

# **A LIFE OF ACTIVISM**



**HOWARD ZINN  
IN HIS OWN  
WORDS**

**SELECTED  
WRITINGS FOR  
THE CENTENNIAL**

**COLLECTED BY  
BEACON PRESS,  
HAYMARKET BOOKS,  
THE NEW PRESS, AND  
SEVEN STORIES PRESS**

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*Howard Zinn  
In His Own Words:  
Selected Writings for  
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A collaboration between publishers  
Beacon Press, Haymarket Books,  
The New Press, and Seven Stories Press

# A Life of Activism

Howard Zinn

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*Celebrating 100 Years of Howard Zinn*

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## CHAPTER I

## Civil Disobedience in the 21st Century

Excerpted from [\*Howard Zinn Speaks: Collected Speeches 1963–2009\*](#) by Howard Zinn  
(Haymarket Books, 2012)

I'll talk about war. And when you talk about war, you have to talk about civil disobedience, because the only way you get out of war is by civil disobedience. I say this to those people here who want to get out of war, to think about what you might do next, make your plans for tomorrow. I don't want to say a lot about the present war in Iraq.

The reason I don't want to say a lot about the present war in Iraq, I assume that everybody knows it's a disaster. Everybody knows it was one of the most stupid wars we've ever engaged in—and we've engaged in a number of them. It's a disaster not because we're losing. What if we were winning? What would that mean? People talk about winning and losing. You don't win in wars. You don't win in wars. That's a very important thing to keep in mind. So when I hear McCain talk about "we're going to win, I want us to win in Iraq," and, frankly, when I hear Obama talk about "we don't have to win in Iraq, we



have to win in Afghanistan,” please, no. We don’t want to win. We don’t belong there. Just a very simple moral point before you get into the specifics of exactly what’s happening there and what should we do, the sort of basic moral statement: We do not belong in Iraq, we do not belong in Afghanistan. Our troops do not belong in any place in the world where people do not want us and where we are doing harm. It’s as simple as that.

I wrote a book early in the Vietnam War, the first couple years of the escalation of the war. I wrote a book called *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*. Mine was the first book, actually, to call for withdrawal from Vietnam. And there were responses and people said, “We can’t withdraw. There will be a bloodbath.” So we stayed for five more years. In those five years another thirty-five thousand Americans were killed and another million Vietnamese were killed. And then in the end we withdrew, and there was no bloodbath.

I say this because people scare you into sticking with a terrible situation by telling you, “If you don’t stick with a terrible situation, there will be a more terrible situation.” It’s a very common thing to do. We must bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we must kill several hundred thousand innocent people in Japan, because if we don’t, something more terrible will happen. Actually, just from a factual, historical point of view, all those things they said about “Oh, we’ll have to invade Japan and we’ll save a million lives” were just untrue. The fact is, we did not have to drop the bombs. But nobody knew what would happen if we didn’t drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, although the Japanese were very, very close, on the brink of surrender. Nobody knew what would happen. But we knew what would happen when we dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There is a sort of principle involved there, there is a kind of theory you can come out with there. And that

is that in war the horror of the means is certain, the outcome is uncertain. So when people tell you, “We must bomb Afghanistan in order to win the war on terror” or “in order to get the terrorists,” the truth is, you don’t know if you’re going to get the terrorists, but in the meantime, with the means you are using—you are bombing Afghanistan, you are invading Afghanistan, you’re killing in Afghanistan more people than were killed in the Twin Towers by those terrorists—you’re engaging in terrorism. You’re engaging in terrorism now on the supposition that you are going to do something useful against terrorism in the future. But in fact the result of bombing and invading Afghanistan is we’ve created more terrorists, we antagonized more people, we aroused more hostility. And where does terrorism come from? It comes from a great reservoir of hostility that comes out of our foreign policy....

I want to talk not just about the war in Iraq, because the war in Iraq will come to an end at some point, we’re going to have to leave at some point. It’s interesting, they say there will be civil war when we leave. Well, how do we know if we leave in five years or ten years or fifteen years, there won’t be civil war when we leave? And in the meantime, many, many, many more people will die, just as happened in Vietnam, that many, many more people died after we said we wouldn’t leave because there will be trouble. One of the important things when you take arguments like that into consideration, when they say, “Oh, we must stay for this reason,” one of the things you must take into account is whether the people who tell you this care about the things they tell you they care about. Do they really care about human life? Do they really care about democracy? The people in Washington who talk about “we’re going to bring democracy to Iraq,” do you think Bush cares about democracy in Iraq? Do you think

Cheney cares about democracy in Iraq? It's laughable. One of the first principles that anybody studying history or studying political science or studying sociology or studying the world around you, one of the first principles you should understand is that the interests of the government are not the same as your interests. It's a very important principle to understand. If you think that the government has the same interests as you, then it seems natural for you to believe the government. They care about the same things you do. What if the government doesn't have the same interests? Is the interest of George Bush the same as the interest of the GI he sends to Iraq? I don't think so. Here's where history comes in. When you study the history of the United States or study the history of any country, you will find that the interests of the government are not the interests of the people. This is true not just in totalitarian states but in so-called democratic states. When you start with that understanding, it will clear up a lot of things for you and will make you very wary of the things that you hear that come out of the seats of authority.

Then you will understand why governments lie.

Did you know that governments lie? All the time. Not just our government. It's just the nature of governments. Why do they lie? Because they have to lie in order to keep power. If they told the truth, they would be out of power in two weeks. So there is a connection between the difference of interest between the government and the people and the deceptions continually carried on by governments.

Yes, I want to stop and talk about principles and theories and ideas about war and about governments and about people, because I want us to think beyond the war in Iraq. Because what happens when the war in Iraq ends and then they wait ten years or so, until the American people have subsided in their anger against war, and get us into another war? Maybe they won't even wait

that long, if they can conjure up another enemy, if they can create another Hitler. Hitler was very useful to us, especially after the war, because then anytime you could find a Hitler somewhere or somebody who we could say was Hitler, boom, we can go to war. Noriega in Panama is Hitler. Go to war. Panama is a big, threatening country. Saddam Hussein is Hitler. Saddam Hussein is a tyrant, but is he Hitler? But Hitler is useful. So we have to think, what happens when they try to get us into the next war? So we have to not just get us out of Iraq, we have to have think about war in general.

For that it helps to know some history. If you don't have history, it's as if you were born yesterday. If you were born yesterday, you're a blank slate, you're an infant in the world. If you don't have any history, then anybody in power can say anything to you and you have no way of checking up on it. Then the president can come up to the microphone and say, "We've got to go to war in order to do something about terrorism," or "We've got to go to war to bring democracy to the Middle East," or "We've got to go to war because someday this little beleaguered, ruined nation may attack us." If you don't know any history, well, you have no cause for being skeptical. If you know some history, if you know how many times governments have lied, if you know the history of American foreign policy, if you know how many times the nation has gotten into war on the basis of deceiving the public and telling them things about how we're doing this to save civilization, how we're doing it for democracy.

Look at the history of the Mexican War. We're going into Mexico. First of all, we were going into Mexico because there was some clash on the border and they fired at us. All these little incidents that presumably are occasions for war. The Gulf of Tonkin incident. They fired at our ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Where is the Gulf of Tonkin? It must be off the coast of San Francisco. Those

Vietnamese must have been firing at our ships off the coast of San Francisco. No. Did Americans know where the Gulf of Tonkin was? “They fired at us.” It turns out they were lying about all of that. They were lying about the occasion for starting a war in the Philippines. “Oh, the Filipino soldiers fired at us.” What were we doing in the Philippines? It’s not New Jersey. “So we’re going into Mexico to bring civilization to the Mexicans.” No.

That’s where the business of interests comes in. The government tells you they’re doing this for one thing. No, the government has its own interests. The slaveholders of the 1840s had their interests. They wanted more slave territory. President Polk had his own interest—expanding the nation. People who are leaders of countries always love expansion. It’s true of any institution. Institutions love to expand. And, of course, some of the expansions are rather peaceful and other expansions are violent and deadly. Generally, the expansions of nations are violent and deadly, as our expansion.

So we took half of Mexico and therefore got all this beautiful territory in the Southwest. Why do we have all these Spanish names around? Why is California full of Santa Cruzes and Santa this’s and Santa that’s? That’s Mexican territory, which we stole from them in an aggressive war, lying to the American public. And now we have to build a wall along the southern border to keep the Mexicans out of the country that we stole from them....

And, of course, the war in Vietnam. It’s amazing how much people have forgotten about the war in Vietnam. If people really remembered the history of the war in Vietnam, they would never have agreed to go into Iraq. The lies told about Vietnam: we’re going to bring democracy to the Vietnamese, we believe in self-determination. It’s interesting. You believe in self-determination. In other words, you believe those people should determine their

destiny. Therefore, you send a force of 500,000 troops into their country.

Yes, history can put you on guard. Maybe that’s why we’re not getting a lot of really good, intelligent, and critical history, because the guardians of our culture get nervous when you get critical. And sometimes when you start talking about this history and you talk about the United States as an expansionist power, first we expanded across the continent. All benign, right? We just expanded. It’s like a biological thing: you expand. I remember the maps in the schoolroom. Oh, the Louisiana Purchase, Mexican Cession. Nothing about a war. Mexican Cession, Louisiana Purchase. We just bought these territories. What about the violence? What about the fact that in the Louisiana territory there lived hundreds of Indian tribes which we had to expel and annihilate in order to do that? That was our expansion, you see.

If you start talking about that and talking about the Mexican War and about this war and that war and all the wars in which the American people were deceived, people say, “Wow, you’re putting down our country.” No, we’re not putting down our country. We’re putting down these rascals who have run our country for too long. That’s who we’re putting down. People are not making the distinction between country and government. People say, “You’re being unpatriotic because you’re criticizing the government.” Be prepared for that, right?

Unpatriotic? What is patriotism? Does patriotism mean “support your government”? No. That’s the definition of patriotism in a totalitarian state. The definition of patriotism in a democracy is Mark Twain’s definition of patriotism. He said, “I’ll support my government when it does right. I’ll support my country all the time.” The country and government are not the same.



When you hear a young fellow speaking in the microphone and he's going off to Iraq and the reporter asks him, "Why, young man, are you going? Why have you enlisted?" and he says, "To fight for my country," sorry, the man has been deceived. He's not fighting for his country. If he dies, he's not dying for his country. He's dying for Bush and Cheney. He's dying for those corporations that are making huge sums of money in the war, Blackwater.

