

## Breaking the Law for the Sake of Justice

On March 21, 2003, more than 1,300 Americans were arrested in San Francisco, and thousands more were arrested in Boston, New York, Toledo, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other major cities around the nation. The *San Francisco Chronicle* carried the story:

*SAN FRANCISCO—More than 1,300 anti-war activists were arrested in San Francisco Thursday as they blocked streets and struggled with police in a civil disobedience campaign protesting the US invasion of Iraq. The campaign coincided with hundreds of other protests around the country involving tens of thousands of Americans as the war in Iraq got under way.*

The protestors said they were trying to communicate to the public their strong view that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was unjust and that they were willing to risk arrest to make their point. This was not the first time Americans deliberately broke the law to protest an injustice. During the 1960s, thousands of black people illegally sat in “white-only” sections of restaurants, theaters, buses, and other segregated businesses to protest unjust segregation laws, and thousands of blacks and whites engaged in civil disobedience to protest state laws that kept blacks from exercising their constitutional rights to vote and to attend the same

public schools as whites. During the 1970s, tens of thousands of people broke the laws to protest the U.S. war in Vietnam, occupying government property, refusing to pay taxes that would support the war, and trespassing on the private property of companies that made military weapons. In the 1980s, numerous Americans illegally smuggled into the United States and sheltered hundreds of Central American refugees fleeing from torture and virtually certain death in their own war-torn countries. In the 1990s, thousands engaged in civil disobedience to protest the Gulf War. When arrested, protestors have inevitably said that their actions are a matter of conscience and that they are obligated to obey their conscience rather than the law.

### QUESTIONS

1. Was it wrong for the antiwar activists to break the law in 2003 to protest the U.S. invasion of Iraq? Is it wrong when an activist breaks only those specific laws the activist believes are unjust?
2. Is civil disobedience ever justified?
3. How would Socrates respond to these various groups of protestors?