Howard Zinn



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Acts of Rebellion, Large and Small

By Greg Ruggiero

Long before Howard Zinn became a household name, he was revered by activists and educators as one of America's preeminent scholars, historians, and trusted allies of movements for peace and justice. His work was rooted in the disobedient tradition of the abolitionists, suffragists, labor organizers, and anti-war protesters whose struggles have dramatically changed both the legal fabric and the political consciousness of the country. A radical analysis of the structures of power formed the basis of his teaching, writing, and activism. His stature as a public figure and moral compass seemed only to increase with each passing year, until at some point Zinn genuinely *did* become a household name, not as a celebrity but as a vitally important and popularly referenced American intellectual, like Noam Chomsky or Carl Sagan. Perhaps Matt Damon's references to Zinn

in the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting* marked the cultural moment when Howard and his masterpiece, *A People's History of the United States*, entered media-driven mass culture. The film certainly helped get the message out about the book. Not long after that *A People's History* sold its millionth copy, and before too long it was no longer a surprise to see Howard and his books in the corporate press and on TV, even in such unlikely programs as *The Simpsons* and *The Sopranos*.¹

I was first introduced to Howard in 1991 through my friend David Barsamian of Alternative Radio. In January of that year some friends and I had launched the Open Media Series, and a transcript of Zinn's anti-war speech *Power*; *History, and Warfare* was published a few months later. It was the first of many pamphlets and books by Howard that I have had the privilege to publish.

I learned many things working with Howard, and projects we worked on together were almost always timed to help leverage specific political interventions. For example, his second contribution to the series was *Columbus*, the *Indians*, and *Human Progress*: 1492–1992. Published as #19 in May 1992, the pamphlet was created to support indigenous opposition to the fanfare accompanying the 500th-anniversary celebrations of the "discovery" of America. Instead of extolling Christopher Columbus, Howard wanted to raise awareness of Columbus's greed and cruelty by focusing

on his true mission—gold—and the countless indigenous people he and his underlings abused and killed in order to get it. The pamphlet ends with the following words:

In rethinking our history, we are not just looking at the past but at the present, and trying to look at it from the point of view of those who have been left out of the benefits of so-called civilization. It is a simple but profoundly important thing we are trying to accomplish, to look at the world from other points of view. We need to do that, as we come into the next century, if we want this coming century to be different, if we want it to be not an American century, or a Western century, or a white century, or a male century, or any nation's, any group's century, but a century for the human race.

The third Zinn title in the Open Media Series was also written and published as a timed intervention—a concise counternarrative to the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. atomic attacks on Japan. At the time it was written, reflections on U.S. actions in World War II were widely couched in feel-good terms like "the good war" and "the greatest generation" and delivered via uncritical presentations like the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space

Museum exhibit, dominated by the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* and archival footage of its smiling crew. In opposition to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to the very premise of a "good war," Howard wrote *Hiroshima: Breaking the Silence*, first published in June 1995 as pamphlet #34 in the Open Media Series and presented again here.

Howard's feelings and views about the U.S. atomic attacks on Japan were always conveyed with a fresh sense of urgency. He spoke out frequently against the immorality of the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, against the madness of nuclear weapons, and against the inevitable consequences of such weapons—the indiscriminate killing and injury of ordinary people. Even after it had sold thousands of copies and had long gone out of print, Hiroshima: Breaking the Silence remained important to him. After we worked together on his 2006 book with City Lights, A Power Governments Cannot Suppress, he and I discussed the upcoming sixty-fifth anniversary of the bombings and made plans for this book. Howard said he would like to bring the Hiroshima text back into print, and suggested combining it with an earlier essay he'd written about the U.S. napalm-bombing of Royan, France—a combat mission in which he participated in April 1945. We decided to call it *The Bomb*, and that Howard would open the book with a new introduction. In December 2009, one month

before he passed away in Los Angeles, Howard emailed me the new introduction and the book was complete—another small act of rebellion against official versions of history and justifications for war.

Howard loved small acts of rebellion. He loved them because it's through small acts that all big change begins, and shifting historical focus from the wealthy and powerful to the ordinary person was perhaps his greatest act of rebellion and incitement. For Howard, to refuse to comply with injustice is to participate in the making of the people's history, and to stand up, speak out, argue against official narratives, form oppositional networks, take to the streets and disobey are among our non-negotiable rights, and the more people we connect with while we rebel, the greater the joy.²

As I write this during the first week of April 2010, President Obama has released the latest U.S. "Nuclear Posture Review." Along with declaring plans for limited reduction of aging nuclear weapons and making vague reference to their eventual elimination at some unspecified time beyond his term of office, the commander-in-chief's announcement clearly reasserts the U.S. military plan to possess and potentially use nuclear weapons against the populations of other countries. While an op-ed in the *New York Times* responded with the statement, "No one in their right mind can imagine the United States ever using

a nuclear weapon again,"³ that is precisely what the United States is doing by keeping thousands of nuclear weapons ready for attack by land, air and sea.

I think Howard would agree with the anonymous oped writer and add that the Obama administration is not in its right mind. Not only does the new nuclear doctrine assert conditions under which the U.S. would use nuclear weapons again, but President Obama used the release of the new policy as an opportunity to intensify threats against North Korea and Iran.

