



HOWARD ZINN

Tears welled up in Howard Zinn's eyes as he talked about Genora Dollinger, the twenty-three-year-old organizer who rallied women to "stand beside your husbands and your brothers and your uncles and your sweethearts" who occupied a General Motors factory in Flint, Michigan, in 1937 and refused to leave. Sure enough, when the police moved against the strikers, Dollinger's summons brought waves of women into the battle zone. Zinn and the actor Matt Damon, who as a kid was the historian's next-door neighbor, turned Dollinger's story into one of the most compelling sequences in their History Channel special, The People Speak. The TV show was based on Howard Zinn's work, including his most famous book, A People's History of the United States, the epic story of heroic, everyday men and women who stood up to organized power.

The book was inspired, in no small part, by his own experiences growing up in a working-class immigrant family in Brooklyn, New York. Zinn worked in the shipyards there before joining the U.S. Army Air Corps and becoming a B-17 bombardier. On his final mission in 1945, to take out an isolated German garrison in the French seaside town of Royan, the Eighth Air Force used napalm for the first time, killing hundreds of civilians. He returned to Royan twenty years later to study the effects of the raid and concluded there had been no military necessity for the bombing; everyone knew the war was

almost over (it ended three weeks later) and the attack made no contribution to the outcome.

*Zinn's grief over having been a cog in a deadly machine no doubt confirmed his belief in small acts of rebellion. After the war, he came home to work at a warehouse loading trucks while enrolling as a twenty-seven-year-old freshman at New York University. In the years that followed, he ran afoul of the FBI when he was anonymously—and wrongly, he said—accused of Communist proclivities, was fired as chairman of the history and social sciences department at Spelman College in Atlanta in 1963 because of his civil rights activities, and spent the remainder of his long teaching career as a professor of political science at Boston University. Zinn passed into popular lore in 1997 when the film *Good Will Hunting* was released. The title character, played by Matt Damon, praises *A People's History of the United States*—"a real history book"—and urges Robin Williams's character to read it.*

*After I screened Zinn and Damon's *The People Speak*, eighty-seven-year-old Howard Zinn came to New York for this interview. He died five weeks later. One of his longtime friends and colleagues wrote that "shifting historical focus from the wealthy and powerful to the ordinary person was perhaps his greatest act of rebellion and incitement."*

—Bill Moyers



History and Hollywood: is this the beginning of a new career for you?

I hope not. But I am happy it is a way of reaching a larger audience with the ideas that were in the book. The idea of people involved in history, people actively making history, people agitating and demonstrating, pushing the leaders of the country into change in a way that leaders themselves are not likely to initiate.

What do these characters from the past have to say to us today?

What they have to say to us today is, think for yourself. Don't believe what the people up there tell you. Live your own life. Think your own ideas. And don't depend on saviors. Don't depend on the founding fathers, on Andrew Jackson, on Theodore Roosevelt, on Lyndon Johnson, on Obama. Don't depend on our leaders to do what needs to be done, because whenever the

government has done anything to bring about change, it's done so only because it's been pushed and prodded by social movements, by ordinary people organizing. Lincoln was pushed by the antislavery movement, Johnson and Kennedy were pushed by the southern black movement, and maybe Obama today will be pushed by people who have such high hopes in him and who want to see him fulfill those hopes.

Traditional history creates passivity because it gives you the people at the top and it makes you think that all you have to do is go to the polls every four years and elect somebody who's going to do the trick for you. We want people to understand that that's not going to happen. People have to do it themselves.

One of my favorite sequences is when we meet Genora Dollinger.

She was a woman who got involved in the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, those very dramatic moments when workers occupied the factories of General Motors and wouldn't leave, and therefore left the corporations helpless. This was a time when strikes all over the country galvanized people and pushed for the reforms that we finally got from the New Deal. And Genora Dollinger represents the women who are very often overlooked in these struggles, women so instrumental in supporting the workers, their men, their sweethearts. And Genora Dollinger just inspires people with her words.

She was only twenty-three when she organized.

Amazing. Yes.

