

A Power Governments Cannot Suppress

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In Review



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Howard Zinn

City Lights

Howard Zinn wants to do history justly. He seeks to bear witness to a past that's never exactly past, and the acts of remembering he demands of his audience (and himself) mesh seamlessly with an intense and determined awareness of present goings-on. Zinn understands that remembrance and awareness don't come naturally to us. It's a difficult and paradoxical task to try to want to know what we don't want to know in our personal lives, in the markets our buying sustains, and in the governments whose actions depend on our funding and our consent. But when we exist in a state of historical deafness, it's as if we were literally born yesterday, and we will believe anything that the powerful—the sellers and spinners of news—need us to believe in order for them to sustain their perceived interests.

Zinn has dedicated a lifetime to contributing to and helping to sustain a counterculture of lively awareness—a culture that counters any ideology that would reduce human beings to collateral damage, illegals, enemy combatants or mere resources. *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, a collection of essays penned over an eight-year period, moves constantly, from autobiography to close reading of constitutional history to commentary on the phenomenon strangely labeled Current Events.

Taking readers back to his days as a bombardier in World War II, when he took part in the U.S. military's inaugural use of napalm, Zinn recalls with a sense of shame that he felt relief when he read the headline reporting the destruction of Hiroshima and suspected that his job was done. But then he began to wonder whether the Western powers and Stalinist Russia were as concerned about fascism as they were about protecting their own power and retaining control of resources. Throughout the war, he noticed, there were military priorities that took precedence over missions—such as the bombing of railway lines leading to Auschwitz—that had obvious human benefits. He began to be less convinced that all the civilian deaths in the war had been necessary.

When he was in junior high school, Zinn recalls, his class was asked to explain the difference between a totalitarian state and a democratic state. They were eventually supplied with the correct answer: "A totalitarian state, unlike ours, believes in using any means to achieve its end." As records of civilian war deaths began to surface, these lines of distinction started to blur for Zinn. War is the enemy, he now contends, and with the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate now asserting that the Iraq war is not decreasing but increasing the spread of terrorism, it's become clear

that *war on terror* is an oxymoron.

While Zinn concedes that humanitarian intervention to prevent or end atrocities will occasionally prove necessary (in Sudan, for instance), his hope is that the memory of the violence and dishonor of the Iraq war will lead to a healing of what he calls Americans' "war syndrome." He believes that the public is beginning to snap out of its unreal—almost surreal—aloofness. "There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people for a purpose which is unattainable," he writes. The power of governments is dependent on the obedience of the people. And the people have the power to redeem the works of pride and folly. "We live in a beautiful country," he writes. "But people who have no respect for human life, freedom, or justice have taken it over. It is now up to all of us to take it back."

History, by Zinn's reckoning, can overwhelm us with instances of committed people turning the tide. He argues persuasively for replacing Theodore Roosevelt's image on Mount Rushmore with Mark Twain's. He wants portraits of Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker of the civil rights movement on our classroom walls. And he's especially eager to hold up the example of Henry David Thoreau—specifically his civil disobedience in protest of the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846. When Zinn testified in the case of the Milwaukee 14, who had burned thousands of draft files during the Vietnam War, he tried to enlist Thoreau as a relevant figure. The presiding judge cut him off with the sound of his gavel and insisted: "You can't discuss that. That is getting to the heart of the matter." Echoing Thoreau, Zinn observes (with what is still occasionally considered a quintessentially American sensibility), "Civil disobedience is inherently antinationalist because it is based on a refusal to accept the legitimacy of government as an absolute; it considers the powers of government subordinate to human rights."

Employing I. F. Stone's response to a request for advice for beginning journalists, Zinn proffers the proverb, "Governments lie." As he catalogues the lies of presidential administrations throughout U.S. history and ponders how "public opinion" (which Jacques Ellul believed to be a very powerful fiction) is marshaled toward state-sponsored atrocities again and again, he calls his readers to practice vigilance against all the ways that "the superficial crowds out the meaningful" and to turn their attention toward the troubling testimonies of returning soldiers, Iraqi citizens and others who—simply by telling the truth—call into question our feverishly defensive and endlessly improvised national self-image.

Because he calls this national self-image into question himself (and is therefore roped together, through the process of brand association, with figures like Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky), I fear that Zinn's power as a historian and an educator will be ignored by some people who would otherwise be moved to hopefulness, renewed vigor, and action by the insights he brings. (To my mind, the same is true of Moore and Chomsky.) Too often we measure people by whether they give offense before we ask whether their witness is truthful.

"Education," Zinn writes, "can, and should, be dangerous to the existing social structure"—quite a provocative statement on the face of it. The context is Zinn's account of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. Zinn was an adviser to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at the time, and he contends that the Freedom Schools, many of them established by students, that operated throughout Mississippi that year called into question the meaning of public education—its goals, its ends and its definition of a job well done. He believes that the memory of that time still questions the meaning of public education.

Zinn continues to be engaged in works of care, concern, cultivation and deeply pro-human witness. His motivation echoes the sentiment of his friend and kindred spirit Kurt Vonnegut, who once said, when asked why he kept writing, that he wanted his readers to know that someone out there was of the same mind: "I care about the same things you care about. You are not alone." Zinn's good word is an ethical summons. It gives voice to crucial figures of our past and present for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see.