

# If a Tree Falls

## *A Study in Nonviolent Civil Disobedience*

**Subject:** Civics / U.S. Government

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Time Required:** 1 class period (45–60 minutes)

**Lesson Type:** Role-play simulation, civic ethics discussion, reflection

**Materials Needed:**

- Classroom desks
  - Role cards (optional but recommended)
  - Student paper or digital document for reflection
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## Lesson Overview

Nonviolent civil disobedience has played a critical role in democratic societies, particularly when minority groups seek to challenge decisions made by those in power. This lesson places students inside a fictional—but realistic—conflict involving economic development, public order, and moral resistance.

Through role-play and guided discussion, students explore **what qualifies as a “just cause,” the responsibilities of government authority, and the moral obligations of citizens** who choose to resist laws or actions they believe are wrong.

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## Essential Question

**When, if ever, is it justified to break the law through nonviolent civil disobedience?**

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## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define the core principles of nonviolent civil disobedience
- Evaluate whether an action meets the standard of a “just cause”
- Analyze the roles and responsibilities of citizens, police, and elected officials
- Distinguish between legality and morality
- Reflect on the personal and civic consequences of protest

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## Foundational Principles of Civil Disobedience

Before beginning the simulation, the class discusses the **three widely accepted rules of nonviolent civil disobedience**:

1. **The cause must be just**
2. **Participants must not respond with violence**, even when faced with force or arrest
3. **Participants must be willing to accept the consequences** of their actions

These principles serve as the lens through which the simulation and discussion are evaluated.

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## The Scenario: “If a Tree Falls”

### Setting

A small Midwestern town with a historic downtown district.

At the center of Main Street stands a **massive oak tree**, hundreds of years old. It has been a gathering place, landmark, and symbol of the town for generations.

However, the tree **blocks traffic** and stands in the way of a proposed downtown development project.

A major developer has agreed to invest in the town **only if the tree is removed**.

The mayor has **already signed the contract**.

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## The Conflict

On the morning construction is scheduled to begin:

- A **small group of citizens** has gathered
- They have **linked arms and formed a circle around the tree**
- They refuse to move
- The **majority of the town supports the development**, not the protest

The mayor orders the police to remove the protestors.

National media has arrived.

The situation is unfolding live.

# If a Tree Falls — Role Cards

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## **ROLE: MAYOR**

### **Who You Are:**

You are the elected mayor of this town. You were voted into office to improve the local economy and address long-standing traffic problems.

### **What You Know:**

- A major developer has agreed to revitalize downtown
- The deal **requires removal of the oak tree**
- You have already signed the contract
- A majority of the town supports the development
- National media is now watching

### **Your Goals:**

- Enforce the contract
- Maintain public order
- Protect the town's reputation
- Respond to media pressure

### **Constraints:**

- You must act within the law
- You may not order unnecessary violence

### **Key Question You Must Answer:**

Is leadership about following the will of the majority—or protecting the rights of the minority?

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## **ROLE: POLICE CHIEF**

### **Who You Are:**

You are the head of the town's police department and report directly to the mayor.

### **What You Know:**

- The protest is nonviolent

- The mayor has ordered the protestors removed
- The eyes of the nation are on this town

**Your Goals:**

- Enforce the law
- Protect public safety
- Keep your officers under control
- Avoid escalating the situation

**Constraints:**

- You must follow lawful orders
- You may not use excessive force

**Key Question You Must Answer:**

Does enforcing the law always equal justice?

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## **ROLE: POLICE OFFICER (2–3 STUDENTS)**

### **Who You Are:**

You are a sworn police officer on duty today.

### **What You Know:**

- Protestors are nonviolent
- They are refusing to move
- You have been ordered to remove them

### **Your Goals:**

- Follow orders
- Maintain peace
- Protect yourself and others

### **Constraints:**

- You may not provoke or retaliate
- You must act professionally

### **Key Question You Must Answer:**

How do you feel enforcing a law you may personally disagree with?

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## **ROLE: PROTESTOR**

### **Who You Are:**

You are a citizen who believes removing the oak tree is wrong.