Zinn's argument is urgent and direct: there simply is no situation, however atrocious, to ever justify us to allow the leaders of this country to attack with nuclear weapons again:

It is a prescription for the endless cycle of violence and counter-violence, terrorism and counter-terrorism, that has plagued our times, for which the only response is: "No more wars or bombings, of retaliation. *Someone*, no, *we*, must stop that cycle, now."

The strategic argument, which I and other historians have tried to answer with the evidence that there was no military necessity to use the bomb, is not enough. We need to confront the moral issue directly: faced with the horrors

visited on hundreds of thousands of human beings by the massive bombings of modern warfare, can any military-strategic-political "necessity" justify that?

And if the answer is no, as I believe, what can we learn to free us from the thinking that leads us to stand by . . . while atrocities are committed in our name?

May this little book contribute to our collective asking of that question, loudly, and to answering it, in Howard's spirit, with acts of rebellion large and small.

Introduction

By Howard Zinn

The day the war in Europe ended—V-E Day, May 8, 1945—my B-17 bomber crew drove from our airfield in East Anglia to the nearby city of Norwich to join an exultant celebration of victory. The city that had been darkened by blackouts for the past five years of war was now ablaze with lights, and it seemed every man, woman, and child was in the streets, dancing, shouting, weeping with joy, passing around fish and chips and beer and embracing one another.

That July we flew back home—crossing the Atlantic in the same four-engine bomber from which we had dropped bombs on Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, France. We were given a thirty-day furlough to reunite with wives, sweethearts, family, and then we were to head for the Pacific to fly more bombing missions against Japan.

My wife Roslyn and I decided to take a holiday in the country, and as we walked to a bus stop to take us to upstate New York we passed a newsstand and a pile of newspapers with huge black headlines: "Atom Bomb Dropped on Hiroshima." I remember our reaction: we were happy. We didn't know what an atom bomb was, but clearly it was huge and important and it foretold an end to the war against Japan, and if so I wouldn't be going to the Pacific, and might soon be coming home for good.

I had no understanding at that moment of what the atomic bomb had done to the people of Hiroshima. It was an abstraction, a headline, just another bombing, like those we had done in Europe, though on a larger scale, it seemed. To this day, the vicious reality of aerial bombing is lost to most people in the United States, a military operation devoid of human feeling, a news event, a statistic, a fact to be taken in quickly and forgotten.

Indeed, that's how it is for those who drop bombs, for people like me, a bombardier sitting in the Plexiglas nose of a B-17, operating my bombsight, observing flashes of light below as the bombs hit, but seeing no human beings, hearing no screams, seeing no blood, totally unaware that down below there might be children dying, rendered blind, with arms or legs severed.

True, I was dropping bombs from 30,000 feet in the air, six miles high, and today's jet bombers are closer to the

ground and use the most sophisticated computers to aim their bombs more accurately at their targets. But the operation is just as impersonal, because even in what is called "pinpoint bombing" the man dropping the bomb sees no human beings. He may do what I could never do in World War II, aim at and hit a specific house, a specific automobile. But he has no idea who is in that house, who is in that auto. He has been told by "intelligence"—that monumental misnomer—that the house or the car contains one or more "suspected terrorists."

What you see over and over again in the news reports is the words "suspected terrorist" or "suspected Al Qaeda" —meaning that "intelligence" is not sure whom we are bombing, that we are willing to justify the killing of a "suspect" in Iraq or Afghanistan or Pakistan, something we would not accept from a police operation in New York or San Francisco. This suggests, to our shame, that the lives of people other than Americans are of lesser importance.

In this way, the members of a wedding party in Afghanistan were put to death by an American bombing aimed at "suspected terrorists." Immediately after Obama's election, unmanned "Predator" drone missiles were fired on Pakistan. In the second of these strikes, as Jane Mayer reported in an analysis in the *New Yorker* of Predator bombing, the house of a pro-government tribal leader was wrongly targeted (by "intelligence"). "The blast killed the

tribal leader's entire family, including three children, one of them five years old."

In World War II the equipment was not as sophisticated, but the results were the same: innocent people killed. The bombardiers of today are in the same position I was in, following orders without question, oblivious of the human consequences of our bombing.

Not until I was out of uniform did I have an awakening, the shock of understanding. It came from reading John Hersey's account of his interviews in Hiroshima with survivors of the bombing, who told their stories in the most graphic and horrifying detail: "The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands."

John Hersey's dispatches made me think of my own bombing missions, and how I had mindlessly dropped bombs on cities without thinking of what human beings on the ground were experiencing. I particularly thought of my last bombing mission.

It took place three weeks before the end of the war in Europe, and everyone knew the war was essentially over. The bomber crews on our airfield in East Anglia expected that there would be no more missions over Europe. Surely there was no reason to do any more bombing, not even the crass justification of "military necessity."

But we were awakened from our sleeping bags in the corrugated tin huts we lived in and ordered onto trucks to take us to the briefing rooms and the flight line. It was about three in the morning, the usual wake-up time on days we were flying missions, because there would be three hours for intelligence briefings, breakfast, and equipment checking before taking off at dawn.

At the briefing, we were told we were going to bomb a German garrison stationed near the town of Royan, a vacation spot on the Atlantic Coast of France not far from the port of Bordeaux. The Germans weren't attacking, just sitting there waiting for the war to end, and we would wipe them out.

In the summer of 1966 I spent some time in Royan and found in the town library most of the material on which my essay is based.