

# 27+ Years at the White House Gates



## Longest Continuous Vigil Anywhere?

By Ellen Thomas

On June 3, 1981 a pilgrim named William ("Doubting") Thomas sat down on the White House sidewalk with a cardboard sign - "Wanted, Wisdom and Honesty" - to talk about

over the caption, "It's the right of every American to set up a stand and make a point in Lafayette Park."

Those who share the materialistic values symbolized by the White House sometimes view the vigil as "visual blight."

The Washington Times and Washington Post have called the vigilers "weirdos" and "lunatics" and the signs "eyesores," "gibberish," and "junk."



On the other extreme, there are those who, valuing life, view the policies of the White House as slightly "mad," and believe that the vigil reflects sanity.

According to National Park Service figures, the signs have been seen by over three million people per year.

To those who maintained perhaps the longest continuous vigil in human history, the signs represent the ancient right -- Thomas Jefferson may have termed it "the duty" -- of people in a democracy to nonviolently voice opinions on issues of broad public concern, even if it means they must go to prison for their beliefs.

Some journalists were more than tolerant, likening the vigilers to saints and prophets.



Actually the vigilers just tried to practice what they preached. They still have hope for humanity.

They believe that someday, if they hold on long enough, people might wake up to their own responsibilities and begin, at last, to act compassionately, wisely, honestly. For this, and for the children, they endure harsh weather, the whims of police, and abusive behavior by hostile bystanders.

So, the vigil continues... working for peace, hoping for humanity.

## It Wasn't Easy

During the early 1980's, hostile Park Police and Secret Service officers tried to drive the vigilers and their transient friends away.

At first they were arrested and charged with "loitering" or "disturbing the peace."

But few judges would convict them, and no judge would imprison them, knowing the history of the First Amendment.

Thanks to the 1976 *Stacey Abney* decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals, sleep as part of a round-the-clock vigil was still considered, in and of itself, "expressive conduct protected by the First Amendment."

So there was a meeting between President Reagan and Department of Interior lawyer Richard Robbins, and shortly thereafter regulations began appearing in the Code of Federal Regulations, to:

(1) define "camping" as "using the park for living

accommodation purposes, regardless of the activity in which one might otherwise be engaged," thus negating the First Amendment and the *Abney* decision;

(2) move the vigilers from the White House sidewalk to Lafayette Park;

(3) reduce the number of signs that an individual might have to two, and the size to 4' x 4' x 1/4", no higher than six feet off the ground, and requiring that someone always be within three feet of the signs; and

(4) reduce the amount of "property" a person might have other than the signs to 3 cubic feet, a real hardship in cold and wet weather.

These regulations allowed police to harass, intimidate, and arrest all demonstrators who came to Lafayette Park, and have been used extensively to chase most people away.

But patience, perseverance, creativity, Thomas's pro-se lawsuits against police misconduct, and



sympathetic friends kept the vigil from disappearing.

## Peace Park

In 1985, we began calling Lafayette Square "Peace Park." A sign on the corner read "Welcome to Peace Park" and, back when there was still traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, we could hear the Trolley Tour drivers point out our signs to tourists as "Peace Park."

During our time in jail, the City Paper and Washington Post both published articles and letters to the editor referring to "Peace Park."



## Prison (1988)

Early in 1987, police issued "camping" tickets right and left. In 1988, Thomas and I were sent to

prison for three months, along with several fellow-vigilers, charged with "camping."

Concepcion kept

the vigil going while we were gone.

When we immediately returned to the park upon our release, the police backed off for a while.



## The Ground War At Home (1991)



One of our most memorable experiences was during the first Gulf War, when the Washington Peace Center and others very effectively reached out to the community to join vigilers in Lafayette Park for 40 days and nights of continuous drumming.