GENORA DOLLINGER (PLAYED BY MARISA TOMEI):
Workers overturned police cars to make barricades. They ran to pick up the firebombs thrown at them and hurl them back at the police. . . . The men wanted to me to get out of the way. You know, the old "protect the women and children" business. . . . I told them, "Get away from me." . . . The lights went on in my head. I thought, "I've never used a loudspeaker to address a large crowd of people, but I've got to tell them that there are women down here." . . . I called to them, "Cowards! Cowards! Shooting into the bellies of unarmed men and firing at the mothers of children." Then

everything became quiet. . . . I thought, “The women can break this up.” So I appealed to the women in the crowd, “Break through those police lines and come down here and stand beside your husbands and your brothers and your uncles and your sweethearts.” . . . I could barely see one woman struggling to come forward. A cop had grabbed her by the back of her coat. She just pulled out of that coat and started walking down to the battle zone. As soon as that happened there were other women and men who followed . . . that was the end of the battle. When those spectators came into the center of the battle and the police retreated, there was a big roar of victory.

What do you think when you hear those words?

First, I must say this, Bill. When my daughter heard Marisa Tomei shout to the police, “Cowards! Cowards!” she said a chill went through her, she was so moved. I’ve seen this so many times, and each time I am moved because what it tells me is that just ordinary people, you know, people who are not famous, if they get together, if they persist, if they defy the authorities, they can defeat the largest corporation in the world.

When I was last at the National Portrait Gallery in London, I was struck all over again by how the portraits there were of wealthy people who could afford to hire an artist. It’s like Egypt, where you see the pyramids and the tombs and realize that only the rich could afford to consider their legacy and have the leisure time to do what they want. We know almost nothing about the ordinary people of the time.

Exactly. I remember when I was going to high school and learning, it was such a thrilling story to read about the Transcontinental Railroad. You know, the golden spike and all of that. But I wasn’t told that this railroad was built by Chinese and Irish workers who worked by the thousands. Long hours, many of them died of sickness, overworked, and so on. I wasn’t told about these working people. That’s what I tried to do in *A People’s History of the United States*, to bring back into the forefront the people who created what was called the economic miracle of the United States.

One of the producers of this film was Matt Damon. And I understand that

when he was in the fifth grade, he took a copy of your book in to his teacher on Columbus Day and said, "What is this? We're here to celebrate this great event, but two years after Columbus discovered America, a hundred thousand Indians were dead, according to Howard Zinn. What's going on?" Is that a true story?

Not all stories are true, but this is true. Matt Damon, when he was ten years old, was given a copy of my book by his mother. They were next-door neighbors of ours, in the Boston area, in Newton. And Matt says that he and his brother, Kyle, would wake up sometimes in the middle of the night and see the light on in my study, where I was writing this book. So they were in on it from the beginning.

What about people today, doing what Genora Dollinger and others did in the past?

I think there are people like that today, but very often they're ignored in the media. Or they appear for a day on the pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, then disappear. There are those people recently who sat in at this plant in Chicago that was going to be closed by the Bank of America, and these people sat in and refused to leave. I mean, that was a modern-day incarnation of what the sit-down strike was in the 1930s. There are people today who are fighting evictions, fighting foreclosures. There are people all over the country who are really conscience-stricken about what's going on. But the press is not covering them very well.

Several people in the program have talked about populism. How do you think of populism?

The word *populism* came into being in the late 1800s—1880, 1890—when great corporations dominated the country, the railroads and the banks. These farmers got together and they organized in the North and South, and they formed the Populist movement. It was a great people's movement. They sent orators around the country, and they published thousands of pamphlets. It was a high moment for American democracy.

Well, if populism is thriving today, it seems to be thriving on the right. Sarah Palin, for example, and the Tea Parties. One conservative writer in The Weekly Standard even said that Sarah Palin could be the William Jennings Bryan of this new conservative era because she is giving voice to millions of

people who feel angry at what the government is doing, who feel that they're being cheated out of a prosperous way of life by forces beyond their control. What do you think about that idea?

Well, I guess William Jennings Bryan would turn over in his grave if he heard that. William Jennings Bryan was antiwar, and she is not antiwar, she is very militaristic. But it's true that she represents a certain angry part of the population. And I think it's true that when people feel beleaguered and overlooked, they will turn to whoever seems to represent them. Some of them will turn to her, some of them will turn to the right-wingers, and you might say that's how fascism develops in countries, because they play upon the anger and the frustration of people. But on the other hand, that anger, that frustration, can also lead to people's movements that are progressive. You can go the way of the Populists, of the labor movement of the '30s, of the civil rights movement, or the women's movement to bring about change in this country.