So that's a very important distinction, between government and country. If people really read and understood the Declaration of Independence, they would understand that distinction, because the Declaration of Independence says governments are set up by the people to ensure certain rights. The governments are artificial creations; they're not given by God. They're set up by the people to give the people certain rights, to protect the equal right of everybody to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. According to the Declaration of Independence, when governments become destructive of these ends—and these are the words of the Declaration—"it is the right of the people to alter or abolish" the government. The Declaration of Independence is a manifesto for civil disobedience.

That's what civil disobedience is. The laws are made by the government. Some of the laws might be good. But when the law violates basic moral principles or when the law protects somehow the violation of those basic principles, then it is your duty as a citizen, as a person who believes in democracy, to violate that law and to stand up not for the government but for the principles that the government is supposed to stand for. So yes, we have to think about basic principles in connection with war. And we have to think about the relationship between the government and the citizen.

My own attitude toward war came out of two things. It came out of my study of history and my own experience in war. I was in the air force in World War II and I

dropped bombs on various cities in Europe: on Germany, on Czechoslovakia, on Hungary, on France. I enlisted because this was the good war, this was the war against fascism. And it's true, you can make out a better case for World War II, although now I don't believe there is such a thing as a good war, a just war. But you can make out a better case for World War II than any other, because there was this terrible evil, fascism, and we must do something about it.

People didn't think, "Is this the only way to do something about it? Is killing 600,000 ordinary people in Germany through our bombing, is killing 100,000 people in one night in Dresden, is killing several hundred thousand people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is incarcerating 120,000 Japanese in our country, is engaging in a war that will kill fifty or sixty million people, is this the only possible way to resist fascism?" Or is it that after something has happened—this is an interesting phenomenon—after something has happened a certain way in history, it's very hard to imagine it happening any other way, it's very hard to imagine another scenario. The thing that has happened, if it's happened in a certain way, has a certain look of inevitability, of "this is the only way."

But if we are human beings with ingenuity and imagination, we have to begin thinking of different ways of solving problems. This is the conclusion I came to only after the war, because during the war I was an eager bombardier. During the war I dropped bombs on people and didn't think about it. I was dropping bombs from thirty thousand feet. I didn't see people, I didn't see human beings dying, children, their limbs torn off. I didn't see that. So much of modern war has that aspect. So much of modern war is killing people at a distance. The pilots come back from Iraq and happily say, "Mission accomplished." Did they know who they killed? With even

the most sophisticated of bombing devices, do they really know who they killed? They don't. No way.

The technology of war has reached the point, certainly ever since World War I, where war is indiscriminate killing of innocent people and, to a large extent, children. And when war has become that, when war has become the indiscriminate killing of innocent people, then you mustn't engage in it no matter what you're told about democracy and terrorism and this and that, no, because in your reaction to and your support of this, you will be supporting an atrocity, you will be supporting terrorism.

War is terrorism. This is an important thing to keep in mind when you think we're fighting against terrorists. War is terrorism. I see Bush as a terrorist. Seriously. Terrorism is the willingness to kill large numbers of people for some presumably good cause. That's what terrorists are about. And governments—and this is a troubling thought—are capable of far larger-scale terrorism than bands of terrorists like al-Qaeda or the IRA or the PLO. Those terrorists can do terrible things, but governments can do much more terrible things....

One of the things that happen in war—this is what I began to think about as I thought about my own trajectory from being a warrior, being a bombardier, to being antiwar—I realized that what happens is that if the other side is evil, which it often is, you assume, then, that your side must be good. It may not be so. The other side might be evil and you might also be evil. Maybe they're a little more evil. But the point is that you're not suddenly blessed with purity because you are fighting against something evil. It may be that the people on your side are really not good. When you think about it, who fought against Hitler? The British Empire, the French Empire, Stalin's Russia, the American Empire. I know I'm calling names, empires, but that's what they were. So you go through

this psychological trick—they're bad, therefore we're good—forgetting that war corrupts everybody.

This is one of the conclusions I made. War corrupts everybody who engages in it. It doesn't matter. You go back to the Peloponnesian Wars. There are the Spartans and they're the bad guys, and there are the Athenians and they're the good guys, Athenian democracy and all of that. They get into the Peloponnesian Wars, and soon the Athenians are be having like the Spartans. That's what happened in World War II. And that's the nature of war....

We have to stop wars. We have to stop this war. And we have to get out of the habit of war. It's more than a habit. It's an addiction....

In order to turn things around, you've got to create a social movement. The people in the White House are not going to do it. Even if you change the leadership in the White House, that won't do it. Here again, history comes in handy. Whenever important things had to be done and injustices had to be rectified, that initiative did not come from Washington, it came from social movements. It was the antislavery movement more than Abraham Lincoln that was responsible for the end of slavery. It was the labor movement more than FDR that was responsible for the minimum wage and all of that. So we need a new social movement. We need more protests, we need more acts, we need more citizen involvement, yes, and we need civil disobedience. We need dramatic actions. In Vietnam, acts of civil disobedience were very important. It was very important when these priests and nuns and other people went into draft boards and broke the law and were put on trial for trespassing and breaking and entering. They weren't doing violence to people but they were breaking the law. You mustn't break the law. The president can break the law. A thousand times he can break the law. You

cannot break the law. But breaking the law is important because it dramatizes your protest. That's what happened during the Vietnam War. There were many dramatic acts of civil disobedience which aroused people to think more about the war. And probably the most important acts of civil disobedience were by the soldiers, the soldiers who came back from Vietnam and formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War. They exposed atrocities to the public. And the soldiers who remained in Vietnam and would not go out on patrol or the B52 bomber pilots who at a certain point said, "I'm not going to go over and do any more bombing." .... That kind of civil disobedience is needed today.

Keep in mind, the people who have the power—and very often you're so daunted by the people in government who have that power—have that power only because everybody else obeys. When people stop obeying, their power disappears. When soldiers start disobeying, the power to carry on war disappears. Just as when workers stop obeying, the power of a great corporation disappears. When consumers boycott a product, the manufacturers that make that product are helpless. People have power if they organize, if they act, sometimes within the law and sometimes without the law, in acts of civil disobedience. But people have to know they have that power. It will take that to stop the war and to make our country a different kind of country—a peace-loving country, a country that uses its wealth not for war but for health and education and to take care of people.

In order for that to happen, all of us have to start doing something, anything. Little things. You don't have to do heroic things. There are some people who will do heroic things. Little things. The little things add up. That's how social movements develop. Somebody does something small, somebody else does something small, somebody else does some thing small. You get a million

small acts, and they merge at some points in history into a great force that brings about change.

*Excerpted from [Howard Zinn Speaks: Collected Speeches 1963–2009 \(2012\)](#) by Howard Zinn, edited by Anthony Arnove, published by Haymarket Books.*

## CHAPTER II

**Introduction**

Excerpted from *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn—Emma, Marx in Soho, Daughter of Venus* by Howard Zinn  
(Beacon Press, 2010)

**W**hy would a historian move outside the boundaries of the discipline (refuse to be disciplined) and decide to enter the world of the theater—that is, to write plays? I can't speak for others—the historian Martin Duberman is the only one who comes to mind, having written the documentary play *In White America* during the early years of the civil rights movement.

In my case, it was something I had in mind for a long time, because even as I was writing history, my family was involved in the theater. In 1961, when I was teaching at Spelman College in Atlanta, my wife, Roslyn, was cast as Anna, the English schoolteacher, in a black production of *The King and I*. She went on to play a number of roles for Theater Atlanta, including the role of Miss Madrigal in Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*. When we moved to Boston, she was cast in Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at Harvard's Loeb Theater (predecessor of the American Repertory Theater). In Atlanta, my daughter Myla was chosen, over sixty contenders, for the role of

Anne Frank and was cited as Best Actress of the Year in 1962. My son Jeff worked as an actor and director in New York, then moved to Cape Cod and became artistic director of the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater (W.H.A.T.).

So I was left behind, to wander in libraries and engage in the solitary pursuit of writing history, while observing the rest of my family having fun in the theater. Always the longing was there, perhaps having begun as far back as when I was sixteen and saw my first play in a funky little theater in Manhattan.

It was a Federal Theater Project production of *One Third of a Nation*, getting its title from FDR's famous declaration "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." My family fit that description, living in various dingy tenements in Brooklyn. As I sat on a wooden bench (could I expect more, having paid 17 cents for admission?) waiting for the play to begin in the darkened theater, I heard the sirens of fire engines, growing louder and louder, and then saw flames shooting up frighteningly from the stage, where one could make out a tenement building on fire. I soon realized it was all a fake but a marvelously exciting way to introduce the theme of the play—poor people made homeless by fire sweeping through wooden tenements.

That experience suggested to me, early on, the power of drama in conveying a message of social significance. It began a life-long fascination with the stage. When we lived in a low-income housing project in downtown Manhattan, my wife and I would scrape together some money to see Broadway plays. We could only afford the cheapest seats. Still, we were thrilled to see the original productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Native Son*, *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*.

When we moved south, to live in the black community of the Atlanta colleges, and I became involved in the movement against racial segregation, I experienced

the theater vicariously through my family. Moving north, my life centered around teaching history and politics at Boston University, but even more, around the struggle to end the war in Vietnam. Writing about war and civil disobedience, I had no chance to think about writing for the theater. But when the war in Vietnam ended, and I was no longer racing around the country for lectures and demonstrations against the war, I felt free to write my first play, *Emma*, about the outrageous feminist-anarchist Emma Goldman, her comrades, her lovers. I now experienced an excitement that could never be matched in the world of the university. I discovered that writing for the theater had a quality missing in the writing of books and articles. Those were solitary endeavors, but when you wrote a play it quickly became a collective experience.

As soon as you, the playwright, turned over your script to a director, it was no longer a lone creative act. Almost immediately, the play belonged to the director, the actors, the set designer, the lighting and costume people, the stage manager, as much as it did to you. And there was a passion binding all of you together in a collective effort to bring your words to the stage in the most dramatic, most compelling way possible. It was an emotional experience unlike anything I had ever known as a professor, as an author of historical works. I was going to be working with all these other people, intensely, in close quarters, with a warmth and affection foreign to academe. People arrived for rehearsal and hugged one another. It was not a scene one encountered in the university.

