Background
Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was a philosopher and writer best known for his criticisms of American social and political institutions. He was also among the leading transcendentalists of the mid-nineteenth century. One of Thoreau's major works, *Civil Disobedience*, espouses the need to prioritize one's conscience over the dictates of laws. The essay was published in 1849, a time of great social and political upheaval in the United States. The two major issues being debated at the time were slavery and the Mexican-American War. Both prompted Thoreau to actively protest what he deemed "unnecessary and arrogant acts of aggression." Thoreau was arrested for refusing to pay a poll tax, since he believed the money would be used to fund the Mexican War, a campaign with which he was greatly at odds. Thoreau saw the war as one that would lead to the expansion of slave territory in the United States, and in his view, it was an immoral undertaking. Thoreau was arrested for not paying the tax and spent a night in jail, an experience that later proved seminal to his famous essay.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines civil disobedience as “a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies.” Furthermore, it states, “The persons who practice civil disobedience are willing to accept the legal consequences of their actions, as this shows their fidelity to the rule of law. Civil disobedience is said to fall between legal protest, on the one hand, and conscientious refusal, revolutionary action, militant protest and organized forcible resistance, on the other hand.” These definitions highlight two important distinctions between civil disobedience and other forms of protest. First, those who practice it are fully aware and accepting of the fact that their actions could result in arrest and/or imprisonment (and are willing to accept this punishment), and second, acts of civil disobedience are morally justifiable breaches of the law.

Related Readings
Subunit 3.3 Civil Disobedience
- Earlham College: Peter Suber’s “Civil Disobedience”

Instructions
“Civil Disobedience” has had widespread influence around the world since its initial publication, inspiring the work and lives of many activists in their agitation for a just society. This assessment will help you evaluate the role and consequences of civil disobedience within key social and political movements. You will use “Civil Disobedience” as the foundation for evaluating the roles and activities of leaders who utilized methods of civil disobedience with the goal of making meaningful social and political change.
Following is a list of individuals who were responsible for leading important civil disobedience (and nonviolent resistance) movements throughout world history. For each person, answer the following questions:

- Describe the background of the law or governmental policy in question. What was the individual and his or her allies protesting?
- In what specific acts of civil disobedience did they engage?
- How did the government and/or the public respond to their actions?
- Were the goals of movement achieved?
- What role did civil disobedience play in helping them to achieve their goals? Did their actions work against them in any way?

To help you formulate answers to these questions, conduct an Internet search using the individual’s name and/or “acts of civil disobedience” as keywords. You will find a wealth of information on each of these leaders and their respective movements.

1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—clergyman and civil rights activist
2. Alice Paul—American suffragist
3. Nelson Mandela— Anti-apartheid activist and former president of South Africa
4. Mohandas Gandhi—Leader of the Indian independence movement
5. Leymah Gbowee—Liberian peace activist