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Howard Zinn: A Radical American Vision

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“I always insisted that a good education was a synthesis of book learning and involvement in social action,” asserts Zinn, a controversial historian. Zinn’s fifteen books, and his involvement in social movements, which has earned him the title of “dean of American radical historians,” are investigated in this volume. The author, emeritus historian at East Central Oklahoma University, admires Zinn and writes in the same readable, jargon-free style that has made Zinn’s books as popular with general readers as they are with historians.

Zinn’s own impoverished childhood led to his early awareness of the few opportunities that the poor had to escape their circumstances. During World War II, while a bombardier for the Army Air Corps, Zinn saw first-hand how African-Americans were discriminated against by the military. These experiences fueled his radicalism and propelled his participation in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

After the war, Zinn attended Columbia University on the GI Bill and later received his Ph.D. from Columbia while teaching at Spelman College, an historically Black women’s college in Atlanta. Zinn became an adviser for the college’s chapter of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, an important role because he was able to use his contacts in journalism and academe to promote SNCC’s cutting-edge actions in the movement. One of his most popular books, SNCC: The New Abolitionists, published in 1964, grew out of this experience.

Ironically, Zinn was fired from Spelman because he was too much of a firebrand for the college’s conservative president. In 1964 Zinn joined Boston University’s political science department, where he remained until his “retirement” in 1988. During his BU years he wrote his most famous book, A People’s History of the United States, and fought memorable battles with university President Charles Silber. Zinn’s most significant confrontations, however, were with members of the historical academy who derided his approach to teaching history “from the bottom up.” Joyce engagingly relates all of these events and many more. His previous works include The Writing of American History, History and Historians, and Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before.

Now eighty-one years old, Zinn, not surprisingly, speaks out against the loss of Constitutional rights that is the fallout of the War on Terrorism. His admiring former students and like-minded colleagues would expect no less from him than his continued activism and his demonstrated belief that people, not leaders, are the driving force of history.
KARL HELICHER (November / December 2003)

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