But would writing for the theater be as satisfying, for someone like me, whose life and writing had been concentrated on war, law, poverty, injustice, racism? Thinking about it, I concluded that neither form of social struggle could be considered superior. Each had its unique power. Writing historical and political works, I could introduce to my readers ideas and facts that might



provoke them to examine anew the world around them, and decide to join the fray. Writing plays would zoom in on a few characters, and by getting the viewers to identify with them emotionally, move the audience in a visceral way, something not easily achievable in prosaic works of history and political philosophy.

A play, like any other form of artistic expression (novels, poetry, music, painting), has the possibility of transcendence. It can, by an imaginative reconstruction of reality, transcend the conventional wisdom, transcend orthodoxy, transcend the word of the establishment, escape what is handed down by our culture, challenge the boundaries of race, class, religion, nation. Art dares to start from scratch, from the core of human need, from feelings that are not represented in what we call reality. The French rebels of 1968 posted a slogan: “Soyez réaliste. Demandez l’impossible” (“Be realistic. Demand the impossible.”). Centuries earlier Pascal said: “The heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know.”

That is the goal, which not all art attains. And certainly, my writing of plays would fall short of the potential for an imaginative reconstruction of reality. But I would have something to strive for, something outside the disciplines of history and political philosophy. And, I concluded, especially after my first experience in theater, this would be more fun than the lone pursuit of history.

*Emma* was first performed in New York in 1977 at the Theater for the New City, and was directed by my son, Jeff Zinn. The following year, in Boston, it was directed by the Obie Award winner Maxine Klein, with an ensemble of talented performers who had been a successful improvisational group before they turned to the theater. *Emma* ran for eight months, the longest-running play in Boston in 1977. In the eighties it played in New York again, directed by Maxine Klein; then in London, at the Young Vic; and at the Edinburgh Festival, directed

by Pauline Randall. In 1990, translated into Japanese, it was performed in Tokyo and other Japanese cities. More recently, in various translations, it has played in Germany, France, Spain, and Argentina.

In the early 1980s, I wrote my second play, *Daughter of Venus*, which was first performed in New York in 1984, directed by Jeff Zinn at the Theater for the New City, whose artistic directors, Crystal Field and George Bartenieff, were doing some of the most creative theater work in the city. Jeff Zinn directed it again the following year at the White Barn Theater in Norwalk, Connecticut. In 2008, the revised script had a reading at Kate Snodgrass’s Boston Playwrights Theater, directed by David Wheeler, and the following year it had a full performance there and at Suffolk University in Boston, directed by Wesley Savick.

As for *Marx in Soho*, after a reading in Boston at the Boston Playwrights Theater, it was performed in 1995 in Providence, Rhode Island, and then in Washington, D.C. Since then it has been staged in several hundred venues in the United States, performed variously by Brian Jones, Jerry Levy, and Bob Weick. In 2009 it was performed at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, directed by David Wheeler. Translated into Spanish, French, Italian, and German, it has played in a number of European cities, as well as in Havana and other venues in Latin America. After being translated into Greek it was done in various cities by the distinguished Greek actor Aggelos Antonopoulos and directed by Athanasia Karagiannopoulou. I was invited to Athens in 2009 to see the performance, before an audience of a thousand, at the University of Athens.

Excerpted from [Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn—Emma, Marx in Soho, Daughter of Venus](#) (2010) by Howard Zinn, published by Beacon Press.

## CHAPTER III

**They Rebelled***The Long Nineteenth Century*

Excerpted from [\*Truth Has a Power of Its Own: Conversations About A People's History\*](#) by  
Howard Zinn with Ray Suarez  
(The New Press, 2022)

**RAY SUAREZ:** *If you look at the history of the Lowell mills and the strikes that periodically racked the mill towns of Massachusetts, what do they teach you about the industrial revolution?*

**HOWARD ZINN:** One of the things they do is to make you aware that the industrial revolution started before the Civil War. The general impression is that up to the Civil War we were simply an agrarian society, and after the Civil War we became an industrial society. But industry came to New England in the 1820s. It came as soon as the power loom was invented and they could weave cotton to cloth mechanically. Then the textile mills grew in towns like Lowell and Lawrence, and places in Rhode Island.

Their workers were mostly girls. girls would go into these mills at the age of twelve, and many of them would

die by the age of twenty-five; they were working very, very hard. They were working long hours—twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day, six or seven days a week. They were getting up in the dark and going home in the dark, getting a half hour for lunch. They were struggling just to stay alive.

They had come to the mill because they had families back on the farm. These were farm girls coming into the city because it was becoming a cash economy. Money was entering the lives of these people, and now these girls were going to bring in some money.

Of course, they were going to bring very *little* money into the house, because they were getting something like 35¢ a day. It was these conditions that caused these girls, young women, to rebel. They formed associations. They put out a newspaper. And yes, starting in the 1820s and 1830s, they began going on strike. That alarmed not only the mill owners, but also some of the newspapers, which reported that these girls were *holding meetings* and, you know, this was not the proper thing for girls to do. They should know better and take their dutiful place in the industrial world.

But some wonderful literature came out of that struggle. One of these girls, Harriet Robinson, later recalled her first strike. She told how she talked to the other girls on her floor about the fact that elsewhere, in other mills, the girls would be going on strike, because they were fed up with how little they were getting and how hard they were working and the terrible conditions. And breathing in cotton fibers—you can imagine what that does to the lungs.

She was asking, “Will you go out on strike? Will you walk out?” The phrase used was “turn out.” “Will you turn out?” And then when the moment came when the workers at other mills were turning out, she looked at her fellow workers and asked, “Well, are we going?”

Nobody moved.

Then she said, “Well, I’m going to move.” And she did. And then the rest followed.

Later she said, “You know, I still look back on that as one of the great moments of my life.”

**RS:** *The mill owners certainly began this process thinking that a working population of women was going to be more pliable, more easily dominated and controlled than a working population of men. But didn’t they also respond with a certain paternalism to the desires of the women? There were choral societies, the newspaper you mention, sewing circles, schools begun inside the mill working units. Were these initiatives an attempt to make these women’s lives more bearable so that they wouldn’t rebel?*

**HZ:** It is true that the owners tried to create a kind of social life for the girls outside the factory, even though they had very little time to engage in any of these things. But they tried. They did try to make it more palatable for them.

This has been a constant issue in the world of the factory. Does it come from a cynical attempt to keep people in line? Is there a grain of humanity in the owners that says, “Oh, we ought to do something for these people”?

There is a long tradition, into the twentieth century, of people like Henry Ford, thinking that he’ll try to make life on the assembly line a little better. But it’s never enough for workers, and certainly not for these young girls. No, it wasn’t enough, and that is why they rebelled.

**RS:** *Do we see here the roots of what would later become the suffrage movement in a mass sense? Do we see here roots of women’s consciousness as a political force?*

**HZ:** Well, this was a period in which women came into the political conflicts of the day. While we can't find a specific organic connection between the strikes at the Lowell mills and the rise of women activists in the antislavery movement and in the feminist movement, there was a very close connection among women coming out as abolitionists and then coming out for the equality of women. In fact, you might say it became easier for women to begin to demand rights for themselves after they had established a kind of dignity for themselves by joining the abolitionist movement.

They were not totally welcomed in the antislavery movement. That is, these men who were opposed to slavery had still not begun to recognize the rights of women. So when there was an antislavery congress in London, the women had to sit in the balcony. But that inspired them, when they came back to the United States, to say, "No, we are not going to put up with this," and then they began to organize on their own.

That was the root of the women's movement—at the Seneca Falls Convention, where the women drew up a declaration of rights by rewriting the Declaration of Independence to include women. "All men and women are created equal." Then they listed, as the Declaration of Independence had listed the grievances against the king of England, their grievances against men.

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**RS:** *What was Gabriel's Rebellion, and where does this fall in the long line of slave revolts?*

**HZ:** Gabriel is the first name of Gabriel Prosser, but there is a preference to call it Gabriel's Rebellion, because Prosser

was the slave owner's name. It came in the early 1800s with a thousand black people trying to ignite a larger rebellion. It failed, as all U.S. slave rebellions did before the Civil War. But they at least were a manifestation of the refusal of slaves to accept their condition. Slave rebellions go back to the seventeenth century, almost as soon as slavery was introduced into the colonies, with the first black people coming to Jamestown in 1619.

The most important one was Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1831, in Virginia, a very powerful, organized attempt on the part of thousands of black people to take over plantations, to invade plantation territory. It was violent—they killed owners, and they went on a rampage. They were put down, and a number of them, including Nat Turner, were executed.

The rebellion was a kind of signal to the South that this might happen again, and on a larger scale. It made the South determined to put down any sign of rebellion, and to make sure, for instance, that abolitionist literature was not spread in the South.

The 1830s saw the beginning of an abolitionist movement in the country, starting in New England. William Lloyd Garrison put out his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and Frederick Douglass, a former slave, put out his own newspaper, *The North Star*. Abolitionist and antislavery tracts began to spread throughout the country, but the South was determined not to let this sentiment spread.

**RS:** *It's interesting that you mentioned that all of them failed. They were put down, often in very purposely cruel and public ways, to demonstrate the cost of this kind of rebellion. If they were all put down, in short periods of time the ringleaders caught and rounded up, with people telling on each other in court proceedings, why were these revolts*

*so threatening to the South? If whites had all the power, all the guns, all the state power, all the bloodhounds, why were the slave revolts able to send an electric jolt into the population of the South?*

**HZ:** Rebellions always suggest to the people in power a possibility that one day they might succeed. We are very often surprised at the extent of force that is employed by people in authority against signs of rebellion, when we see how these rebellions fail. But people in power seem to have a kind of foresight. That is, they understand that tiny acts of protest can easily turn into larger acts of protest. And the idea of the people in power is to stifle them with such overwhelming power as to discourage future rebellion.

It happens in our time. You have seven people on a picket line, and they look around, and there are fifty policemen in riot gear who've been sent out to deal with them. They wonder, *What are they afraid of? What are they worried about?*

And I think the answer is that, yes, the people in power may have a clearer idea than the people on the picket line of what the possibilities are for small acts of protest to turn into large acts of rebellion. In fact, they're right, for the history of social movements is a history of small groups of people starting out apparently powerless, easily controlled, easily put down, and yet they rise again. And again and again they become larger and larger, and before you know it, you have a movement. An important movement.

