

Carol Polsgrove Blog: Howard Zinn Tribute

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Carol Polsgrove on Writers' Lives

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Howard Zinn

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When Howard Zinn arrived in Atlanta in 1956 to teach history at Spelman, a college for black women, he brought with him more than his Ph.D. from Columbia University. He had grown up poor in Brooklyn, returning from school some winter days to find his mother knitting by candlelight because the electric company had turned off the power. After high school he worked in a shipyard and organized for his union. He participated in the Young Communist League (though he did not join the party). He fought as a bombardier in World War II and in 1948 campaigned for the Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. While he did not go south intending to enlist in the Negro cause, he wasted no time doing it.

He had barely arrived in Atlanta with his wife and their two children when he took his students to the state legislature where they sat in the white section. He worked with Atlanta University dean Whitney M. Young Jr. to desegregate Atlanta's public libraries. He published an article on desegregation in *Harper's*, arguing that there were things southerners cared more about than holding the racial line. The article caused a dustup in Jackson, Mississippi, where the white-run *State Times* published an account of it in an insert written by a black journalist and meant for black readers. The headline proclaimed, "Southern Whites Prefer Race Mix." Apparently a delivery boy picked up the wrong stack of papers, some wound up on whites' front porches, and the article became an item in the files of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission.

When the student sit-ins swept the south in the spring of 1960, Zinn lent the Atlanta students his typewriter to type up an ad that the Georgia Governor called "anti-American." He lent them his car to ride downtown in for their sit-ins, and just minutes before the sit-ins began, he alerted the newspapers. Seventy-seven students were arrested; fourteen Spelman students were among them. In an article for the *Nation*, Zinn delighted in a dormitory notice that brought together the decorous past and the radical present: "Young Ladies Who Can Picket, Please Sign Below." With the *Nation* article, Zinn, a white vaguely Jewish professor from Brooklyn, stepped into the supportive role he was to play in the movement as one of its persistent spokesmen in the northern press.

Selma, Alabama, an old town on a curve of the Alabama River, had its pretty places: the dark river itself, the Victorian homes where white people lived. The streets of the Black part of town were unpaved, the houses often ramshackle, but the Black community had several handsome churches, and in one of them on an early October night in 1963, comedian Dick Gregory spoke, saying things to the crowd that they were not accustomed to hearing in Selma.

Howard Zinn was there, an unobtrusive presence, as a scribe. His involvement in the movement had deepened. Noting the articles he had published on desegregation, the Southern Regional Council had tapped his talents to produce two reports on the Albany movement, which dragged on inconclusively from one year to the next. He had published articles in *Harper's* and the

Nation. Now he was writing a book on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for Beacon Press – [*SNCC: The New Abolitionists*](#). He had time to devote to the work since he had lost his job at Spelman (possibly not so much because of his civil rights activities as because he had supported Spelman women’s rebellion against campus rules so restrictive that one of his students, the future novelist Alice Walker, transferred to a northern college).

That evening in Selma after Dick Gregory spoke, Zinn waited with several others at the home of Amelia Boynton for James Baldwin and his brother David to arrive. A gracious, determined woman, Mrs. Boynton, recently widowed, was the pillar of the Black effort to register voters against the will of white Selma. Neither Mrs. Boynton nor field-workers from SNCC had been able to break through the unyielding barrier whites had placed before black voters in Selma. In a campaign of intimidation, the sheriff and his deputies arrested hundreds for unlawful assembly or parading without a permit. When arrests in the last two weeks of September mounted to more than three hundred, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a suit that would have to wend its way through recalcitrant white juries.

To shore up local courage and bring national pressure to bear, SNCC had designated October 7, 1963, a Freedom Day. As SNCC leader James Forman would explain in *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, the goal of Freedom Day was to attract to the courthouse a large number of blacks wanting to register to vote – far too many to register during the two days the county normally allotted for registration (which could take a full hour per person, in the case of black applicants). Coming down to the courthouse would take courage; anyone who did ran risks, from job loss to imprisonment to physical harm. To boost spirits, Forman had invited Baldwin and Gregory, a celebrity who, like Baldwin, had supported the movement at every turn. As usual, Mrs. Boynton had opened her home to the visitors, whose choices of lodging were limited. Forman scrambled eggs while they waited. Once Baldwin appeared, he did not say much. “You fellows talk,” he said. I’m new here. I’m trying to find out what’s happening.” The atmosphere was tense. Each time a car passed, everyone fell silent, expecting bullets, or a bomb.

