

Remembering Howard Zinn

By Elizabeth DiNovella, January 27, 2010

I am deeply saddened by the news of the death of Howard Zinn. He was a longtime columnist for *The Progressive*, and his most recent piece, "The Nobel's Feeble Gesture," expressed his dismay about President Obama getting the Nobel Peace Prize.

Here's an excerpt:

"I think some progressives have forgotten the history of the Democratic Party, to which people have turned again and again in desperate search for saviors, later to be disappointed. Our political history shows us that only great popular movements, carrying out bold actions that awakened the nation and threatened the Establishment, as in the Thirties and the Sixties, have been able to shake that pyramid of corporate and military power and at least temporarily changed course."

It was a "classic" Zinn piece—piercing but playful, saying in no uncertain terms what needed to be said. It's not surprising he was a favorite columnist for many of our subscribers. He was my favorite, too.

On matters of war and peace, he was absolute. In our July 2009 issue, he wrote, "We've got to rethink this question of war and come to the conclusion that war cannot be accepted, no matter what. No matter what the reasons given, or the excuse: liberty, democracy; this, that. War is by definition the indiscriminate killing of huge numbers of people for ends that are uncertain. Think about means and ends, and apply it to war. The means are horrible, certainly. The ends, uncertain. That alone should make you hesitate. . . . We are smart in so many ways. Surely, we should be able to understand that in between war and passivity, there are a thousand possibilities."

What I loved most about Zinn was his sense of humor, which didn't always translate onto the page. I didn't know how funny he was until I heard him speak at our 95th anniversary party six years ago. He was gracious enough to attend our recent 100th birthday bash, too.

When I was a just becoming politicized, I read *A People's History of the United States* and it blew my mind away. Reading Zinn's book was a rite of passage in my activist circles, and I hope it still is.

It's been nearly twenty years since I've read *A People's History*, and it is no small thrill to be at a magazine that regularly publishes the work of a peace mongering historian, a World War II soldier who flew bombing missions over Europe but later staunchly advocated for peace. That was thing about Zinn—when he spoke of war, he knew what he was talking about.

Back in 2003 when George W. Bush was gunning for Saddam Hussein, Zinn wrote a cover story for *The Progressive* called "A Chorus Against War."

This is how it ends:

"If Bush starts a war, he will be responsible for the lives lost, the children crippled, the terrorizing of millions of ordinary people, the American GIs not returning to their families. And all of use will be responsible for bringing that to a halt.

Men who have no respect for human life or for freedom or justice have taken over this beautiful country of ours. It will be up to the American people to take it back."

I would have loved to read what Zinn thought about the recent Supreme Court ruling allowing even more money into our political system. Or what he would have written after hearing Obama's first State of the Union Address. The President's speech hasn't even started yet tonight, but this much I do know: Zinn would have reminded us, as he did over and over, that we need to organize our neighborhoods and workplaces and schools in order to create change, and not leave it up to the politicians.

"Historically, government, whether in the hands of Republicans or democrats, conservatives or liberals, has failed its responsibilities until forced to by direct action: sit-ins and Freedom Rides for the rights of black people, strikes and boycotts for the rights of workers, mutinies and desertions of soldiers in order to stop a war," Zinn wrote in a piece called, "Election Madness" back in March 2008. "Voting is easy and marginally useful, but it is a poor substitute for democracy, which requires direct action by concerned citizens."

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