The suppression of slave revolts in the South had to be done and had to be done decisively, yet it did not resolve the situation. The resentment of people against their condition may be kept under control for a while, and the people who are being oppressed may then themselves hold back, even appear to be content with their

condition. But under the surface they're brimming with indignation—and waiting for the moment. Of course, for slaves the moment came when the Civil War gave them an opportunity finally to run away, to escape from the plantations.

**RS:** *Going back to the period before the Civil War, apart from these sudden eruptions, these spasms of violence in slave uprisings, did black resistance take more day-to-day, everyday forms?*

**HZ:** Yes, I think that is important to recognize, because if you look only at the rebellions, which were sporadic and you might say occasional, you might conclude that most slaves just accepted their situation. There were many, many forms of slave resistance that were not as dramatic as rebellion. There was feigning illness and not doing their work the way they were supposed to. But probably the biggest form of slave resistance was running away.

That's what the Underground Railroad was about. There were huge numbers of slaves who wanted to run away but didn't have the capacity to do it. Harriet Tubman and other people went south to help slaves run away, to give them the possibility of doing that.

The high point of slave resistance before the Civil War came when slaves ran away and then had to deal with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The Fugitive Slave Act gave the federal government the responsibility of returning slaves to their masters. Federal officials would get twice as much money if a slave was sent back to slavery than if he or she was declared free. In response, abolitionists organized themselves into what they called vigilante groups, which has a different connotation than what we think of today as vigilantes.



The idea of vigilante groups was that they would be vigilant—on the lookout for escaped slaves. If these escapees were apprehended by the federal government, then these abolitionist groups would rescue them.

A number of very dramatic rescues took place in the 1850s. Abolitionists, white and black, would break into police stations and courthouses to rescue slaves, then send them on their way to Canada.

By the 1850s, after twenty years of antislavery agitation, there had been a change of opinion in the North about slavery. When juries were faced with the problem of acquitting or convicting those white and black people who had helped slaves to escape, who had violated the Fugitive Slave Act, who had broken into courthouses and so on, often these juries voted to acquit them.

William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, and others started out being the objects of ridicule and anger by their white neighbors in the North, but things changed. By the 1850s, important people in the North were speaking out against slavery.

**RS:** *Amid this ferment of jailbreaks and runaways, there was a serious reconsideration and reexamination of slavery going on. People began to question whether it made economic sense for the South to continue to retain slavery as an institution. Looking back from the twenty-first century, did slavery make a big economic impact in the South? Did it make sense for the South? Did it help the economy of the nation as a whole?*

**HZ:** Well, we have to consider that cotton had become a very, very important commodity—not just for the South, which grew it, but also for the North, which turned it into cloth, as well as the merchants who exported and sold it. The South and its economy were important to the nation.

There were now 4 million black slaves, and you can measure the growth of slavery along with the growth of cotton growing in the South. Slavery became absolutely essential to the plantation system in the South. Now, there has been argument among historians as to whether the economics of slavery made sense, whether the Southern slave owners would have been better off with free labor. It's possible that the South would have been better off freeing the slaves under the conditions that developed after the Civil War—black people “free” but still half enslaved. The question is whether that would have been the rational thing for slave owners to do, and thus avoid civil war. But I think there is always a psychological element that enters into it. Whether slavery was profitable or not didn't matter, because the psychology of a slave-owning aristocracy was such that the life of plantation owners was built around a slave plantation.

Slavery gave them wealth and a life of great privilege and superiority in which they could enjoy all the finer things. They didn't want to disrupt it. I think that psychological factor, that cultural factor, may have been as important as economic considerations in the retention of slavery.

**RS:** *A nineteenth-century writer named George Fitzhugh wrote a bestseller called *Cannibals All* that suggests that the workers of the new factories of the North were every bit as much enslaved as people tied to the land and picking cotton, black people in the South. That caused a sensation. Was it common among workers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line to see parallels in their condition?*

**HZ:** George Fitzhugh's argument was very compelling. It was a sophisticated and clever defense of slavery, saying, “You know, it's not simply that we have slaves and you

have free people. We just have different forms of slavery.” In a limited sense, you might say that Fitzhugh was a Marxist before there were Marxists, in that he saw the worker of the North, the proletariat of the North, as a slave to the industrial giants of the North. And he pointed to the hypocrisy of the North, which was railing against slavery while maintaining wage slavery. Although we don’t know how many people or what percentage of people in the North and South, there were some who responded to this argument.

**RS:** *You point out in your book that one thousand families in the South controlled about the same amount of wealth as the other almost seven hundred thousand families who were counted in the 1850 census. Why did the white working class go to war to defend, to preserve that system?*

**HZ:** Of course, you might ask that question in any war, because in any war it’s the working people who go to war on behalf of a system that doesn’t offer any great promise of living a better life. But it’s certainly true that the South was an extreme example of this.

I suppose one answer is that it seems it’s not that hard to persuade young people to go to war if you can present them with a cause—if you can show them that they’re fighting for a principle, for a way of life. If you can locate an enemy for them to hate. And it wasn’t hard to hate the North, which had, you might say, precipitated this war, by refusing to accept the secession of the Southern states and which looked upon the South as uncivilized because it had slavery. In other words, a working class can be propagandized into a war that is against its interests, and that certainly took place in the South.

Then, of course, there is also the race question and the fact that white people could be told that, if they didn’t fight this war, black people would rise up and take over

the South—that they were fighting to maintain the position of white supremacy over these 4 million black people.

But then you have to understand that all of this did not work well after a while. That is, white soldiers in the Confederacy, especially as the bloodiness of that war became extreme, especially as the war went on and on and men were dying on the battlefield in huge numbers—these young white kids began to question the war.

Huge desertions began to take place from the Confederate Army. This is a story that is not very well known. In the minds of most Americans who go to school and study the Civil War, the Confederacy appears as a kind of solid, loyal block.

But it wasn’t.

There were desertions of the soldiers, and then there were rebellions of the soldiers’ families back home. There were women in Georgia whose husbands were fighting— some of whose husbands had died—and by 1863 and 1864 these women were rioting against the slave owners, pointing out that the plantation owners were growing cotton instead of food. Cotton was profitable; food was not. They were starving while their men were giving their lives.

So there was a lot of disloyalty in the Confederacy. Conscription had to be introduced; they had to draft people into the army.

**RS:** *War had changed a lot during the nineteenth century. We were now in a time when armies stayed in the field the whole year round. That was a big departure from the days when people used to go home and plant and harvest, and then fight. Taking an agrarian population away from their farms for the entire year almost guaranteed there was going to be hunger and privation in the South.*

**HZ:** Yes. And of course the Civil War also introduced new, deadlier weapons. Six hundred thousand men died in the battles of the Civil War—in a population of about 30 or 35 million people. That would be equivalent today to 4 or 5 million dead in a war. There were grisly scenes on the battlefield, and you know they didn't have the medical facilities that we have today when so many people are wounded but stay alive. Huge numbers of amputations took place right there in the field without anesthetics. It's not surprising that there was rebellion in the Confederacy.

Class conflict in the Civil War is too often unrecognized in the histories of the period, which very often dwell on the battles, and which present the Civil War as "the North versus the South." Well, it was not just the North versus the South. It was also the North versus the North and the South versus the South. It was the rich against the poor. It was the draft rioters, not just in New York but also in other cities, noting that the rich were getting out of serving by paying \$300.

By the way, the same thing was true in the South. The rich could get out of conscription by paying sums of money.

**RS:** *One of the turning points in the Civil War, by common agreement, is the entry of freedmen and runaway slaves into the ranks of the Union Army. How did that change the war?*

**HZ:** Close to two hundred thousand ex-slaves fought in the Civil War. They had not been welcome at first, but the Northern army became desperate for men as the war went on. In the view of many historians—certainly the great black historian W.E.B. DuBois made this point, that black soldiers made a crucial difference in the victory of the North over the South. Besides their contributions to the army, they made a crucial difference in bringing about a change in the Northern political structure's willing-

ness to change the Constitution, to adopt the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. They were an important force in the country now, not just militarily but also politically.

**RS:** *But weren't we also sort of trapped in a paradoxical situation, where there was rising resentment toward black people because there was perception of the war as being fought for them, and over them, at the same time as there were forces inside the policy-making apparatus, the opinion-making apparatus of the United States, that didn't want black soldiers to enter the Union ranks?*

**HZ:** That's right. That's why it took a while before they were allowed to enter. But military desperation drove the government to enlist them. Then they came back from the military, as has often been true in America's wars, demanding their rights, demanding change. And I think that this had an effect on Congress, and on the North in general, although the North remained racist.

**RS:** *You talk about the change in the character of the war due to the fact that black people were fighting for their own freedom, with ensuing changes in popular opinion in the North, but didn't this also send an electric charge through the people of the South, that black people were now fighting in the army? This was not an unnoticed development.*

**HZ:** Certainly. It was frightening to Southerners that black people who had been slaves were now fighting against them. When black prisoners were taken by the Confederate Army, they were very often shot.

**RS:** *So they were not treated as soldiers.*

**HZ:** No, because the idea of them being treated as ordinary soldiers was repugnant to the people in the Southern armies.

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**RS:** *Let's jump ahead to the end of the war and the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau. As you noted, there was some growing sentiment that, now that the war was over, there should be some addressing of black aspiration.*

**HZ:** The Freedmen's Bureau was created to help black people in the transition from slavery to freedom. And for a while it offered promise, but ultimately it was unsuccessful because it could not give the freed slaves what they really needed, which was land of their own. The Freedmen's Bureau could give them schools, could bring educators down into the South, but black people were trapped economically—trapped very often on the plantations where they had been slaves. Because they did not have land of their own, in order to survive they had to go back to work for the plantation owner as tenant farmers.

They were held in semi-slavery. The Southern states adopted Black Codes, as they were called, which restricted the lives of these tenant farmers almost in the way that slavery had restricted them.

