

HOWARD ZINN

1922-

IN HOWARD ZINN, THE AGE OF DEMOCRACY HAS ITS AMERICAN historian, a writer and teacher attuned to the forces that just might create a world with respect for equality and human rights. Unlike many historians, he fixes attention not on wars and government, but on the ideas, imagination, and courage of ordinary people. And in a host of articles, essays, and books published since 1959, he focuses on acts of disobedience and solidarity of the past two centuries that initiated mass movements for liberation. Confronted with such large popular movements against injustice, the established order—and sometimes even the state—has given way to reason and reform.

In charting this history, Howard Zinn commits something more than his voice and tenure as an academic, beginning with his active involvement in the civil rights movement and moving on to resistance against the draft and the nuclear arms race. With a handful of talented and committed academics and artists, including Noam Chomsky, Grace Paley, Denise Levertov, George Wald, and Richard Falk, Zinn makes the link between scholarship and humane values, between the academy and the public order. He is, in fact, almost a National Endowment for the Humanities himself.

Born in New York City on August 24, 1922, Zinn has lived in the Boston area, with his wife and family, since 1964. He, like many men of his generation, "grew up" in the armed services, and was decorated as an air force bombardier in Central Europe during the Second World War. Afterward, he completed his formal education at New York University and Columbia University under the G.I. bill, receiving a Ph.D. in history in 1958. Before moving to Boston University, he chaired the history and social science department at Spelman College, in Atlanta; during those years, he was also deeply involved in the civil rights movement and wrote an important study of

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (1964).

Prior to the publication of his major work, *A People's History of the United States* (1980), Zinn wrote frequently on politics and the social thought of the Great Depression and on the tradition of civil disobedience in American history. In February 1968, he, with Father Daniel Berrigan, arranged the release of three American prisoners of war in North Vietnam, during a special visit to that country. Since that time, Howard Zinn has testified on behalf of people on trial for resisting the draft or for damaging nuclear weapons equipment; and he has appeared in several films, such as *Holy Outlaw* (1970) and *Lovejoy's Nuclear War* (1976), that dramatize those issues. He is the author, as well, of a successful biographical drama about the anarchist, feminist, and pamphleteer, Emma Goldman.

In writing history, Zinn has taken his lead not from the announced purposes of governments, but from their actions, their deeds. He has been careful, for example, to note "the warring elements" of the American creed. By this he means a conflict between the *rhetorical* creed, represented by the Declaration of Independence ("all Men are created equal," the right to revolution, and so on) and the *working* creed. The hard evidence is

that all men are created equal, except foreigners with whom we are at war, blacks who have not been signaled out for special attention, Indians who will not submit, inmates of prisons, members of the armed forces, and anyone without money.

In his writings, as well as in his undergraduate classes and public lectures, Zinn spells out the consequences of this dichotomy, especially America's failure to alter its allocation of power and wealth. He occasionally admits that changes take place within the narrow boundaries of profit-motivated capitalism, a paternalistic political system, an aggressive foreign policy, and "a social system based on a culture of prejudices concerning race, national origin, sex, age, and wealth."

Zinn's truths are obvious to many observers outside the

United States, but few people profess them from "inside the whale," and even fewer from the hallowed groves of academe. Although his view of history is sometimes regarded as unorthodox, his authority as a teacher and writer has won him a wide audience among students and scholars, as well as a significant, perhaps permanent, place among modern historians. With E.P. Thomaspon, in England, Zinn has made the history of the working class visible in a way that it has seldom been since the 1930s.

In his histories, Zinn has always been explicit about his purpose and goal. In the introduction to *Postwar America: 1945-1971*, for example, after encouraging the reader to take an active part in making history, he poses two central questions:

First, why did the United States, exactly as it became the most heavily armed and wealthiest society in the world, run into so much trouble with its own people? From the late fifties to the early seventies, the nation experienced unprecedented black rebellion, student demonstrations, antiwar agitation, civil disobedience, prison uprising, and a widespread feeling that American civilization was faltering, or even in decay. And second, what are the possibilities, the visions, the beginnings of fresh directions for this country?

A decade later, Zinn continues to explore the implications of these radical questions. In the same quiet, measured voice, with an understated, even wry humor, he lectures to large classes of undergraduates, speaks at a rally against conscription on the Boston Common, or addresses an annual meeting of professional historians and political scientists. Patient and persistent, he appears confident that his message will get through, amid the conventional noise and chatter. In the long effort to get the facts straight and to keep alive the history of ordinary people, he behaves as if time were on his side, "as long," he might add, "as the bomb doesn't fall."

BY HOWARD ZINN

A People's History of the United States. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Postwar America: 1945-1971. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

The Politics of History. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1970.

Disobedience and Democracy. New York: Random House, 1968.

"Three Prisoners: The Petty Route Home," *Nation*, CCVI, No. 14 (April 1968), 431-37.

SNCC: The New Abolitionists. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1964.

And others.