

Howard Zinn: A Historian and Political Analyst Unafraid of Taking Sides with the Voiceless and Oppressed

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Howard Zinn, government and history professor and activist in so many struggles for the voiceless and oppressed died January 27 this year of heart attack in Santa Monica CA while doing laps in a swimming pool. We can all, and surely all his relatives, should take pride in this great progressive voice who as Carl Sandburg once said of Abraham Lincoln “now he belongs to the ages.” His voice will be sorely missed and so hard to replace, and that’s damn putting it mildly. David Horowitz, I’m talking to you, you worthless bag of far right neo constipated hot air. The day when you can stand in Zinn’s shadow will never come, thus don’t even damn think about it. You definitely aren’t in his league, therefore stop taking a damn whiz on his grave. National Petroleum Radio (NPR) for your “outstanding” performance as a ideological hooker for the far right and further right, neo constipated US neo cons, I hereby nominate you for a PULighzer Prize which FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) a progressive US media watchdog annually awards to such slime as you. Jeff Cohen and all you fine people at FAIR, do give me some help on this. Maybe I’ll have to do the Christian thing the way George McGovern did in 1972 by turning both cheeks to these slime balls attacking Zinn after his death and whizzing on his grave. McGovern, as people know the son of a Methodist minister.

Active in opposition to US militarism and most especially the Vietnam War, Zinn was a well decorated war hero in the Second World War as part of the US Army Air Force in combat in action over the European Theater winning the Air Medal and other awards. His opposition to militarism and war was grounded in actual experience in what has so often been called a just war in which Zinn served as a second lieutenant.

As one reviewer of Zinn would say, he makes the case for less emphasis on “the great white men’s theory of history,” and for a more egalitarian history putting more stock in the contributions of others including minorities, women, and the working class.

Zinn’s book entitled The People History of the United States which came out in 1980 was his response to those who said he and others with his viewpoint hadn’t provided a complete synthesis of US history. It went further showing the contributions of blacks, other people of color, women, as well as the working class in substantial detail covering the broad sweep of US history. In this book Zinn showed how hopes for an egalitarian society or more egalitarian one ended up shattered, with the power elites holding onto their power, wealth, and privileges. Furthermore, Zinn showed the role of civil disobedience in US history. To offset the past and likely current lack of the progressive viewpoint in US history textbooks, it would surely be appropriate for this book of Zinn’s to be required reading in any public four

year high school or senior high school to counter the effects of the US exceptionalist garbage which passes for the gospel in public schools nationally. This writer know that this was the case even in the 1960s, and is likely even worse today with the political elites being all too much further to the right. Then add to that “journalism’s being the first draft of history, with the media so overwhelmingly putting out the right wing line as to be pathetic in favoring the US hierarchy’s power elites and the situation is more bleak.

Other academicians as a rule take sides even though claiming to be objective, they actually takes sides with what C Wright Mills has called the power elites in the hierarchal societies including the United States, whereas Zinn sided with those at the bottom of these same top down organized societies to move affairs in the direction of an egalitarian society and away from hierarchy with the power elites so completely with the collaboration of the bulk of academicians and the media seeking to keep the hierarchal society’s power elites’ power and privileges in place while defending same by insisting the system “works,” but not saying whom it works for. Zinn, on the other hand isn’t shy about saying whom the system here works for nor how it should be changed- which he maintains convincingly must be from the bottom up with bottom up organized mass social movements such as the US civil rights movement, the anti war movement with regard to the Vietnam War and right on across a whole range of issues this society and others have faced historically, with his stress being on what can be done in the United States based on what has happened in US history. His book a Peoples History of the United States provides a welcome challenge to those so used to simply acting as stenographers for the power elites in the United States with their contending that the system “works” constantly being their refrain and meanwhile making a pretense of objectivity, but actually siding with the power elites calling the shots in US system. Zinn has never shrank from repudiating this silly claim of objectivity by those dominating academia who constantly insists the system “works,” but refuse to say whom it works for nor concede they themselves are clearly taking sides with the power elites by their take on history acting as they do not much more than an echo chamber for the power elite establishment and more and more today an echo chamber for the military, industrial complex which Dwight D Eisenhower warned against and and one which has really become a national security, industrial, academic, media complex. Zinn has throughout his life ending at age 87 stood with those at the bottom of the US hierarchal society to move that same society toward an egalitarian society that pushes the power elites aside to give the real power to all the people by giving greater voice to those below in the US hierarchal state and for sometime empire- an empire to many academicians along with too much of the media refuse to recognize and acknowledge but instead constantly throw in their mantra of the system “works.” For whom it works doesn’t seem to bother them, it does distort history by simply echoing the propaganda coming from the power elites’ consensus and taking it as gospel and all that time insisting completely falsely of their objectivity as does much of the US media. Zinn like too few other academicians has had the guts to stand early with those opposing the Vietnam War and to recognize the truth of what Martin Luther King Jr said when he spoke out about the US Government “being the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. . .” Almost surely today Dr King would say the same thing, and speak of how this same government had largely been on the “wrong side of history since” the Second World War with Zinn standing beside him to cite chapter and verse of the details of this sordid history of US power elites and their decisions to make sure they keep their power and privileges no matter what.