**RS:** *Didn't the divisions in the North all during the Civil War manifest themselves now with the Freedmen's Bureau? Some of the people running that and related bureaus had just been in uniform fighting against the South, and some of them were seized by a zeal to remake the country with a new dispensation under which black people could be free.*

*How did they lose? What happened? Was there a shift—a sudden shift underneath their feet that made it impossible to move on with land redistribution, that made it impossible legally to continue giving farms and land to black farmers?*

**HZ:** Well, the most important thing that happened was a brief period of entry into political life by black people. Protected by federal troops in the South, who had been sent to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, for several years, black people were actually voted into state legislatures—and in South Carolina, there actually was a black majority in the state's House of Representatives.

There was a really quite remarkable period of what was called Radical Reconstruction. But it was not useful to the political leaders of the North, they realized after a while, to give all this political power to black people—and at the expense of their relationships with the old planter class of the South.

They wanted a national economic system. They wanted railroads both North and South. They wanted banks in the North to be able to have relations with Southern plantation owners. Those economic ties became more important to them than doing something for the ex-slaves.

It was that recognition of the common economic interest of the Northern elite with the Southern elite that led to the removal of federal troops from the South. In a sense, they were saying to the white South, "Okay now, we're giving the South back to you, and the fate of black people now rests in your hands."

**RS:** *In the early parts of the war, Lincoln insisted this was not a war to free the slaves but to save the Union, but clearly by the later stages of the war, ending slavery had become part of the North's program by common consent. Are you saying that, once the war was over and Reconstruction was*

*being reconsidered, the economic interests trumped these other political concerns, and human rights concerns?*

**HZ:** Yes. I think the economic interests were paramount. After all, human rights concerns in general have not been primary for the people who run the economic system, the social system. Human rights are recognized only when they are useful.

For that brief period after the Civil War, when it was useful for the political leaders of the North to give the vote to black people and therefore give the North political control, that was fine. You might say the voting rights of black people were useful in electing a Republican president. Grant was elected by the margin of black voters in the South after the Civil War. But that interest faded, and the economic interest that we're talking about became paramount.

There was a very close election in 1876, and the Democrats won the popular vote, but there was a dispute about electoral votes in a number of states. Even though the Democratic candidate, Samuel Tilden, had won two hundred thousand more votes and should have been president by popular vote, the disputed electoral votes prevented that outcome.

A kind of arrangement was made, a compromise. The Republicans and the Democrats said, "Okay, we'll let Hayes—the Republican, with fewer votes—become president, but in return Hayes will remove the federal troops from the South."

This was the turning point, the signal that the black person was no longer useful to Northern economic and political interests. There then began, from the 1870s on into the twentieth century, the worst possible period for black people in the South after the Civil War.

**RS:** *So in your view, leaving the black people of the South to their fate completes a process that takes them from slavery without submission to emancipation without freedom?*

**HZ:** Yes, exactly. You have moments in that period that dramatized the change.

I'm thinking of the year 1868, when a black minister named Henry Turner, who had been elected to the Georgia legislature with the support of black Georgians, faced expulsion under the threat of violence. His very eloquent speech in reply has been recorded in history.

One of the things that happened during Reconstruction is that black people, once removed from slavery, got a glimpse of their possibilities. We saw it earlier in Frederick Douglass and now we see it in Henry Turner. He speaks to the South as he says, "I am not going to let you take away my manhood." But of course they expelled him. Many years later, in the 1960s during the Vietnam War, the Georgia legislature expelled Julian Bond because he spoke out against the Vietnam War.

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**RS:** *Is there a thread, almost a DNA relationship, that ties together runaway slaves and striking Lowell mill girls and Southern bread rioters and skedaddling Confederate soldiers and workers in the Freedmen's Bureau—that ties them together in a history of nineteenth-century America?*

**HZ:** I think the thing that ties them together is the persistent refusal of people to stay in a state of subjection. In spite of the enormous power of slave owners, of mill owners, of the government, the insistence of apparently powerless people that they will not accept their condition



is a current that runs through American history. And it's too often unrecognized, as we tell American history from the standpoint of the people in power, the presidents and the congressmen and the Supreme Court and the industrialists and the so-called important people in society.

I think it's important to pull all of that together and recognize it, because if we don't, we're losing the possibility of inspiring ourselves to join in whatever movement and resistance there is in our time.

**RS:** *When I read your book, the Civil War ends up being sort of a massive exclamation point stuck into the middle of the nineteenth century. But I don't know whether to conclude that it's a cataclysm that sets a lot of things free and into motion, or whether it's the beginning of a reconsolidation by the powerful people in society whom you were just talking about.*

**HZ:** I think the Civil War is both. It's a consolidation of power, the joining of the North and South in saving a political system, and the beginning of that long period of bipartisanship in which Democrats and Republicans, even though they rival one another for political power, will fundamentally act to maintain the control of the society by the wealthy and the privileged.

It's also the opening up of the country to economic forces that are now going to leap ahead. We also now see the consolidation of power by the white man over Indian territory. More land was taken from the Indians during the Civil War than in any other comparable time in American history.

But it's also a period in which the seeds are planted for a kind of protest and organization. The nineteenth century is a time when the labor movement of the North arises, when you are going to see violent strikes against

the industrial system, and the struggle for the eight-hour day. In other words, class conflict becomes more intense as the upper class consolidates its power, and the workers in the factories and the farmers in the fields decide that they must organize to do something about their own lives.

**RS:** *If we look at the years right after the Civil War, it seems that there was a lot of idealism injected into American politics. There were the post-Civil War amendments to the Constitution. The work of the Freedmen's Bureau and other voluntary and government-sponsored efforts to resettle former slaves. What happened to all that idealism?*

**HZ:** The idealism that brought forth the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments collapsed under the weight of political and economic interests. The idealism was sustained in part by realism and necessity and political advantage, which the leaders of Northern society had gained from the temporary alliance with black people. But when they recognized that their fortunes would be better off in alliance with the old white South, then that idealism dissipated.

And yet the idealism of the ex-slaves, and the idealism of those people in the North who cared about racial inequality, that idealism did not disappear. But it was submerged by military and economic power, and by the atmosphere created by the new industrial society.

You might say that the idealists were overwhelmed by the march of the nation toward becoming an economic giant. It took a little while before people began to rebel against this enormous economic power that was developing in the North—the railroads and the banks and the oil industry and the mining industry.

After the Civil War, the economy took off. There was a huge market, and new technological developments brought

huge economic growth. It took a while before workers in this new industrial economy were able to gather enough strength to rebel against it.

**RS:** *Now, you give a lot of credit to the abolitionists of the earlier part of the century for creating some of the social consciousness that helped usher in that Civil War period. Many of the same personalities are involved in this immediate postwar period. Many of the same structures that abolitionists started earlier in the century led to schools and industrial and vocational institutions throughout the South, and so on. How come they could play such a big role earlier in the century but just couldn't make their presence felt in the 1860s and 1870s?*

**HZ:** In the 1860s and 1870s, they had, you might say, a false sense of victory. The technical ending of slavery, the apparent granting of racial equality with the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Fifteenth Amendment giving black people the right to vote all created what I think was a false sense of security for reformist and radical groups in the United States.

A common feature of reform movements is that they become intoxicated with victory and then realize that following through on that victory is not going to take place so long as power still remains in the hands of people who held that power earlier.

It took a while to realize that the wave of reform—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—is going to remain superficial, that those amendments were on the books but were not going to be enforced. The government had the power but wouldn't do it.

There is a certain similarity between the situation there and the situation in the Second Reconstruction, the period of the 1960s when the black movement rose in the

South and won victories on the national field. They won the Civil Rights Act of 1964; they won Supreme Court decisions; they won the legal end of segregation. But it turned out that these were insufficient. They didn't speak to the ultimate condition of black people. They didn't change their economic situation. Ultimately, in both periods, it was economic power that determined whether the political reform would have real meaning in the lives of these people who were in a subordinate position.

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## CHAPTER IV

## No Human Being is Illegal

Excerpted from [Howard Zinn On Race](#) (Seven Stories Press, 2011). Originally published as an article in *The Progressive* in 2006.

*In this July 2006 article for The Progressive, Howard Zinn provides a context for today's immigration reform debate by tracing the history of how we've treated foreign-born people in this country since the Revolutionary War: from anti-Irish and anti-Chinese sentiment in the mid- and late-nineteenth century to the deportation of Russians from the U.S. just after the Bolshevik Revolution, from the McCarthy Era to the ironically titled Patriot Act. Howard portrays the Bush Administration's decision to build a wall at the southern border of California and Arizona as a tired example of our politicians and our government surrendering to fear while forgetting the equal rights that all humans share. —Eds.*

**V**igilantes sit at the border, guns on their laps, looking for those who might cross over. President Bush promises to send 6,000 National Guardsmen there and to build a wall. Archconservatives threaten to make felons out of the undocumented and those who help them. But

immigrants from south of the border, along with their supporters, have been demonstrating, by the hundreds of thousands, for the rights of foreign-born people, whether here legally or illegally. There is a persistent sign: “No Human Being Is Illegal.”

Discrimination against the foreign born has a long history, going back to the beginning of the nation.

Ironically, having just gone through its own revolution, the United States was fearful of having revolutionaries in its midst.

France had recently overthrown its monarchy. Irish rebels were protesting against British rule, and the new U.S. government was conscious of “dangerous foreigners”—Irish and French—in the country. In 1798, Congress passed legislation lengthening the residence requirement for becoming a citizen from five to fourteen years. It also authorized the President to deport any alien he regarded as dangerous to the public safety.

There was virulent anti-Irish sentiment in the 1840s and '50s, especially after the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, which killed a million people and drove millions abroad, most of them to the United States. “No Irish Need Apply” symbolized this prejudice. It was part of that long train of irrational fear in which one generation of immigrants, now partly assimilated, reacts with hatred to the next. Take Irish-born Dennis Kearney, who became a spokesman for anti-Chinese prejudice. His political ambitions led him and the California Workingmen’s Party to adopt the slogan “The Chinese Must Go.”

The Chinese had been welcome in the 1860s as cheap labor for the building of the transcontinental railroad, but now they were seen, especially after the economic crisis of 1873, as taking away jobs from the native born. This sentiment was turned into law with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which, for the first time in the nation’s history, created the category of “illegal” immigrants.

Before this, there was no border control. Now Chinese, desperate to change their lives, tried to evade the act by crossing over from Mexico. Some learned to say “Yo soy Mexicano.” But violence against them continued, as whites, seeing their jobs go to ill-paid Chinese, reacted with fury. In Rock Springs, Wyoming, in the summer of 1885, whites attacked 500 Chinese miners, massacring twenty-eight of them in cold blood.

