

John Hampsey's Tribute to Howard Zinn on the Fifth Anniversary of His Death, January 27, 2015

Q: As we approach the fifth anniversary of Howard Zinn's death, what is foremost in your mind?

A: How much it feels like Howard is still here. On the first day of my Classical Literature class last week, I was talking about cutting through the kitsch to get to the truth of the Classical Tradition. I was thinking about the Hebrew creation story in the Book of Genesis and of Homer's epics, the beginnings of the written tradition from the Jews and from the Greeks. And I suddenly found myself relying upon Howard's key notion that the greatest lies in history are not false facts, because we can always check them. For instance, if I were to say that 50,000 American lives have been lost in Iraq, you could check that and find out that the real number is just under 5,000.

Rather, the greatest lies in history are what has been left out, and what has been left out is very important. You can tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, but if you've left something important out, you've lied, as Howard used to say. In a sense, Howard's whole life was dedicated to bringing to light all that has been left out in our "official" American history.



But to get to what has been left out takes time and work, and so most people would just rather believe what the talking heads tell them, believe the kitsch, because it is so much easier. That's how we got into the Iraq war, people believing the kitsch that Iraq was connected

to 9/11 when, in fact, there was no connection between Iraq and 9/11.

Q: When and how did you first meet Howard Zinn?

A: It was 1984. I was thirty years-old and into my second year as an assistant professor at Boston University. I was elected to serve on the Faculty Senate, where Howard was already a member, but I had never met him. John Silber, the notorious and tyrannical president of BU, was trying to undermine the university's official policy on academic freedom by pressing for a Senate resolution giving him the right to fire a tenured professor if he didn't like what that professor was saying *as a private citizen*. The Senate asked for volunteers to write up a resolution to counter Silber's, and my hand and Howard's hand were the only two raised. So we became an ad-hoc committee of two, Howard and I.

We began meeting in Howard's office, an office that Silber's men had broken into several times over the years to go through his desk and files. Howard had been Silber's public enemy since the day Silber arrived in 1971. Howard would sit, bent over his old black manual typewriter, and I would stand behind him, and together we forged our rebuttal to Silber. A debate followed at the Senate, the press was there covering it, and the public, which had been invited to attend, looked on. Silber made his argument using absurd examples. Howard and I spoke, followed by others. In the end, Silber's resolution failed, and the resolution Howard and I wrote affirming all aspects of academic freedom passed.

After that, Howard and I were bonded for life. After that, I also became a marked man by John Silber. In 1988, I got fired from BU for my political activities. That same year, Howard Zinn retired from BU. He had taught there from 1964 till 1988.

Q: Do you have other key memories from your years at Boston University with Howard Zinn?

A: In January of 1985, I chaired the Student Life Task Force at Boston University. At that time, divestiture movements were forming on university campuses. If a particular university had financial investments in South Africa, students pressured the administration to divest until South Africa ended apartheid. Boston University had significant investments in companies in South Africa, but President Silber refused to divest. He argued that it would hurt poor blacks in South Africa more than help them, because divestiture would cause some companies there to shed workers.

After meeting with Howard, the student task force decided the best way to force Silber's hand would be to build a shanty town right in the center of the university plaza. So the students got a weekend permit, brought in their corrugated metal and cardboard, and built the shacks. On Monday, however, they refused to decamp until the university promised to divest in South Africa. Newspapers and television stations began covering the story, which made Silber furious. Every day, more people gathered around the shanty town; Silber threatened to bring in bulldozers.

The following weekend, the students organized a speaker's forum and hold it at their shanty town. Over a thousand people gathered. Silber hired photographers to take pictures of faculty members attending the event because he planned to fire them later. Howard Zinn was the keynote speaker. "The university," he said, "is trying to politicize what the students are doing here. But these shanties that the university considers eyesores are not about politics, but about education. If people can literally *see* the living conditions of black people in South Africa, they will know how wrong apartheid is and that something must be done."