After President George H.W. Bush told a group of supporters, "those damned drums are keeping me awake all night," the police began enforcing an absurd "60 decibels" rule (background noise was 80 decibels!), snatching drums and signs and arresting people, sometimes brutally. Bush later retracted his statement as "hyperbole," but the damage was done.

A video we produced after the war, "The Ground War At Home," played on public access television all over the country during the spring of 1991, showing police misconduct and utter disregard for the First Amendment.



...justice, wisdom, peace, and the threat of nuclear war. Except when forced to leave by police and judges, Thomas remained true to his vigil until the day he died on January 23, 2009.



Concepcion Picciotto also came to Lafayette Park and began working with Thomas in 1981.

Many people joined Thomas for varying lengths of time. I was one of them, marrying Thomas in the park in May 1984.



Four presidents have, with varying degrees of patience, reduced and endured the vigil's impact.



To the public, those who maintained the vigil outside the White House aroused a spectrum of perceptions.

The 1991 and 1994 Berlitz Travel Guide for Washington, DC, pictured the vigil

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While anti-war protesters were harassed and arrested for even putting a sign or drum down, or drumming at more than 60 decibels, halfway down the block a few pro-war advocates were encouraged by police when they stuck signs in the fence, blew whistles, and encouraged motorists to honk.



One of the drummers, Diana Nomad, was arrested and convicted for chanting "Na myo ho reng e kyo" and tapping a prayer drum, but the Court of Appeals overturned the conviction, ruling that drumming outside the White House is a form of speech protected by the First Amendment. Remember the Diana Nomad case if the police try to silence your drums! <http://prop1.org>

### Proposition One

By 1990, we had collected thousands of signatures on a petition for global nuclear disarmament and conversion of the war machines to provide for human needs -- solar panels and windmills, not missiles and bombs! The success of the petition proved that these ideas were popular all over the world, even in the U.S. We lobbied Congress with petitions in hand, to no avail. So we decided to bring the idea to the voters of DC, in hopes that this might impress the politicians. In September, 1993, we brought the voters DC Initiative 37 - the "Nuclear Disarmament and Economic Conversion Act." We called this idea "Proposition One."

A hard-working crew of unpaid young people registered to vote and hit the streets, collecting thousands of signatures at shopping centers, churches, bus stops, grocery stores, and (with assistance from well-known activists) we got the idea on the ballot, and won the election.

As a result, since 1994 a bill has been introduced nine times by DC's Delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, most recently as HR 1653 on March 19, 2009.

## IMMORTALIZED IN DOONESBURY

Garry Trudeau has shown a strong interest in Lafayette park since 1984, and paid particular attention in 1991:



Unfortunately, although eleven other Representatives have cosponsored the legislation over the years, it has remained stuck in House Committees, and has never been brought to the floor for debate and vote. Fortunately, Representatives John Lewis and Dennis Kucinich have said they will sign on this session!

**For this reason, I will be traveling the country the next two years to help put Proposition One on the ballot in every state possible in 2010.**

I'll be headed west this summer, and hope to speak to as many people as possible... especially energetic, idealistic people who understand the visionary seeds planted by William "Doubting" Thomas outside the White House from June 3, 1981 until January 23, 2009. **Please write or call if you would like me to speak to a group near you!**

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## William "Doubting" Thomas, Presente!

This flier was first produced for the weekend of March 20-22, 2009, when people from all over the world joined our celebration of William Thomas's extraordinary life.

He wrote a book, "Life, Liberty, and the Hot Pursuit," which chronicles his pilgrimage to the Middle East in the 1970's. This book will soon be published, but can be found online if you go to <http://prop1.org/thomas.htm>. Let us know if you would like to obtain a copy of the book.

Thomas took on the federal regulation-writers who attempted to

snuff out free speech in front of the White House, and although they jailed him, ultimately he won, because the vigil continues even now, after his death on January 23, 2009.

Thomas also produced a video, "Proposition One: Peace Through Reason," which explains the genesis of the Washington DC voter initiative for global nuclear disarmament and economic conversion.