Although this was not Baldwin’s first journey south, he had not seen anything before to match the scene he and Zinn witnessed the next day in front of the Dallas County Courthouse, a modern building on a side street. A long line of people wanting to register waited – young mothers with their babies, elderly women and men. Sheriff Jim Clark’s deputies, wearing helmets and armed with guns and clubs, stood guard over them. Some would-be voters had been standing there for hours without food or water when two SNCC workers with a load of sandwiches from a shopping cart defied the deputies’ efforts to keep them away and walked toward the line. State troopers moved in with electric cattle prods. They smashed a reporter’s camera, pushed him against a truck, and struck him in the mouth.

A lawyer from the Justice Department took the name of the photographer who had been hit, but when Zinn asked an FBI agent why he didn’t arrest the sheriff and the others for breaking federal law, the agent told him, “We don’t have the right to make arrests in these circumstances.”

Zinn knew that the U.S. Administrative Code authorized FBI agents to arrest people without warrants when crimes were committed before their eyes. Yet again and again, in situations like this they refused to step in. Just a few weeks earlier, he had proposed as an alternative that a special federal force to be stationed in the south to protect “the lives and liberties of Negroes, and of whites who break with segregation.” The president had the power to create such a force, he

argued in an impassioned but unpublished letter to the *New York Times*, co-signed by journalist Murray Kempton and Harvard professor Thomas Pettigrew.

Few had pressed harder for federal intervention than Howard Zinn. Earlier, Zinn had seen the need for federal action when the Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta-based interracial organization, sent him to Albany, Georgia. There he heard chilling stories from two young SNCC workers trying to register voters in surrounding Terrell County. Someone in a truck tried to run over one of them and, failing in that, beat him up. At a voter-registration meeting in Sasser, a small community in Terrell County, the sheriff appeared with a dozen white men and began taking down names. With reporters on hand watching, the sheriff broke up the meeting. As those present left the church, a deputy sheriff told one of the them, "I know you. We're going to get some of you." A few days later, two SNCC field-workers were arrested. Finally and belatedly, the Department of Justice asked a federal judge to order law enforcement officials not to intimidate Terrell County residents who wanted to vote. The judge refused.

"Two days later," Zinn would write, "a church that was used as a voter registration center in neighboring Lee County burned to the ground.... Two weeks later, in another night shooting incident, the homes of four black families active in voter registration were riddled by bullets, while children slept inside." A shotgun blast wounded a SNCC worker. The same week, the Mount Olive Church in Sasser went up in flames.

At the time, Zinn was teaching constitutional law at Spelman. Applying the material of his classroom to the situation at hand, he came to a startling conclusion. "It suddenly struck me that constitutional rights were being violated and the federal government was absent – not only absent, but complicit," he would recall. The federal government was supposed to protect Americans' civil rights, wasn't it? Zinn called the national office of the ACLU and said he wanted to talk with someone who knew constitutional law. William Kuntzler, emerging on the civil rights scene as a dynamic force, came on the line and told Zinn he was right.

The November 1962 report Zinn wrote for the SRC portrayed a southern police state in action. While local law enforcement officials rode roughshod over the rights of blacks and some whites, the federal government had failed to act. Zinn called for prosecution of local officials. He called on the government to station federal agents in Albany to protect those who were being intimidated. In fact, he called for creation of a special unit of federal agents who would protect civil rights. He asked for a presidential address on segregation. The *New York Times* picked up his criticism, including comments critical of the FBI (which attempted to discredit him by spreading the rumor that he was communist).

Instead of strengthening its support for the Albany movement, the federal government actually turned on SNCC, indicting nine people active in Albany on misguided charges. To the movement, the Albany indictments represented a major betrayal by the Justice Department. Zinn tried to recruit Yale and Harvard law professors to pay a call on Attorney General Robert Kennedy to protest. He found the professors he approached sympathetic but unable to make the trip. As an alternative, he suggested that SNCC "do something dramatic in Washington." "Something very dramatic, very stark, very intense needs to be done in Washington to make clear that *here* is the root of Southern repression. Not Congress, not anyone; but the executive branch, which has the power, and which is not using it."

But SNCC's focus at that point had been Freedom Day at Selma. There Zinn, watching with Baldwin, again saw evidence of the executive branch's failure to act. Afterwards, he published an article in the *New Republic* calling for a special federal force—a thousand agents, at least, “to stand guard throughout the Deep South in protection of the constitutional rights of the people of that region.” The *New Republic* endorsed his call. True, such a force might foment more white rebellion and less willingness among local police to enforce the law, the magazine acknowledged. It could even lead to “a full-fledged national police force.” Still, perhaps that would be necessary to “secure the Negro his full rights as a citizen of the United States.” This was a strong statement, and the *New Republic*, long a member of the country's liberal establishment, was a strong platform from which to make it. Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general in charge of civil rights, took the article seriously enough to write a lengthy response, which the *New Republic* published. Marshall defended the Justice Department's record in the south and labeled a “national police force” an “extreme alternative.”

