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# Dave Zirin, "The People's Howard Zinn"

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**Howard Zinn, my hero, teacher, and friend died of a heart attack on Wednesday at the age of 87. With his death, we lose a man who did nothing less than rewrite the narrative of the United States. We lose a historian who also made history.**

**Anyone who believes that the United States is immune to radical politics never attended a lecture by Howard Zinn. The rooms would be packed to the rafters, as entire families, black, white and brown, would arrive to hear their own history made humorous as well as heroic. "What matters is not who's sitting in the White House. What matters is who's sitting in!" he would say with a mischievous grin. After this casual suggestion of civil disobedience, the crowd would burst into laughter and applause.**

**Only Howard could pull that off because he was entirely authentic. When he spoke against poverty it was from the perspective of someone who had to work in the shipyards during the Great Depression. When he spoke against war, it was from the perspective of someone who flew as a bombardier during World War II, and was forever changed by the experience. When he spoke against racism it was from the perspective of someone who taught at Spelman College during the civil rights movement and was arrested sitting in with his students.**

And of course, when he spoke about history, it was from the perspective of having written *A People's History of the United States*, a book that has sold more than two million copies and changed the lives of countless people. Count me among them. When I was 17 and picked up a dog-eared copy of Zinn's book, I thought history was about learning that the Magna Carta was signed in 1215. I couldn't tell you what the Magna Carta was, but I knew it was signed in 1215. Howard took this history of great men in powdered wigs and turned it on its pompous head.

In Howard's book, the central actors were the runaway slaves, the labor radicals, the masses and the misfits. It was history writ by Robin Hood, speaking to a desire that many share: to actually make history instead of being history's victim. His book came alive in December with the debut of *The People Speak* on the History Channel as actors, musicians, and poets, brought Zinn's book alive.

Howard was asked once whether his praise of dissent and protest was divisive. He answered beautifully: "Yes, dissent and protest are divisive, but in a good way, because they represent accurately the real divisions in society. Those divisions exist — the rich, the poor — whether there is dissent or not, but when there is no dissent, there is no change. The dissent has the possibility not of ending the division in society, but of changing the reality of the division. Changing the balance of power on behalf of the poor and the oppressed."

Words like this made Howard my hero. I never thought we would also become friends. But through our mutual cohort, Anthony Arnove, Howard read my sports writing and then gave his blessing to a book project we called *A People's History of Sports in the United States*.

We also did a series of meetings together in which I would interview Howard on stage. Even at 87, he still had his sharp wit, strong voice, and matinee-idol white hair. But his body had become frail. Despite this physical weakness, Howard would stay and sign hundreds of books until his hand would shake with the effort.

At our event in Madison, Wisconsin, Howard issued a challenge to the audience. He said, "Our job as citizens is to

honestly assess what Obama is doing. Not measured just against Bush, because against Bush, everybody looks good. But look honestly at what Obama's doing and act as engaged and vigorous citizens."

He also had no fear to express his political convictions loudly and proudly. I asked him about the prospects today for radical politics and he said,

"Let's talk about socialism. ... I think it's very important to bring back the idea of socialism into the national discussion to where it was at the turn of the [last] century before the Soviet Union gave it a bad name. Socialism had a good name in this country. Socialism had Eugene Debs. It had Clarence Darrow. It had Mother Jones. It had Emma Goldman. It had several million people reading socialist newspapers around the country... Socialism basically said, hey, let's have a kinder, gentler society. Let's share things. Let's have an economic system that produces things not because they're profitable for some corporation, but produces things that people need. People should not be retreating from the word socialism because you have to go beyond capitalism."

Howard Zinn taught millions of us a simple lesson: Agitate. Agitate. Agitate. But never lose your sense of humor in the process. It's a beautiful legacy and however much it hurts to lose him, we should strive to build on Howard's work and go out and make some history.

Dave Zirin is sports editor for The Nation magazine. He is the author of A People's History of Sports in the United States (The New Press). His writing has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Sports Illustrated.com and The Progressive. He is the host of Sirius/XM's Edge of Sports Radio.

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