In the East, Europeans were needed to work in the garment factories, the mines, the textile mills, or as laborers, stonecutters, ditch diggers. The immigrants poured in from Southern and Eastern Europe, from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, and the Balkans. There were five million immigrants in the 1880s, four million in the 1890s. From 1900 to 1910, eight million more arrived.

These newcomers faced vicious hostility. A typical comment in the *Baltimore Sun*: “The Italian immigrant would be no more objectionable than some others were it not for his singularly bloodthirsty disposition, and frightful temper and vindictiveness.” New York City’s Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham insisted that “half of the criminals” in New York City in 1908 were Jews.

Woodrow Wilson’s decision to bring the United States into the First World War brought widespread opposition. To suppress this, the government adopted legislation—the Espionage Act, the Sedition Act—which led to the imprisonment of almost a thousand people. Their crime was to protest, by speech or writing,

U.S. entrance into the war. Another law provided for the deportation of aliens who opposed organized government or advocated the destruction of property.

After the war, the lingering super-patriotic atmosphere led to more hysteria against the foreign born, intensified by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In 1919, after the explosion of a bomb in front of the house of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, a series of raids were carried

out against immigrants. Palmer's agents picked up 249 noncitizens of Russian birth, many of whom had lived in this country a long time, put them on a transport, and deported them to Soviet Russia. Among them were the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. J. Edgar Hoover, at that time a young agent of the Department of Justice, personally supervised the deportations.

Shortly after, in January 1920, 4,000 persons in thirty-three cities were rounded up and held in seclusion for long periods of time. They were brought into secret hearings, and more than 500 of them were deported. In Boston, Department of Justice agents, aided by local police, arrested 600 people by raiding meeting halls or by invading their homes in the early morning. They were handcuffed, chained together, and marched through the city streets. It was in this atmosphere of jingoism and anti-foreign hysteria that the Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were put on trial after a robbery and murder at a Massachusetts shoe factory, found guilty by an Anglo-Saxon judge and jury, and sentenced to death.

With the increased nationalist and anti-foreign sentiment, Congress in 1924 passed a National Origins Quota Act. This set quotas that encouraged immigration from England, Germany, and Scandinavia but strictly limited immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe.

Following World War II, the Cold War atmosphere of anticommunist hysteria brought about the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which set quotas of 100 immigrants for each country in Asia. Immigrants from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany could take up 70 percent of the annual immigration quota.

The act also revived, in a virulent way, the anti-alien legislation of 1798, creating ideological grounds for the exclusion of immigrants and the treatment of all foreign-born residents, who could be deported for any "activities prejudicial to the public interest" or "subversive to

national security." Noncitizens suspected of radical ideas were rounded up and deported.

The great social movements of the Sixties led to a number of legislative reforms: voting rights for African Americans, health care for senior citizens and for the poor, and a law abolishing the National Origins Quota system and allowing 20,000 immigrants from every country.

But the respite did not last.

In 1995, the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed, with the deaths of 168 people. Although the two men convicted of the crime were native-born Americans, the following year President Bill Clinton signed into law the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which contained especially harsh provisions for foreign-born people. For immigrants as well as for citizens, the act reintroduced the McCarthy-era principle of guilt by association. That is, people could be put in jail—or, if foreign born, deported—not for what they actually did, but for giving support to any group designated as "terrorist" by the Secretary of State. The government could deny visas to people wanting to enter the United States if they were members of any such group, even if the actions of the group supported by the individual were perfectly legal. Under the new law, a person marked for deportation had no rights of due process, and could be deported on the basis of secret evidence.

Clinton's signing of this act reaffirmed that the targeting of immigrants and depriving them of constitutional rights were not policies simply of the Republican Party but also of the Democratic Party, which in the military atmosphere of World War I and the Cold War had joined a bipartisan attack on the rights of both native and foreign born.

In the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, President George Bush declared a "war on terrorism." A climate of fear spread



across the nation, in which many foreign-born persons became objects of suspicion. The government was now armed with new legal powers by the so-called Patriot Act of 2001, which gave the Attorney General the power to imprison any foreign-born person he declared a “suspected terrorist.” He need not show proof; it all depends on his say-so. And such detained persons may be held indefinitely, with no burden of proof on the government and no hearing required. The act was passed with overwhelming Democratic and Republican support. In the Senate, only one person, Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, voted against it.

In the excited atmosphere created by the “war on terrorism,” it was predictable that there would follow violence against foreignborn people. For instance, just four days after the 9/11 events, a forty-nine-year-old Sikh American who was doing landscaping work outside his gas station in Mesa, Arizona, was shot and killed by a man shouting, “I stand for America all the way.” In February 2003, a group of teenagers in Orange County, California, attacked Rashid Alam, an eighteen-year-old Lebanese-American, with bats and golf clubs. He suffered a broken jaw, stab wounds, and head injuries.

Shortly after 9/11, as documented by the Center for Constitutional Rights and Human Rights Watch, Muslims from various countries were picked up, held for various periods of time in tiny, windowless cells, often beaten and abused. As *The New York Times* reported, “Hundreds of noncitizens were swept up on visa violations in the weeks after 9/11, held for months in a much-criticized federal detention center in Brooklyn as ‘persons of interest’ to terror investigators, and then deported.”

Muslims became a special target of surveillance and arrest. Thousands were detained. *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis told of one man, who, even before September 11, was arrested on secret evidence. When a federal judge found there was no reason to conclude

the man was a threat to national security, the man was released. However, after September 11, the Department of Justice, ignoring the judge’s finding, imprisoned him again, holding him in solitary confinement twenty-three hours a day, not allowing his family to see him.

As I write this, Republicans and Democrats are trying to work out a compromise on the rights of immigrants. But in none of these proposals is there a recognition that immigrants deserve the same rights as everyone else. Forgetting, or rather, ignoring the indignation of liberty-loving people at the building of the Berlin Wall, and the exultation that greeted its fall, there will be a wall built at the southern borders of California and Arizona. I doubt that any national political figure will point out that this wall is intended to keep Mexicans out of the land that was violently taken from Mexico in the War of 1846–1848.

Only the demonstrators in cities across the country are reminding us of the words on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” In the wave of anger against government action in the Sixties, cartoons were drawn showing the Statue of Liberty blindfolded. The blindfolds remain, if only symbolically, until we begin to act, yes, as if “No Human Being Is Illegal.”

*Excerpted from [Howard Zinn On Race](#) (2011), published by Seven Stories Press. Originally published as an article in *The Progressive* in 2006.*

## CHAPTER V

## The Question Period in Kalamazoo

Excerpted from [\*You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History\*](#)  
by Howard Zinn (Beacon Press, 2018)

**T**he publication of *A People's History* led to requests from around the country for me to speak. And so there I was in Kalamazoo that evening in 1992, speaking about why telling the truth about Columbus is important for us today. I was really not interested in Columbus himself, but in the issues raised by his interaction with the native Americans: Is it possible for people, overcoming history, to live together with equality, with dignity, today?

At the end of my talk, someone asked a question which has been put to me many times in different ways. "Given the depressing news of what is happening in the world, you seem surprisingly optimistic. What gives you hope?"

I attempted an answer. I said I could understand being depressed by the state of the world, but the questioner had caught my mood accurately. To him and to others, mine seemed an absurdly cheerful approach to a violent and unjust world. But to me what is often disdained as romantic idealism, as wishful thinking, is justified if it

prompts action to fulfill those wishes, to bring to life those ideals.

The willingness to undertake such action cannot be based on certainties, but on those possibilities glimpsed in a reading of history different from the customary painful recounting of human cruelties. In such a reading we can find not only war but resistance to war, not only injustice but rebellion against injustice, not only selfishness but self-sacrifice, not only silence in the face of tyranny but defiance, not only callousness but compassion.

Human beings show a broad spectrum of qualities, but it is the worst of these that are usually emphasized, and the result, too often, is to dishearten us, diminish our spirit. And yet, historically, that spirit refuses to surrender. History is full of instances where people, against enormous odds, have come together to struggle for liberty and justice, and have won—not often enough, of course, but enough to suggest how much more is possible.

The essential ingredients of these struggles for justice are human beings who, if only for a moment, if only while beset with fears, step out of line and do something, however small. And even the smallest, most unheroic of acts adds to the store of kindling that may be ignited by some surprising circumstance into tumultuous change.

Individual people are the necessary elements, and my life has been full of such people, ordinary and extraordinary, whose very existence has given me hope. Indeed, the people there in that audience in Kalamazoo, clearly concerned with the world beyond the election returns, were living proof of possibilities for change in this difficult world.

Though I didn't say so to my last questioner, I had met such people that evening, in that city. At dinner before my talk I was with the campus parish priest, a man built like a football linebacker, which in fact he had been years

before. I asked him the question I often ask people I like: "How did you come by the peculiar ideas you now have?"

His was a one-word answer, the same given by so many: "Vietnam." To life-probing questions there seems so often to be a one-word answer: Auschwitz ... Hungary ... Attica. Vietnam. The priest had served there as a chaplain. His commanding officer was Colonel George Patton III. A true son of his father, Patton liked to talk of his soldiers as "darn good killers," hesitating to use the word "damn" but not the word "killers." Patton ordered the chaplain to carry a pistol while in the combat zone. The chaplain refused, and despite threats, continued to refuse. He came out of Vietnam against not just that war but all wars. And now he was traveling back and forth to El Salvador to help people struggling against death squads and poverty.

Also at dinner was a young teacher of sociology at Michigan State University. Raised in Ohio by working-class parents, he too had come to oppose the war in Vietnam. Now he taught criminology, doing research not about robbers and muggers, but about high crime, about government officials and corporate executives whose victims were not individuals but the whole of society.

It's remarkable how much history there is in any small group. There was also at our table a young woman, a recent university graduate, who was entering nursing school so that she could be of use to villagers in Central America. I envied her. As one of the many who write, speak, teach, practice law, preach, whose contribution to society is so indirect, so uncertain, I thought of those who give immediate help—the carpenters, the nurses, the farmers, the school bus drivers, the mothers. I remembered the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who wrote a poem about his lifelong wish that he could do something useful with his hands, that he could make a broom, just a broom.