By the fall of 1985, universities across the country, influenced by student-led protests, began divesting in South Africa. Nobel Peace prize winner Desmond Tutu later said, "There is no greater testament to the basic dignity of ordinary people everywhere than the divestment movement of the 1980s." Apartheid officially ended in South Africa in 1994.

Q: Can you tell us more about Howard Zinn the person?

A: He loved the Red Sox and Dunk' in Donuts coffee! ... Seriously, perhaps the most amazing thing about Howard Zinn is that there was no difference between what he said and wrote, and who he was as a human being. And he had no ego. If you met him, he would ask you all kinds of questions about yourself and your life, and be truly interested in your answers. He was always reluctant to talk about himself. He was a fantastic listener, and a humble man.

It took his editors years to convince Howard to finally write a book about his life. That slim book may actually be his best. It's called *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*. One of my favorite stories is at the beginning of the book. It is 1959 and Howard is a professor of history and social science at Spelman College, a black women's college in Atlanta. One day he mentions to the student social science club, to which he was the faculty advisor, that it might be interesting to undertake some real project involving social change.

One of the students says, "Why don't we do something about the segregation of the public libraries." And so, several years before sit-ins swept the south and the "Movement" excited the nation, a few young women at Spelman College decide to launch an attack on the main public library in Atlanta. Stared at by everyone around, the black students go in and ask for John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. As expected, they are turned away and told, "We'll send the books to your Negro branch." The Spelman women keep going back, though, day after day, until the Atlanta library system, two months later, agrees to end segregation.

When people talk about the history of the civil rights movement in this country, they always raise the big events, like the Montgomery bus boycott, and the March from Selma. Howard always believed that missing from such histories are the countless small actions of unknown people that led up to those great moments . . . and that the tiniest acts of protest become, in his words, "the invisible roots of social change."

In 1963, Howard was fired from Spelman for siding with the students over segregation. The following year, he came to Boston University, where he would teach a course every semester on Civil Liberty. So many students (400-600) signed up for this non-required class that he had to teach it inside a local movie theatre.

Because of the Freedom of Information Act, the FBI released their file on Howard in July of 2010, six months after he died. The file was 423 pages long. That's when I found out that in 1966, because of his influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI designated Howard a "high security risk to the country."

Q: Can you tell us something about the last phase of Howard Zinn's life?

A: Howard often talked about the two best decisions he made in his life. The first one was marrying his wife, Roz. They were married over fifty years! Roz was a beautiful, kind, and wonderfully sublime person, and a tremendous artist. Alice Walker once said, "Roz's smile could make the plants grow." Roz died in 2008, two years before Howard.

His second best decision, Howard said, was buying, together with a friend, his little cottage in Wellfleet on Cape Cod. I think he was happiest there. I often visited him on the cape, and in the earlier years, we would play a couple sets of tennis and then go back to his cottage for a bite to eat on his little back patio overlooking Cape Cod Bay. The last time I saw Howard was in Wellfleet in August of 2009. My wife and daughter and I had lunch with him on the back patio.

I can still see the afternoon sun streaking across the sea and white beach rocks behind him. And Howard was telling a story to my daughter, who was nine at the time, about a black girl, also nine, who made a journal entry in 1952 that made it into one of Howard's last great works—*The People Speak: American Voices, Some Famous, Some Little Known*. The little girl got in trouble at school for refusing to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. When the teacher asked her why she wasn't saying the pledge with everyone else, the girl said that if she walked through a certain park in town, she could get to school in half the time. But she couldn't, because it was for whites only. So she couldn't understand why she should pledge allegiance to a country that wouldn't let her walk through that park just because she wasn't white.

My daughter, who had met Howard several times before, was never so mesmerized by him. And I sensed that she would never forget Howard telling her that story at that particular moment... her lunch barely touched because she was listening so intensely to him. And behind Howard, nothing but the blue sea and bright sun.

John Hampsey is Professor of Romantic and Classical Literature at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. His boyhood memoir, Kaufman's Hill, will be released in hardback on February 1st by Bancroft Press. He was a close friend of Howard Zinn for more than twenty-five years.