

## Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left

**Martin Duberman**

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In his popular and enduring *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn offers a very different account of American history than the one that generations of schoolchildren have been taught. Rather than focusing on the elite classes, or celebrating the inherent rightness of the government, or glorifying the United States as God's gift to the rest of the world, Zinn discusses the ways that the lives of ordinary people both shaped and were affected by larger historical forces. His groundbreaking book blazed a trail, for many subsequent histories of the United States have taken more care to include the voices of those who protested the status quo or who were marginalized by political or social forces.

As eloquent biographer Martin Duberman points out in this compulsively readable and elegant book, Zinn's great passion for the oppressed and voiceless came honestly to the young man raised in Brooklyn by parents who had difficulty making ends meet. "Howard would sometimes express anger about how hard his parents had to work and how little they ever had to show for it; it taught Howard that people rarely got what they deserved."

Drawing on his exclusive access to the previously closed Zinn archives, Duberman warmly chronicles Zinn's life and work, from his childhood growing up as a voracious reader whose parents recognized his intellectual gift early and encouraged and fostered it, to his military service, to his doctoral work at Columbia and his first teaching appointment at Spelman College in Atlanta during the early years of the Civil Right Movement. During these latter years, Zinn wrote his first book, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, which Duberman observes is "passionately argued, intense, and persuasive ... and remains memorably alive." Zinn eventually left Spelman because of conflicts with the administration, though the students acclaimed him as one of their best teachers. Duberman follows Zinn's career through his work as a professor at Boston University and his activist involvement in a number of causes, from labor to prison reform.

The biographer admiringly tells a compelling tale of a man whose "exemplary concern for the plight of others, a concern free of condescension or self-importance" was at the center of his life. Zinn, observes Duberman, remained centered on a "capacious solidarity with the least fortunate." Owing to Duberman's own passionate commitment to social justice and his exclusive access to Zinn's papers, his authoritative biography brings Zinn's colorful voice back to life.

HENRY CARRIGAN (Winter 2013)

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