### **What You Believe:**

- The tree has historical, cultural, and moral value
- Economic growth should not erase community identity
- Some things are worth personal sacrifice

### **Your Rules:**

- You **must remain nonviolent**
- You **must not resist arrest physically**
- You **accept the consequences** of your actions

### **Your Goal:**

- Prevent the tree's removal
- Bring attention to the issue

### **Key Question You Must Answer:**

Is being right worth being punished?

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## **ROLE: CITIZEN (SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT)**

### **Who You Are:**

You are a town resident who supports the development project.

### **What You Believe:**

- The town needs jobs and growth
- Traffic problems hurt local businesses
- The protestors are standing in the way of progress

### **Your Goals:**

- Support the mayor's decision
- Voice frustration with the protest
- Appeal to practicality and economics

### **Constraints:**

- You may not engage in violence
- You are not in charge

### **Key Question You Must Answer:**

Should the will of the majority outweigh the conscience of the minority?

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## **ROLE: CONSTRUCTION WORKER / CONTRACTOR**

### **Who You Are:**

You are hired to remove the tree.

### **What You Know:**

- You are legally contracted
- Delays cost money
- This is your job, not a political statement

### **Your Goals:**

- Complete the job
- Avoid legal or physical trouble

### **Constraints:**

- You cannot act against the law
- You do not make policy decisions

### **Key Question You Must Answer:**

Are you responsible for the consequences of work you are paid to do?

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# **ROLE: REPORTER / MEDIA**

## **Who You Are:**

You are a national reporter covering the story.

## **What You Do:**

- Ask questions
- Observe behavior
- Frame the public narrative

## **Your Goals:**

- Get compelling quotes
- Highlight conflict and moral tension
- Expose contradictions

## **Questions You May Ask:**

- “Why is this tree worth arrest?”
- “Is the mayor silencing dissent?”
- “Are police protecting justice or power?”

## **Key Question You Must Answer:**

How does media attention change power dynamics?

## Role Assignments

Assign students to the following roles:

- Mayor
- Police Chief
- 2–3 Police Officers
- Protestors (minority group)
- Concerned Citizens (supporting development)
- Construction Workers / Contractors
- Reporter / Media

### Classroom Tip:

Place a desk in the center of the room to represent the tree. Protestors physically circle the desk with linked arms.

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## Simulation Guidelines

- Protestors must remain **nonviolent and passive**
  - Police must attempt to carry out lawful orders
  - The mayor may respond to media pressure
  - The reporter may ask questions during or after the action
  - The simulation runs **only a few minutes**—long enough for tension to develop
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## Debrief & Guided Discussion

After the role-play, bring the class together and discuss:

1. **Did the protest meet the definition of a just cause?** Why or why not?
2. **Who gets to decide what a “just cause” is?**
3. **Were the police acting unjustly when they followed the mayor’s order?**
4. **Is it ethical to disrupt the will of the majority?**
5. **Does accepting punishment legitimize civil disobedience—or simply reinforce authority?**

Encourage students to speak **from their assigned roles**, then from their personal views.

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# Student Reflection Assignment

## Prompt:

*Describe one insight you gained from this lesson about civil disobedience, authority, or citizenship. Explain how the simulation shaped your thinking.*

## Requirements:

- One well-developed paragraph (or more)
  - Must reference a moment or role from the simulation
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## Assessment Options

- Reflection response (formative or summative)
  - Participation rubric (role engagement, respect, nonviolence)
  - Exit ticket: *“One question I still have about civil disobedience”*
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## Teacher Notes

- Emphasize that **being nonviolent does not guarantee moral correctness**
  - Highlight the distinction between:
    - Legal authority
    - Moral legitimacy
  - This lesson pairs well with:
    - Civil Rights Movement
    - Environmental protests
    - Labor movements
    - Modern protest movements
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## Why This Lesson Works

- Forces students to confront **moral ambiguity**
  - Makes abstract civic principles **physically real**
  - Avoids easy “right vs. wrong” answers
  - Centers minority rights within a democratic system
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## **Optional Extensions**

- Compare this scenario to a real-world protest
- Re-run the simulation with the protestors as the majority
- Add a judge or court ruling component
- Connect to Supreme Court cases involving protest and assembly