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A Memory of Howard Zinn

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I just learned that my friend Howard Zinn died today. Earlier this morning, I was being interviewed by the Boston Phoenix, in connection with the February release of a documentary in which he is featured prominently. The interviewer asked me who my own heroes were, and I had no hesitation in answering, first, “Howard Zinn.”

Just weeks ago, after watching the film, I woke up thinking that I had never told him how much he meant to me. For once in my life, I acted on that thought in a timely way. I sent him an e-mail in which I said, among other things, what I had often told others: that he was, “in my opinion, the best human being I’ve ever known. The best example of what a human can be, and can do with their life.”

Our first meeting was at Faneuil Hall in Boston in early 1971, where we both spoke against the indictments of Eqbal Ahmad and Phil Berrigan for “conspiring to kidnap Henry Kissinger.” We marched with the rest of the crowd to make citizens’ arrests at the Boston office of the FBI. Later that spring, we went with our affinity group (including Noam Chomsky, Cindy Fredericks, Marilyn Young, Mark Ptashne, Zelda Gamson, Fred Branfman and Mitch Goodman), to the May Day actions blocking traffic in Washington (“If they won’t stop the war, we’ll stop the government”). Howard tells that story in the film, and I tell it at greater length in my memoir, “Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers.” But for reasons of space, I had to cut out the next section in which Howard—who had been arrested in D.C. after most of the rest of us had gone elsewhere—came back to Boston for a rally and a blockade of the Federal Building. I’ve never published that story, so here it is, an outtake from my manuscript:

A day later, Howard Zinn was the last speaker at a large rally in Boston Common. I was at the back of a huge crowd, listening to him over loudspeakers. Twenty-seven years later, I can remember some of what he said. “On May Day in Washington, thousands of us were arrested for disturbing the peace. But there is no peace. We were really arrested because we were disturbing the war.”

He said, “If Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had been walking the streets of Georgetown yesterday, they would have been arrested. Arrested for being young.”

At the end of his comments, he said: “I want to speak now to some of the members of this audience, the plainclothes policemen among us, the military intelligence agents who are assigned to do surveillance. You are taking the part of secret police, spying on your fellow Americans. You should not be doing what you are doing. You should rethink it, and stop. You do not have to carry out orders that go against the grain of what it means to be an American.”

Those last weren't his exact words, but that was the spirit of them. He was to pay for that comment the next day, when we were sitting side by side in a blockade of the Federal Building in Boston. We had a circle of people all the way around the building, shoulder to shoulder, so no one could get in or out except by stepping over us. Behind us were crowds of people with posters who were supporting us but who hadn't chosen to risk arrest. In front of us, keeping us from getting any closer to the main entrance to the building, was a line of policemen, with a large formation of police behind them. All the police had large plastic masks tilted back on their heads and they were carrying long black clubs, about four feet long, like large baseball bats. Later the lawyers told us that city police regulations outlawed the use of batons that long.

But at first the relations with the police were almost friendly. We sat down impudently at the very feet of the policemen who were guarding the entrance, filling in the line that disappeared around the sides until someone came from the rear of the building and announced over a bullhorn, "The blockade is complete. We've surrounded the building!" There was a cheer from the crowd behind us, and more people joined us in sitting until the circle was two or three deep.

We expected them to start arresting us, but for a while the police did nothing. They could have manhandled a passage through the line and kept it open for employees to go in or out, but for some reason they didn't. We thought maybe they really sympathized with our protest, and this was their way of joining in. As the morning wore on, people took apples and crackers and bottles of water out of their pockets and packs and shared them around, and they always offered some to the police standing in front of us. The police always refused, but they seemed to appreciate the offer.

Then one of the officers came over to Howard and said, "You're Professor Zinn, aren't you?" Howard said yes, and the officer reached down and shook his hand enthusiastically. He said, "I heard you lecture at the Police Academy. A lot of us here did. That was a wonderful lecture." Howard had been asked to speak to them about the role of dissent and civil disobedience in American history. Several other policemen came over to pay their respects to Howard and thank him for his lecture. The mood seemed quite a bit different from Washington.

Then a line of employees emerged from the building, wearing coats and ties or dresses. Their arms were raised and they were holding cards in their raised hands. As they circled past us, they held out the cards so we could see what they were: ID cards, showing they were federal employees. They were making the peace sign with their other hands, they were circling around the building to show solidarity with what we were doing. Their spokesman said over a bullhorn, "We want this war to be over, too! Thank you for what you are doing! Keep it up." Photographers, including police, were scrambling to take pictures of them, and some of them held up their ID cards so they would get in the picture. It was the high point of the day.

A little while after the employees had gone back inside the building, there was a sudden shift in the mood of the police. An order had been passed. The bloc of police in the center of the square got into tight formation and lowered their plastic helmets. The police standing right in front of us, over us, straightened up, adjusted their uniforms and lowered their masks. Apparently the time had come to start arrests. The supporters who didn't want to be arrested fell back.

But there was no arrest warning. There was a whistle, and the line of police began inching forward, black batons raised upright. They were going to walk through us or over us, push us back. The man in front of us, who had been talking to Howard about his lecture a little earlier, muttered to us under his breath, “Leave! Now! Quick, get up.” He was warning, not menacing us.