I didn't say any of this to my last questioner in Kalamazoo. In fact, to really answer him I would have had to say much more about why I was so curiously hopeful in the face of the world as we know it. I would have had to go back over my life.

I would have to tell about going to work in a shipyard at the age of eighteen and spending three years working on the docks, in the cold and heat, amid deafening noise and poisonous fumes, building battleships and landing ships in the early years of the Second World War.

I would have to tell about enlisting in the Air Force at twenty-one, being trained as a bombardier, flying combat missions in Europe, and later asking myself troubling questions about what I had done in the war.

And about getting married, becoming a father, going to college under the G.I. Bill while loading trucks in a warehouse, with my wife working and our two children in a charity day-care center, and all of us living in a low-income housing project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

And about getting my Ph.D. from Columbia and my first real teaching job (I had a number of unreal teaching jobs), going to live and teach in a black community in the Deep South for seven years. And about the students at Spelman College who one day decided to climb over a symbolic and actual stone wall surrounding the campus to make history in the early years of the civil rights movement.

And about my experiences in that movement, in Atlanta, in Albany, Georgia, and Selma, Alabama, in Hattiesburg and Jackson and Greenwood, Mississippi.

I would have to tell about moving north to teach in Boston, and joining the protests against the war in Vietnam, and being arrested a half-dozen times (the official language of the charges was always interesting: "sauntering and loitering," "disorderly conduct," "failure

to quit"). And traveling to Japan, and to North Vietnam, and speaking at hundreds of meetings and rallies, and helping a Catholic priest stay underground in defiance of the law.

I would have to recapture the scenes in a dozen courtrooms where I testified in the 1970s and 1980s. I would have to tell about the prisoners I have known, short-timers and lifers, and how they affected my view of imprisonment.

When I became a teacher I could not possibly keep out of the classroom my own experiences. I have often wondered how so many teachers manage to spend a year with a group of students and never reveal who they are, what kind of lives they have led, where their ideas come from, what they believe in, or what they want for themselves, for their students, and for the world.

Does not the very fact of that concealment teach something terrible—that you can separate the study of literature, history, philosophy, politics, the arts, from your own life, your deepest convictions about right and wrong?

In my teaching I never concealed my political views: my detestation of war and militarism, my anger at racial inequality, my belief in a democratic socialism, in a rational and just distribution of the world's wealth. I made clear my abhorrence of any kind of bullying, whether by powerful nations over weaker ones, governments over their citizens, employers over employees, or by anyone, on the Right or the Left, who thinks they have a monopoly on the truth.

This mixing of activism and teaching, this insistence that education cannot be neutral on the crucial issues of our time, this movement back and forth from the classroom to the struggles outside by teachers who hope their students will do the same, has always frightened the guardians of traditional education. They prefer that

education simply prepare the new generation to take its proper place in the old order, not to question that order.

I would always begin a course by making it clear to my students that they would be getting my point of view, but that I would try to be fair to other points of view. I encouraged my students to disagree with me.

I didn't pretend to an objectivity that was neither possible nor desirable. "You can't be neutral on a moving train," I would tell them. Some were baffled by the metaphor, especially if they took it literally and tried to dissect its meaning. Others immediately saw what I meant: that events are already moving in certain deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that.

I never believed that I was imposing my views on blank slates, on innocent minds. My students had had a long period of political indoctrination before they arrived in my class—in the family, in high school, in the mass media. Into a marketplace so long dominated by orthodoxy I wanted only to wheel my little pushcart, offering my wares along with the others, leaving students to make their own choices.

The thousands of young people in my classes over the years gave me hope for the future. Through the seventies and the eighties, everyone outside seemed to be groaning about how "ignorant" and "passive" was the current generation of students. But listening to them, reading their journals and papers, and their reports on the community activity that was part of their assigned work, I was impressed with their sensitivity to injustice, their eagerness to be part of some good cause, their potential to change the world.

The student activism of the eighties was small in scale, but at that time there was no great national movement to join, and there were heavy economic pressures from all sides to "make good," to "be successful," to join the world of prosperous professionals. Still, many young people were

yearning for something more, and so I did not despair. I remembered how in the fifties haughty observers talked of the "silent generation" as an immovable fact, and then, exploding that notion, came the sixties.

There's something else, more difficult to talk about, that has been crucial to my mood—my private life. How lucky I have been to live my life with a remarkable woman whose beauty, body and soul, I see again in our children and grandchildren. Roz shared and helped, worked as a social worker and a teacher, later made more of her talents as painter and musician. She loves literature and became first editor of everything I wrote. Living with her has given me a heightened sense of what is possible in this world.

And yet I am not oblivious to the bad news we are constantly confronted with. It surrounds me, inundates me, depresses me intermittently, angers me.

I think of the poor today, so many of them in the ghettos of the nonwhite, often living a few blocks away from fabulous wealth. I think of the hypocrisy of political leaders, of the control of information through deception, through omission. And of how, all over the world, governments play on national and ethnic hatred.

I am aware of the violence of everyday life for most of the human race. All represented by the images of children. Children hungry. Children with missing limbs. The bombing of children officially reported as "collateral damage."

As I write this, in the summer of 1993, there is a general mood of despair. The end of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union has not resulted in world peace. In the countries of the Soviet bloc there is desperation and disarray. There is a brutal war going on in the former Yugoslavia and more violence in Africa. The prosperous elite of the world finds it convenient to ignore starvation and sickness in poverty-ridden countries.



The United States and other powers continue to sell arms wherever it is profitable, whatever the human costs.

In this country, the euphoria that accompanied the election in 1992 of a young and presumably progressive president has evaporated. The new political leadership of the country, like the old, seems to lack the vision, the boldness, the will, to break from the past. It maintains a huge military budget which distorts the economy and makes possible no more than puny efforts to redress the huge gap between rich and poor. Without such redress, the cities must remain riddled with violence and despair.

And there is no sign of a national movement to change this.

Only the corrective of historical perspective can lighten our gloom. Note how often in this century we have been surprised. By the sudden emergence of a people's movement, the sudden overthrow of a tyranny, the sudden coming to life of a flame we thought extinguished. We are surprised because we have not taken notice of the quiet simmerings of indignation, of the first faint sounds of protest, of the scattered signs of resistance that, in the midst of our despair, portend the excitement of change. The isolated acts begin to join, the individual thrusts blend into organized actions, and one day, often when the situation seems most hopeless, there bursts onto the scene a movement.

We are surprised because we don't see that beneath the surface of the present there is always the human material for change: the suppressed indignation, the common sense, the need for community, the love of children, the patience to wait for the right moment to act in concert with others. These are the elements that spring to the surface when a movement appears in history.

People are practical. They want change but feel powerless, alone, do not want to be the blade of grass that sticks up above the others and is cut down. They wait for

a sign from someone else who will make the first move, or the second. And at certain times in history, there are intrepid people who take the risk that if they make that first move others will follow quickly enough to prevent their being cut down. And if we understand this, we might make that first move.

This is not a fantasy. This is how change has occurred again and again in the past, even the very recent past. We are so overwhelmed by the present, the flood of pictures and stories pouring in on us every day, drowning out this history, that it is no wonder if we lose hope.

I realize it is easier for me to feel hopeful because in many ways I have just been lucky.

Lucky, for one thing, to have escaped the circumstances of my childhood. There are memories of my father and mother, who met as immigrant factory workers, who worked hard all their lives and never got out of poverty. (I always feel some rage when I hear the voice of the arrogant and affluent: We have a wonderful system; if you work hard you will make it. How hard my parents worked. How brave they were just to keep four sons alive in the cold-water tenements of Brooklyn.)

Lucky, after stumbling around from one bad job to another, to find work that I loved. Lucky to encounter remarkable people everywhere, to have so many good friends.

And also, lucky to be alive, because my two closest Air Force friends—Joe Perry, nineteen, and Ed Plotkin, twenty-six—died in the last weeks of the war. They were my buddies in basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. We marched in the summer heat together. We went out on weekend passes together. We learned to fly Piper Cubs in Vermont and played basketball in Santa Ana, California, while waiting for our assignments. Then Joe went to Italy as a bombardier, Ed to the Pacific as a navigator, I to England as a bombardier. Joe and I could

write to one another, and I kidded him as we who flew B-17s kidded those who flew B-24s—we called them B-Dash-Two-Crash-Fours.

The night the European war ended, my crew drove to Norwich, the main city in East Anglia, where everybody was in the streets, wild with joy, the city ablaze with lights that had been out for six years. The beer flowed, enormous quantities of fish and chips were wrapped in newspapers and handed out to everyone, people danced and shouted and hugged one another.

A few days after that, my most recent letter to Joe Perry came back to me with a penciled notation on the envelope: “Deceased”—too quick a dismissal of a friend’s life.

My crew flew our old battle-scarred B-17 back across the Atlantic, ready to continue bombing in the Pacific. Then came the news about the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and we were grateful—the war was over. (I had no idea that one day I would visit Hiroshima and meet blinded, maimed people who had survived the bomb, and that I would rethink that bombing and all the others.)

When the war ended and I was back in New York, I looked up Ed Plotkin’s wife—he had stolen out of Fort Dix the night before he was being shipped overseas, to spend a last night with her. She told me Ed crashed in the Pacific and died just before the war ended and that a child was conceived the night he went AWOL. Years later, when I was teaching in Boston, someone came up to me after a class with a note: “Ed Plotkin’s daughter wants to meet you.” We met and I told her whatever I could remember about the father she never saw.

So I feel I have been given a gift—undeserved, just luck—of almost fifty years of life. I am always aware of that. For years after the war I had a recurrent dream. Two men would be walking in front of me in the street. They would turn, and it would be Joe and Ed.

Deep in my psyche, I think, is the idea that because I was so lucky and they were not, I owe them something. Sure, I want to have some fun; I have no desire to be a martyr, though I know some and admire them. Still, I owe it to Joe and Ed not to waste my gift, to use these years well, not just for myself but for that new world we all thought was promised by the war that took their lives.

And so I have no right to despair. I insist on hope.

It is a feeling, yes. But it is not irrational. People respect feelings but still want reasons. Reasons for going on, for not surrendering, for not retreating into private luxury or private desperation. People want evidence of those possibilities in human behavior I have talked about. I have suggested that there are reasons. I believe there is evidence. But too much to give to the questioner that night in Kalamazoo. It would take a book.

