

Howard Zinn's Echoes

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Theme: [History](#)

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We're approaching three years since Howard Zinn left us, and to my ear his voice sounds louder all the time. I expect that effect to continue for decades and centuries to come, because Zinn spoke to enduring needs. He taught lessons that must be relearned over and over, as the temptations weighing against them are so strong. And he taught those lessons better than anybody else.

We like to use the word "we," and to include in it everything the Constitution pretends to include in it, notably the government. But the government tends to act against our interests. Multi-billionaires, by definition, act against our interest. Zinn warned us endlessly of the danger of allowing those in power to use "we" to include us in actions we would otherwise oppose. It's a habit we carry over from sports to wars to economic policies, but the danger of a spectator claiming "we scored!" doesn't rise to the same level as millions of spectators claiming "we liberated Afghanistan."

We like to think of elections as a central, important part of civic life, and as a means of significantly impacting the future. Zinn not only warns against that misperception with incisive historical examples, and with awareness of the value of the struggle for black voting rights in the Southern United States, but he was a part of that struggle and warned against misplaced expectations at the time.

We like to think of history as shaped by important stand-out individuals. We like to think of war as a necessary tool of last resort, as demonstrated by our list of "good wars" which generally includes the U.S. war of independence, the U.S. civil war, and the second world war (debunked by Zinn as 'The Three Holy Wars'). We imagine that political parties are central to our efforts to shape the world, but that civil disobedience is not. We imagine that we often have no power to shape the world, that the forces pushing in other directions are too powerful to be reversed. If you listen to enough Howard Zinn, each of these beliefs ends up looking ludicrous — even if, in some cases, tragic.

If you haven't had enough Howard Zinn lately (and who has?), there's a new book of his collected speeches just published, called *Howard Zinn Speaks*. Of course it's just a tiny sampling of his speeches, as he gave innumerable speeches over the years. With one exception, these have been transcribed from speeches given without pre-written remarks. Zinn doesn't have his footnotes in hand. He paraphrases people rather than quoting them. But he also says what he believes to be most needed, what he has thought about most deeply, what pours out of him in ever-changing variation on his one and only theme: *We can shape the future if, and only if, we make use of the past.*

The speeches collected here are themselves part of the past. There's one from the 1960s,

two from the 70s, two from the 80s, four from the 90s, and over half the book from the Bush-Obama years. But the examples Zinn draws on, the stories he tells to make his points, go back for centuries into a past that most Americans only dimly recognize.

Zinn traces the roots of racism and wars through Columbus, slavery, colonialism, and current U.S. wars. “The abolition of war,” he says, “is of course an enormous undertaking. But keep in mind that we in the antiwar movement have a powerful ally. Our ally is a truth which even governments addicted to war, profiting from war, must one of these days recognize: that wars are not practical ways of achieving their ends. More and more, in recent history, the most powerful nations find themselves unable to conquer much weaker nations.”

Four years ago, Zinn warned: “It is dangerous to look just to Obama. This has been part of our culture, looking to saviors. Saviors will not do it. We cannot depend on the people on top to save us. I hope that people who supported Obama will not simply sit back and wait for him to save us but will understand that they have to do more than this. All of these are limited victories.”

In April, 1963, Zinn spoke in similar terms — if anything even more forthrightly — of President Kennedy. “This is beyond the South,” he said. “Our problem is not basically that Eastland is vicious, but that Kennedy is timid.” Zinn criticized Kennedy for his actions and inactions in 1961 and again in 1963 when the Senate had the opportunity, as it always does, at the beginning of each new session, to change its own rules and do away with the filibuster. Kennedy, Zinn had concluded, wanted to allow the racists to filibuster against civil rights. Echoes of Zinn should be amplified between now and January loudly enough for current senators, and the current president, to hear.

In May of 1971, Zinn said, “It’s been a long time since we impeached a president. And it’s time, time to impeach a president, and the vice president, and everybody else sitting in high office who carries on this war.” In 2003, Zinn said, “There are people around the country calling for Bush’s impeachment. Some people think this is a daring thing to say. No, it’s in the Constitution. It provides for impeachment. . . . Congress was willing to impeach Nixon for breaking into a building, but they’re not willing to impeach Bush for breaking into a country.”

“It is true,” Zinn says of our endless and perhaps permanent elections hang-up, “that Americans have been voting every few years for Congressmen and presidents. But it is also true that the most important social changes in the history of the United States — independence from England, Black emancipation, the organization of labor, gains in sexual equality, the outlawing of racial segregation, the withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam — have come about not through the ballot box but through the direct action of social struggle, through the organization of popular movements using a variety of extralegal and illegal tactics. The standard teaching of political science does not describe this reality.”

Later (years later) Zinn says, without self-pity: “So if we don’t have a press that informs us, we don’t have an opposition party to help us, we are left on our own, which actually is a good thing to know. It’s a good thing to know we’re on our own. It’s a good thing to know that you can’t depend on people who are not dependable. But if you’re on your own, it means you must learn some history, because without history you are lost. Without history, anybody in authority can get up before a microphone and say, ‘We’ve got to go into this country for that reason and for this reason, for liberty, for democracy, the threat.’ Anybody

can get up before a microphone and tell you anything. And if you have no history, you have no way of checking up on that.”

But if you do have history, Zinn says, then you gain the additional advantage of recognizing that “these concentrations of power, at certain points they fall apart. Suddenly, surprisingly. And you find that ultimately they’re very fragile. And you find that governments that have said ‘we will never do this’ end up doing it. ‘We will never cut and run.’ They said this in Vietnam. We cut and ran in Vietnam. In the South, George Wallace, the racist governor of Alabama: ‘Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.’ Enormous applause. Two years later, Blacks in Alabama had in the meantime begun to vote and Wallace was going around trying to get Black people to vote for him. The South said never, and things changed.”

The more things change . . . the more we need to hear Howard Zinn.

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