Howard and I looked at each other. We’d come expecting to get arrested. It didn’t seem right to just get up and move because someone told us to, without arresting us. We stayed where we were. No one else left either. Boots were touching our shoes. The voice over our heads whispered intensely, “Move! Please. For God’s sake, move!” Knees in uniform pressed our knees. I saw a club coming down. I put my hands over my head, fists clenched, and a four-foot baton hit my wrist, hard. Another one hit my shoulder.

I rolled over, keeping my arms over my head, got up and moved back a few yards. Howard was being hauled off by several policemen. One had Howard’s arms pinned behind him, another had jerked his head back by the hair. Someone had ripped his shirt in two, there was blood on his bare chest. A moment before he had been sitting next to me, and I waited for someone to do the same to me, but no one did. I didn’t see anyone else getting arrested. But no one was sitting anymore, the line had been broken, disintegrated. Those who had been sitting hadn’t moved very far, they were standing like me a few yards back, looking around, holding themselves where they’d been clubbed. The police had stopped moving. They stood in a line, helmets still down, slapping their batons against their hands. Their adrenaline was still up, but they were standing in place.

Blood was running down my hand, covering the back of my hand. I was wearing a heavy watch, and it had taken the force of the blow. The baton had smashed the crystal and driven pieces of glass into my wrist. Blood was dripping off my fingers. Someone gave me a handkerchief to wrap around my wrist and told me to raise my arm. The handkerchief got soaked quickly and blood was running down my arm while I looked for a first-aid station that was supposed to be at the back of the crowd, in a corner of the square. I finally found it, and someone picked the glass out of my arm and put a thick bandage around it.

I went back to the protest. My shoulder was aching. The police were standing where they had stopped, and the blockade had reformed, people were sitting 10 yards back from where they had been before. There seemed to be more people sitting, not fewer. Many of the supporters had joined in. But it was quiet. No one was speaking loudly, no laughing. People were waiting for the police to move forward again. They weren’t expecting any longer to get arrested.

Only three or four people had been picked out of the line to be arrested before. The police had made a decision (it turned out) to arrest only the “leaders,” not to give us the publicity of arrests and trials. Howard hadn’t been an organizer of this action, he was just participating like the rest of us, but from the way they treated him when they pulled him out of the line, his comments directly to the police in the rally the day before must have rubbed someone the wrong way.

I found Roz Zinn, Howard’s wife, sitting in the line on the side at right angles to where Howard and I had been before. I sat down between her and their housemate, a woman her age. They had been in support before until they had seen what happened to Howard.

Looking at the police in formation, with their uniforms and clubs, guns on their hips, I felt

naked. I knew that it was an illusion in combat to think you were protected because you were carrying a weapon, but it was an illusion that worked. For the first time, I was very conscious of being unarmed. At last, in my own country, I understood what a Vietnamese villager must have felt at what the Marines called a "county fair," when the Marines rounded up everyone they could find in a hamlet—all women, children and old people never draft- or VC-age young men—to be questioned one at a time in a tent, meanwhile passing out candy to the kids and giving vaccinations. Winning hearts and minds, trying to recruit informers. No one among the villagers knowing what the soldiers, in their combat gear, would do next, or which of them might be detained.

We sat and talked and waited for the police to come again. They lowered their helmets and formed up. The two women I was with were both older than I was. I moved my body in front of them, to take the first blows. I felt a hand on my elbow. "Excuse me, I was sitting there," the woman who shared the Zinns' house said to me, with a cold look. She hadn't come there that day and sat down, she told me later, to be protected by me. I apologized and scrambled back, behind them.

No one moved. The police didn't move, either. They stood in formation facing us, plastic masks over their faces, for quite a while. But they didn't come forward again. They had kept open a passage in front for the employees inside to leave after 5, and eventually the police left, and we left.

There was a happier story to tell, slightly more than one month later. On Saturday night, June 12, 1971, we had a date with Howard and Roz to see "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" in Harvard Square. But that morning I learned from someone at The New York Times that—without having alerted me—The Times was about to start publishing the top secret documents I had given them that evening. That meant I might get a visit from the FBI at any moment; and for once, I had copies of the papers in my apartment, because I planned to send them to Sen. Mike Gravel for his filibuster against the draft.

From "Secrets" (p. 386):

> "I had to get the documents out of our apartment. I called the Zinns, who had been planning to come by our apartment later to join us for the movie, and asked if we could come by their place in Newton [Mass.] instead. I took the papers in a box in the trunk of our car. They weren't the ideal people to avoid attracting the attention of the FBI. Howard had been in charge of managing antiwar activist Daniel Berrigan's movements underground while he was eluding the FBI for months (so from that practical point of view he was an ideal person to hide something from them), and it could be assumed that his phone was tapped, even if he wasn't under regular surveillance. However, I didn't know whom else to turn to that Saturday afternoon. Anyway, I had given Howard a large section of the study already, to read as a historian; he'd kept it in his office at Boston University. As I expected, they said yes immediately. Howard helped me bring up the box from the car.
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> "We drove back to Harvard Square for the movie. The Zinns had never seen 'Butch Cassidy' before. It held up for all of us. Afterward we bought ice-cream cones at Brigham's and went back to our apartment. Finally Howard and Roz went home before it was time for the early edition of the Sunday New York Times to arrive at the subway kiosk below the square. Around midnight Patricia and I went over to the square and bought a couple of copies. We came up the stairs into Harvard Square reading the front page, with the three-column story about the secret archive, feeling very good."

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