In the spring of 1964 however, Marshall acknowledged to an audience at Columbia University that the restrained approach had failed. Under the Kennedys, the executive branch had tried to play by the traditional rules of federal-state relations, but some southern states had flatly defied federal law. In the face of outright and widespread defiance, what could the federal government do? Very little, Marshall appeared to be saying.

But if the federal government did not intervene, who would protect southern blacks and the whites working with them to secure their rights? “Right now a Negro or white civil rights worker in the Deep South risks his life every moment with no chance of protection by the Federal Government,” Zinn wrote in a long letter published by the *New York Times* on February 19, 1964. In the May 18 issue of the *Nation*, he offered a litany of the kind of violence he believed the federal government could bring to a halt if it tried.

“In towns in Georgia, James Williams had his leg broken by police...; Rev. Samuel Wells was kicked and beaten by police....Mrs. Slater King, five months pregnant, was punched and kicked by a deputy sheriff,...and later lost her baby. In Winona, Mississippi, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Annelle Ponder were beaten by police. Men, women and children were clubbed in Danville, Virginia, by police. In a Clarksdale, Miss. Police station, a 1-year-old Negro girl was forced to pull off her clothes and was then whipped. The list is endless.”

The FBI had “faithfully recorded it all,” and nothing of consequence had resulted. Drawing a comparison so often made in these years, he said, “It is very much like the Germans and the death camps. There they are, all around us, but we honestly don't see them.”

He had an idea what to do about it. The federal government needed to interpose itself between citizens and the police. Once again, Zinn proposed “a nation-wide system of federal defenders” who would have the power the FBI already had but did not use: power to arrest violators of federal laws, including police officers who violated citizens' rights. “Either we put up with jailing and brutality for thousands of Negroes and whites who have done nothing but ask for rights asserted in our Constitution, or we put into jail – *without* brutality – enough local policemen and state officials to make clear what the federal system really is.” That job was the president's.

In *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*, historian Carl M. Brauer would single out Zinn as the only critic of Kennedy's policy to specify what the federal government ought to do. But Zinn's role in the movement was larger than that. When he described it himself in later writings, his description would fail to capture the full extent of his engagement. In his writing at the time, he was even more self-effacing; he barely suggested his role in the events he described, though sometimes he appeared as a witnessing "I." He had kept himself out of his articles because, he explained later, he had been taught, as an academic, to stand back. But he was also sensitive to his role as a white man in a predominantly black movement. Whatever the reasons for his reticence, he showed no inclination toward celebrity, and none came his way. So quietly did he play his role that some later historians would miss it altogether.

As a member of SNCC's advisory committee, Zinn stood near the heart of the action. Even after he moved to Boston, he made strategy suggestions, especially regarding publicity, the area he had taken on as his particular province. In Boston, he was in an even better position to connect SNCC to intellectual centers in the north, mustering support from academic and political communities there. As Freedom Summer approached in 1964, he conceived a plan to bring the Mississippi struggle to the capital to show why the federal government needed to intervene.

A fellow scholar-activist at Spelman, white historian Staughton Lynd had what he later characterized as a "comradely difference" with Zinn over so much emphasis on federal intervention." Committed to radical, local transformation, Lynd questioned the wisdom of emphasizing federal intervention over "building a strong grassroots organization." He told Zinn that he might wind up owing Zinn his life for "putting forward the question of protection so early and so insistently." Yet Lynd also said that "there is no clear sense...as to whether the purpose of the Summer Project is to provoke Federal intervention or to build the Mississippi movement. While asking for federal intervention was a "sound tactical demand," more fundamental changes were needed. After Freedom Summer was over, Lynd would write historian C. Vann Woodward, "I have long had a difference with Howard about massive Federal intervention, he feeling clear about its necessity, I (much more confusedly) feeling that what was needed was a change in the economic substratum of daily life – comparable to 40 A[res] and a mule – which would set Negroes and whites free to find a new pattern of relationships by themselves."

Zinn shared Lynd's vision of radical transformation, but he thought that demanding federal intervention could help to build the movement and safeguard people while they built the movement." Lynd knew as well as Zinn the need for protection – he would make out his will before he left for Mississippi that summer to direct the Freedom schools. And so, despite their comradely difference, as Freedom Summer approached Lynd helped Zinn and SNCC's Julian Bond mount a carefully staged appeal for federal intervention in Mississippi: a showcase hearing. Before a panel of leading intellectuals, Mississippians would bear witness to the violence directed at them for trying to exercise their constitutional rights.

