money for this war. And if these Congressmen don't like the upsets to courtesy and decorum represented by civil disobedience, then let them courteously, separately, put an end to the murder in Vietnam by stopping the funds for the war, or by filibustering or impeaching the President and the Vice President and impeaching every high official in government. Let them not criticize those who in anguish cry out with the only means we have left with our energies, with our spirits, with our bodies, against the abomination of this war.

It's been a long time since we impeached a president. And it's time, time to impeach a President, and the Vice President, and everybody else sitting in high office who carries on this war. The Constitution says, Article 2 Section 4, that the President and the Vice President, and other civil officers of the government may be impeached for, and I quote, "High crimes and misdemeanors". Is not making war on the peasants of Southeast Asia a high crime?

We grow up in a controlled society, and the very language we use is corrupted from the time we learn to speak and read. And those who have the power, they decide the meaning of the words that we use. And so we're taught that if one person kills another person, that is murder, but if a government kills a hundred thousand persons, that is patriotism. We're taught that if one person invades another person's home, that is breaking and entering, but if a government invades a whole country, and searches and destroys the villages and homes of that country, that is fulfilling its world responsibility.

When nuns and priests, horrified by the burning of children, disrupt actions that brought about the war, actions that do no violence to human life, they're arrested for conspiracy to kidnap. And when the government reaches into a million homes and snatches the young men out of them under penalty of imprisonment, and gives them uniforms and guns and sends them off to die, that is not kidnapping. That's selective service. So, let's restore the meaning of words. And let's tell the world that the government has committed high crimes. And that we don't want to continue being accomplices to these crimes. And we have to do that, and we have to say that in every way our conscience compels and every way our imaginations suggest.

And so the veterans will throw away their medals, and GIs will refuse to fight, and young men will refuse to be drafted and women will defy the state, and we will refuse to pay our taxes, and we'll disobey. And, they'll say we're disturbing the peace, but there is no peace. What really bothers them is that we are disturbing the war.

For two weeks, for two weeks we have not let the country forget about this war. The veterans in their ways, the mass meetings in their way, the disrupters in their way... and we must continue disturbing the war and the makers of the war. We must

not give them a moment's rest until the soldiers and warplanes are out of Southeast Asia. And so, tomorrow morning, early in the morning, let's all go to Government Center. All of us. Let us, let us be non-violent. We are going to be protesting against violence. We may break some petty laws. We may interfere slightly with business as usual. But these are not terrible crimes. There are terrible crimes being committed, but sitting down and locking arms, that's no terrible crime. War is the great crime of our age.

We may be arrested, but it's not a shame to be arrested for a good cause. The shame is to do the job of those who carry on the war. You policemen, you policemen around here who are going to be called on to make arrests tomorrow, remember it's your sons also that are taking off for war to be killed. And it's your sons, your sons as well as ours that they want to die for the profit of General Motors and Lockheed. It's your sons too, your sons too that they want to die for the political profit of the Mayor Daleys and the Spiro Agnews (unintelligible)

So you policemen will have to put away your clubs and put away your guns, put away your tear gas. Become non-violent. And learn to disobey the order for violence. You agents of the FBI who are circulating in the crowd, hey, don't you see that you're violating the spirit of democracy by what you're doing? Don't you see that you're behaving like the secret police of a totalitarian state? Why are you obeying J. Edgar Hoover? Why are you obeying the lies of an executioner, acting like a dictator from Paraguay rather than a public servant in a supposedly democratic state? Remember, members of the FBI, you are secret police, and you ought to learn what the German secret police did not learn in time. Learn to disobey.

So you police and you FBI, if you want to arrest people who are violating the law, then you shouldn't be here. You should be in Washington. (Unintelligible) You should go there immediately and you should arrest the President, and his advisors, on the charge of disturbing the peace of the world.