Below is an essay, written by Thomas, which was published by the Washington Post in 1984. The cartoons were provided by the Post.

## Lafayette Park Belongs to the Dissenters



Letter to Editor  
 December 22, 1984  
 Washington Post "Free For All"

Elizabeth Rowe (Close to Home, Dec. 9, 1984) lamented that "Lafayette Square ... is no longer a place to delight the eye and invite the passerby" and that the park should be "restored to its traditional use as a 'public pleasuring place.'" She suggested establishing "the city's new Hyde Park on the Ellipse."

In a letter Dec. 15, Thomas W. D. Wright praised Elizabeth Rowe's inspiration and opined that "some [demonstrators] are aware they are defiling beauty."

It seems grossly unfair to credit Elizabeth Rowe with this "inspiration." In January 1983, the secretary of the Interior, James Watt, had the same notion. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending upon one's perception of "beauty"), he ran up against the First Amendment.

As early as July 1981 a tourist suggested that I move my signs ("trash" he called them) from in front of the White House to the Ellipse. I replied that if I moved, it would only be a matter of time before someone else's aesthetic sensibilities would be offended and would suggest I move to Greenbelt, Md. or Yosemite National Park, or the top of Mt. McKinley. And I pointed out that freedom of speech is something of a moot point if there is no one to hear what you are saying.

Perhaps Elizabeth Rowe has her traditions crossed, or maybe I just don't understand what she means by "a public pleasuring place." But one thing is certain--no place on the planet is a more traditional place for public discourse than Lafayette Park. And, traditionally, intolerant segments of the ponderous majority have sought to stifle minority dissent in front of the presidential palace.

Until recently those who considered the free expression of ideas less significant to the interests of democracy than the preservation of the status quo have been thwarted in their attempts to prohibit criticism in the area where it is most likely to reflect on the chief administrator.

As recently as 1965, a bill was before Congress (it was voted down by the Senate) which was aimed at banning demonstrations within 1,000 feet of the White House. Now we have entered a new era where bureaucrats write regulations that restrict freedom of religion, speech, the press and the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievance.

In "Birth of a Street Person" (Style, Dec. 14), a story about my wife, [Ellen] Thomas, and me, the U.S. attorney, Royce Lambeth, was quoted as asking, "Why can't (the demonstrators in front of the White House) conform?" Perhaps the answer lies in the question: "Why couldn't Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego kneel down and worship the king's idol?"

I have two additional solutions for folks who don't like to listen to folks they don't like to look at:

1) Build a chain-link fence around the District, call it "King's Dominion," and prohibit protesting within the fence.

2) Move to the Soviet Union and leave Lafayette Park to those who value individual freedom and human life above "perfect" Polaroid snapshots and the "sanctity" of national icons.

William Thomas

[Note: substitute "Iraq" or "Korea" for "Soviet Union" and it still makes sense. [et@prop1.org](http://prop1.org)]

### Proposition One Has Been Introduced Nine Times:

#### "The Nuclear Disarmament and Economic Conversion Act"

The United States Government shall--

(1) disable and dismantle all its nuclear weapons and refrain from replacing them at any time with any weapons of mass destruction;

(2) redirect resources that are currently being used for nuclear weapons programs to use--

(A) in converting all nuclear weapons industry employees, processes, plants, and programs smoothly to constructive, ecologically beneficial peacetime activities during the 3 years following the effective date of this Act, and

(B) in addressing human and infrastructure needs such as housing, health

care, education, agriculture, and environmental restoration, including alternative fuel sources;

(3) undertake vigorous good faith efforts to eliminate war, armed conflict, and all military operations; and

(4) actively promote policies to induce all other countries to join in these commitments for world peace and security.

This Act shall take effect when the President certifies to the Congress that all foreign countries possessing nuclear weapons have established legal requirements comparable to those set forth [herein] and those requirements have taken effect.