On June 8, 1964, just as the students began traveling south for Freedom Summer, the panel gathered at the National Theatre in Washington: psychiatrist Robert Coles, already deep into his extraordinary documentation of the movement; Joseph Heller, best-selling author of the novel *Catch-22*; anarchist Paul Goodman, author of *Growing Up Absurd*; New York journalist Murray Kempton, and several others. A large audience was in attendance and television cameras recorded the event, which took place on the set of *Camelot*, a musical about political idealism and betrayal.

The heart of the Mississippi movement was on the National Stage that day: Lawrence Guyot, Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert Moses. Jimmy Travis was there to tell how he had been shot in the head and shoulder as he drove toward Greenville from a voter registration meeting. Greene Brewer described how he and his brother were bludgeoned by a store owner who apparently just didn't like their attitude. George Greene told about his beating by a police officer in Ruleville. Fannie Lou Hamer recounted her arrest on her way from a voter-registration workshop. Taken to jail, she was beaten with a blackjack by two black prisoners under the supervision of a state highway patrolman. Mrs. Louis Allen described the death of her husband, killed for witnessing the murder of Herbert Lee.....The stories went on, told in detail and building up a picture of lawlessness and corruption. Lawyers took the stand to voice their opinions that the federal government had the power to intervene in Mississippi. Congressman William F. Ryan from New York stopped in to say he was drafting a letter asking the president to send marshals to Mississippi for the summer.

Despite the presence of nationally known figures and leaders of the Mississippi movement, local and national media largely ignored the production. Television stations showed a few brief clips, and transcripts of the hearing were hand-delivered to the Justice Department and the gates of the White House. Several members of Congress read portions of the transcript into the *Congressional Record*. President Johnson read the *Congressional Record* every morning and it is possible that the testimony entered his thoughts as he was called upon to respond to the violence about to break in Mississippi. If it did, he gave no sure sign of it. Zinn himself wrote a long account of the hearing, but no one published it. By the time his agent sent it to the *Reporter* in early July, three summer workers had disappeared in Mississippi – victims of racial violence. On a routing sheet, an editor commented, “It’s about a busload of Mississippi Negroes who testified in Washington on June 8 before a panel of citizens....about the need for federal protection etc. in Miss. But all this is all too well known now.”

By summer’s end, Jim Silver, Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd, and Robert Coles – engaged intellectuals all – had left the south. That fall, Alfred A. Knopf published Zinn’s [*The Southern Mystique*](#). In it, Zinn countered the idea put forth by historian Jim Silver in *The Closed Society* that the south was set apart from the rest of the nation by its culture and history. To Zinn, the idea that white southerners were innately violent or xenophobic was only an excuse for inaction. The truth was that “compromise and vacillation on the race question are intrinsic parts of our national political heritage.” If national leaders failed to act now, they followed a long tradition: “The Negro has always been a hitchhiker in American history.”

On March 7, 1965, movement marchers from Selma, bound for Montgomery, fell beneath the blows of Alabama State Police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Television viewers watching *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a movie about the trials of Nazi war criminals, suddenly saw, as the news broke in, American policemen beating American citizens. Across the country, demonstrators marched in protest, their numbers increasing after a white Unitarian minister from Boston died from a beating in Selma. Stirred by all these events, President Lyndon Johnson appeared before Congress to ask for a voting rights bill. After a federal judge issued an order protecting the marchers, Johnson supplied federal troops to protect them when they again started out from Selma on March 21 to walk the fifty miles to the capital.

It would take four days to reach the edge of Montgomery. On the next to the last full day of walking, Howard Zinn, travelling in the south for the *Nation*, joined the three hundred marchers

allowed by court order to walk down the two-lane stretch of the road. It had been raining and cold, and the ground where they camped was muddy. The fires of their soldier-guards ringed the field. At dawn of the next day, the fires burned low; the moon pushed the clouds aside. Marchers prepared to walk, some barefoot, to the accompaniment of an army helicopter. With every hour more marchers joined them. The sun would come out, then rain would flash hard, and the sun would come out again. At the capitol, Martin Luther King told the thousands assembled before him. “We are on the move now. The bombing of our churches will not deter us. We are on the move now. The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. We are on the move now. The beating and killing of our clergymen and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now.”

That night, a white woman from Detroit driving another marcher back to Selma was shot and killed on the lonely highway. On May 26, Congress passed a voting rights bill that authorized federal officials to register voters turned down by local registrars. In mid-August, in Los Angeles, across the continent from the former Confederate states, fire and violence swept through the large Black section known as Watts. Nearly nine hundred people suffered injuries. Thirty-four died. The movement for racial equality had not ended.



Howard Zinn in Selma, Alabama

Interested readers can find footnotes to this story in [*Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement*](#) (W.W. Norton). *Divided Minds* explores the doubts, hesitation, suffering, and courage experienced by Black and White intellectuals in the movement's ten years after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