Zinn and others like he are a voice for those too often lacking a voice in the United States whether it be blacks, other people of color, women, the working class or others left out and

at times virtually locked out of the system which claims to be a democracy, but today more and more has a for sale sign on it bringing to mind a legal Nevada whore house, and with the most recent US Supreme Court ruling on the “rights” of big business to have its “voice heard” to the degree it can outspend its opposition makes matter even worse.

Of progressive values which informed him as an academic and activist, he would say they are “fundamentally egalitarian. he would say “it’s the idea that everyone has a right to the good things in life, to the necessary things in life, that there should be no disproportions in the world.” He talked the talk, and he walked the walk, as people would say in the US black community. The book he wrote entitled “You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train” really sums up his stand as an academic and activist that while all hell is breaking loose people can’t just stand idly by, but need to do what they can to keep things from going to hell in a hand basket or they become collaborators, and Zinn wasn’t about to become a collaborator in the militarism, imperialism, racism, and all the rest for the power elites used to divide and rule to keep the power, wealth, and privileges for same power elites.

Though a seeming early admirer of liberalism and its advocates such as Fiorello LaGuardia, a congressman whom Zinn pictured as backing pro working class legislation and opposing the policies his own GOP for being too much in favor of the interests of the upscale as detailed in Zinn’s doctoral dissertation on LaGuardia. Zinn would become disenchanted with with what he clearly viewed as the minimalism of liberalism. The fact was that Zinn would become even skeptical of the good of Franklin D Roosevelt’s New Deal, and would later conclude that FDR and his inner circle by their policies had prevented a really major reform of the system which Zinn would have preferred as a true progressive. Thus Zinn would then break with the minimalism of liberalism’s reforms to favor a more aggressive and maybe even militant reform agenda to get more solid and complete reform of the system to move affairs in the direction of a more truly egalitarian rather than hierarchal society. Real reform Zinn was beginning to see must come from the bottom up, not top down, as the top down organization of society with its hierarchy and power elites couldn’t achieve needed substantial reform to bring about such an egalitarian society. Like Dr King, Zinn favored this more aggressive approach to reform to get at the roots of the problems such an hierarchal system created. Zinn’s take on the New Deal’s minimalism would come out in his anthology on the New Deal published in 1965. Zinn became increasingly disillusioned with liberalism minimalism by events of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1956 Zinn had taken a post as chairman of the history and social science department at Spellman College, a then black women’s college after moving to Atlanta. Zinn observed and was active in the events of the civil rights movement during his seven years teaching at Spellman. The violent repression of blacks shook Zinn and he was outraged by what he saw as the US Government’s less than strong protection of blacks’ rights. With this Zinn became disenchanted with John F Kennedy and his inner circle. Zinn’s study of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) published in 1964 was a passionate portrayal of the civil rights movement and an analysis linking it to the pre civil war anti slavery movement. Zinn saw JFK as still like FDR, a minimalist. Some would simply see Kennedy as liberal, but liberal wasn’t good enough for Zinn. Zinn wanted a progressive who would aggressively and maybe even militantly push for civil rights. Others would say that such wouldn’t be possible with JFK’s razor thin margin from the 1960 election and with the GOP/Dixiecrat coalition’s stranglehold on congress. Nevertheless Zinn was right about movements at the bottom being needed for reform.

After joining Boston University’s government department where Zinn would continue as a professor for the rest of his career, he would become active in the movement to oppose US

military involvement in Vietnam. Along with his activism on this issue Zinn published a book in 1967 called *The Logic of Withdrawal*, which made a strong case against Lyndon B Johnson's policy of military intervention there. Also Zinn was also active in the American Mobilization Committee's push to bring US involvement to an end. In 1968 he would travel to North Vietnam with Father Daniel Berrigan to gain the release of three US bomber pilots shot down during their attacks on North Vietnam. After gaining their release, Zinn wrote articles of first hand account of his journey to North Vietnam.

"Objective" academicians attacked Zinn for his advocacy as an academic, obviously not considering that by their establishment positions, they were being advocates at least indirectly for the status quo. In a collection of essays he got published in 1970. Zinn repudiated the notion that historical study was objective, on the contrary he insisted all written history represented opinion. He maintained that for those who failed to speak out against that which was immoral was to make them irresponsible and irrelevant, and that those writing history needed to speak up for values reflecting the values of humanity. In his articles on the Second World War, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement Zinn made the case for advocacy style history providing examples of how this kind of history worked in real life. His advocacy was simply more straight forward and thus more honest, whereas the establishment types were simply pretending to be objective, but their own research surely was colored by their views.

Active in progressive politics, Zinn was widely published both in scholarly journals as well as elsewhere.

Born in New York City in August 22, 1922, Zinn attended New York University as an undergraduate after leaving the military, getting his bachelor's degree in 1951. Following this Zinn would go on to Columbia, getting his master's degree in 1952 and his Ph D in 1958. From 1953 to 1956 he would be an instructor at Upsala College in East Orange NJ.

A H Goldberg is the name used on the author's blog which can be accessed at ahgoldberg.radioleft.com/blog.

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