So I decided to write one.

*Excerpted from [You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History](#) (2018) by Howard Zinn, featuring a foreword by Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, published by Beacon Press.*

## CHAPTER VI

**Means and Ends***Against Discouragement*

Excerpted from [\*The Zinn Reader, 2nd Edition: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy\*](#) by Howard Zinn (Seven Stories Press, 2009)

*This current volume begins with an essay (“The Southern Mystique”) about the time when I first arrived to teach at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1956. I taught at Spelman, a college for African-American women, for seven years before being asked to leave in 1963 on the basis of my involvement in the movement for civil rights that had gained a great deal of momentum during my time there. What follows is the speech I gave to Spelman students in 2005, when I was invited back to campus to offer a commencement address to graduating seniors.*

**I** am deeply honored to be invited back to Spelman after forty-two years. I would like to thank the faculty and trustees who voted to invite me, and especially your president, Dr. Beverly Tatum. And it is a special privilege to be here with Diahann Carroll and Virginia Davis Floyd.

But this is your day—the students graduating today. It's a happy day for you and your families. I know you have your own hopes for the future, so it may be a little presumptuous for me to tell you what hopes I have for you, but they are exactly the same ones that I have for my grandchildren.

My first hope is that you will not be too discouraged by the way the world looks at this moment. It is easy to be discouraged, because our nation is at war—still another war, war after war—and our government seems determined to expand its empire even if it costs the lives of tens of thousands of human beings. There is poverty in this country, and homelessness, and people without healthcare, and crowded classrooms, but our government, which has trillions of dollars to spend, is spending its wealth on war. There are a billion people in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East who need clean water and medicine to deal with malaria and tuberculosis and AIDS, but our government, which has thousands of nuclear weapons, is experimenting with even more deadly nuclear weapons. Yes, it is easy to be discouraged by all that.

But let me tell you why, in spite of what I have just described, you must not be discouraged.

I want to remind you that, fifty years ago, racial segregation here in the South was entrenched as tightly as was apartheid in South Africa. The national government, even with liberal presidents like Kennedy and Johnson in office, was looking the other way while Black people were beaten and killed and denied the opportunity to vote. So Black people in the South decided they had to do something by themselves. They boycotted and sat in and picketed and demonstrated, and were beaten and jailed, and some were killed, but their cries for freedom were soon heard all over the nation and around the world, and the president and Congress finally did what they had previously failed to do—enforce the 14th and

15th Amendments to the Constitution. Many people had said: the South will never change. But it did change. It changed because ordinary people organized and took risks and challenged the system and would not give up. That's when democracy came alive.

I want to remind you also that when the war in Vietnam was going on, and young Americans were dying and coming home paralyzed, and our government was bombing the villages of Vietnam—bombing schools and hospitals and killing ordinary people in huge numbers—it looked hopeless to try to stop the war. But just as in the Southern movement, people began to protest and soon it caught on. It was a national movement. Soldiers were coming back and denouncing the war, and young people were refusing to join the military, and the war had to end.

The lesson of that history is that you must not despair, that if you are right, and you persist, things will change. The government may try to deceive the people, and the newspapers and television may do the same, but the truth has a way of coming out. The truth has a power greater than a hundred lies. I know you have practical things to do—to get jobs and get married and have children. You may become prosperous and be considered a success in the way our society defines success, by wealth and standing and prestige. But that is not enough for a good life.

Remember Tolstoy's story, "The Death of Ivan Illych." A man on his deathbed reflects on his life, how he has done everything right, obeyed the rules, become a judge, married, had children, and is looked upon as a success. Yet, in his last hours, he wonders why he feels a failure.

After becoming a famous novelist, Tolstoy himself had decided that this was not enough, that he must speak out against the treatment of the Russian peasants, that he must write against war and militarism.

My hope is that whatever you do to make a good life for yourself—whether you become a teacher, or social

worker, or business person, or lawyer, or poet, or scientist—you will devote part of your life to making this a better world for your children, for all children. My hope is that your generation will demand an end to war, that your generation will do something that has not yet been done in history and wipe out the national boundaries that separate us from other human beings on this earth.

Recently I saw a photo on the front page of the *New York Times* which I cannot get out of my mind. It showed ordinary Americans sitting on chairs on the southern border of Arizona, facing Mexico. They were holding guns and they were looking for Mexicans who might be trying to cross the border into the United States. This was horrifying to me—the realization that, in this twenty-first century of what we call “civilization,” we have carved up what we claim is one world into two hundred artificially created entities we call “nations” and are ready to kill anyone who crosses a boundary.

Is not nationalism—that devotion to a flag, an anthem, a boundary, so fierce it leads to murder—one of the great evils of our time, along with racism, along with religious hatred? These ways of thinking, cultivated, nurtured, indoctrinated from childhood on, have been useful to those in power, deadly for those out of power.

Here in the United States, we are brought up to believe that our nation is different from others, an exception in the world, uniquely moral; that we expand into other lands in order to bring civilization, liberty, democracy. But if you know some history you know that’s not true. If you know some history, you know we massacred Indians on this continent, invaded Mexico, sent armies into Cuba, and the Philippines. We killed huge numbers of people, and we did not bring them democracy or liberty. We did not go into Vietnam to bring democracy; we did not invade Panama to stop the drug trade; we did not invade Afghanistan and Iraq to stop terrorism. Our aims were

the aims of all the other empires of world history—more profit for corporations, more power for politicians.

The poets and artists among us seem to have a clearer understanding of the disease of nationalism. Perhaps the Black poets especially are less enthralled with the virtues of American “liberty” and “democracy,” their people having enjoyed so little of it. The great African-American poet Langston Hughes addressed his country as follows:

*You really haven't been a virgin for so long.  
It's ludicrous to keep up the pretext...*

*You've slept with all the big powers  
In military uniforms,  
And you've taken the sweet life  
Of all the little brown fellows...*

*Being one of the world's big vampires,  
Why don't you come on out and say so  
Like Japan, and England, and France,  
And all the other nymphomaniacs of power.*

I am a veteran of the Second World War. That was considered a “good war,” but I have come to the conclusion that war solves no fundamental problems and only leads to more wars. War poisons the minds of soldiers, leads them to kill and torture, and poisons the soul of the nation. My hope is that your generation will demand that your children be brought up in a world without war. If we want a world in which the people of all countries are brothers and sisters, if the children all over the world are considered as our children, then war—in which children are always the greatest casualties—cannot be accepted as a way of solving problems.

I was on the faculty of Spelman College for seven years, from 1956 to 1963. It was a heartwarming time, because the friends we made in those years have remained



our friends all these years. My wife Roslyn and I, and our two children, lived on campus. Sometimes when we went into town, white people would ask: how is it to be living in the Black community? It was hard to explain. But we knew this—that in downtown Atlanta, we felt as if we were in alien territory, and when we came back to the Spelman campus, we felt that we were at home.

Those years at Spelman were the most exciting of my life, the most educational certainly. I learned more from my students than they learned from me. Those were the years of the great movement in the South against racial segregation, and I became involved in that in Atlanta, in Albany, Georgia, in Selma, Alabama, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Greenwood and Itta Bena and Jackson. I learned something about democracy: that it does not come from the government, from on high, it comes from people getting together and struggling for justice. I learned about race. I learned something that any intelligent person realizes at a certain point—that race is a manufactured thing, an artificial thing, and while race does matter (as Cornel West has written), it only matters because certain people want it to matter, just as nationalism is something artificial. I learned that what really matters is that all of us—of whatever so-called race and so-called nationality—are human beings and should cherish one another.

I was lucky to be at Spelman at a time when I could watch a marvelous transformation in my students, who were so polite, so quiet, and then suddenly they were leaving the campus and going into town, and sitting in, and being arrested, and then coming out of jail full of fire and rebellion. You can read all about that in Harry Lefever's book *Undaunted by the Fight*. One day Marian Wright (now Marian Wright Edelman), who was my student at Spelman, and was one of the first arrested in the Atlanta sit-ins, came to our house on campus to show us a petition she was about to put on the bulletin board of

her dormitory. The heading on the petition epitomized the transformation taking place at Spelman College. Marian had written on top of the petition: "Young Ladies Who Can Picket, Please Sign Below."

My hope is that you will not be content just to be successful in the way that our society measures success; that you will not obey the rules, when the rules are unjust; that you will act out the courage that I know is in you. There are wonderful people, Black and white, who are models. I don't mean African-Americans like Condoleezza Rice, or Colin Powell, or Clarence Thomas, who have become servants of the rich and powerful. I mean W. E. B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and Marian Wright Edelman, and James Baldwin and Josephine Baker and good white folk, too, who defied the Establishment to work for peace and justice.

Another of my students at Spelman, Alice Walker, who, like Marian, has remained our friend all these years, came from a tenant farmer's family in Eatonton, Georgia, and became a famous writer. In one of her first published poems, she wrote:

*It is true—  
I've always loved  
the daring  
ones  
Like the black young  
man  
Who tried  
to crash  
All barriers  
at once,  
wanted to  
swim  
At a white  
beach (in Alabama)  
Nude.*

I am not suggesting you go that far, but you can help to break down barriers, of race certainly, but also of nationalism; that you do what you can—you don't have to do something heroic, just something, to join with millions of others who will just do something, because all of those somethings, at certain points in history, come together, and make the world better.

That marvelous African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston, who wouldn't do what white people wanted her to do, who wouldn't do what black people wanted her to do, who insisted on being herself, said that her mother advised her: Leap for the sun—you may not reach it, but at least you will get off the ground.

By being here today, you are already standing on your toes, ready to leap. My hope for you is a good life.

## Howard Zinn

*(August 24, 1922 - January 27, 2010)*

**H**OWARD ZINN's (1922–2010) was a historian, author, professor, playwright, and activist. His life's work focused on a wide range of issues including race, class, war, and history, and touched the lives of countless people. His writing celebrated the accomplishments of social movements and ordinary people, and challenged readers to question the myths that justify war and inequality. Zinn's influence lives on in millions of people who have read his work and have been inspired by his actions. He ended his autobiography with these encouraging words: "We don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an endless succession of presents, and to live now as we think humans should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

Excerpted from [The Zinn Reader, 2nd Edition: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy](#) (2009) by Howard Zinn, published by Seven Stories Press.

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