You mentioned the women's movement, and there's another remarkable moment in your film of Susan B. Anthony. She's on trial for trying to vote when she and other women didn't have the right.

JUDGE HUNT (PLAYED BY JOSH BROLIN): The sentence of the Court is that you pay a fine of one hundred dollars and the costs of the prosecution.

SUSAN B. ANTHONY (PLAYED BY CHRISTINA KIRK): May it please Your Honor, I will never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty. All the stock in trade I possess is a debt of \$10,000, incurred by publishing my paper—*The Revolution*—the sole object of which was to educate all women to do precisely as I have done, rebel against your man-made, unjust, unconstitutional forms of law, which tax, fine, imprison, and hang women, while denying them the right of representation in the government; and I will work on with might and main to pay every dollar of that honest debt, but not a penny shall go to this unjust claim. And I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women to the practical recognition of the old revolutionary maxim, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

I think what that says to people today is you must stick up for your principles, even if it means breaking the law. Civil disobedience. It's what Thoreau urged, it's what Martin Luther King Jr. urged. It's what was done during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Susan B. Anthony thought it was right for her to try to register to vote. And yeah, people should defy the rules if they think they're doing the right thing.

You have said that if President Obama were listening to Martin Luther King Jr., he'd be making some different decisions.

Well, first of all, he'd be taking our troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and he'd be saying we are no longer going to be a war-making country. We're not going to be a military country. We're going to take our immense resources, our wealth, and we're going to use them for the benefit of people. Remember, Martin Luther King started a Poor People's Campaign just before he was assassinated. And if Obama paid attention to the working people of this country, then he would be doing much, much more than he is doing now.

Those of us who were around then remember that 1967 speech Martin Luther King gave here in New York at the Riverside Church, a year before his assassination. He said, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. . . . It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." I mean, that's pretty fundamental, right? Change the system?

King had a much more fundamental critique of our economic system, certainly more fundamental than Obama has because a fundamental critique of our economic system would not simply give hundreds of billions of dollars to the bankers and a little bit to the people below. A fundamental change in our system would really create a greater equalization of wealth, including free medical care, not the kind of half-baked health reforms that are debated in Congress.

This is one reason you are seen as a threat to people at the top, because your message, like King's message, goes to a fundamental rearrangement of power in America.

Yes, that is very troublesome for people at the top. They're willing to let people think about mild reforms, and little changes, and incremental changes, but they don't want people to think that we could actually trans-

form this country into a peaceful country, that we no longer have to be a super military power. They don't want to think that way because it's profitable for certain interests in this country to carry on war, to have the military in a hundred countries, to have a \$600 billion military budget. That makes a lot of money for certain people, but it leaves the rest of the country behind.

Let's hear the words of a labor person, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW—the Wobblies.

IWW MEMBER (PLAYED BY VIGGO MORTENSEN): If you were a bum without a blanket; if you had left your wife and kids when you went west for a job, and had never located them since; if your job had never kept you long enough in a place to qualify you to vote; if you slept in a lousy, sour bunkhouse, and ate food just as rotten as they could give you and get by with it; if deputy sheriffs shot your cooking cans full of holes and spilled your grub on the ground; if your wages were lowered on you when the bosses thought they had you down; . . . if every person who represented law and order and the nation beat you up, railroaded you to jail, and the good Christian people cheered and told them to go to it, how in the hell do you expect a man to be patriotic? This war is a businessman's war, and we don't see why we should go out and get shot in order to save the lovely state of affairs which we now enjoy.

They refused to go along with World War I, and he's explaining why they won't. Basically, he's speaking to poor people in all wars. He's saying, "It's a businessman's war." War is a businessman's war. It always is. The ordinary guys have nothing to gain from this war.

How do you explain the absence of protest in the streets today? The passivity in response to the fact that Obama has now doubled the number of troops in Afghanistan over the number George W. Bush had there.

I don't think people are apathetic about it. I believe most people in this country do not want us to be in Afghanistan. But they're not doing anything about it, you're right. We're not seeing protests in the street. And I

think one of the reasons is that the major media, television, and newspapers have not played their role in educating the public about what is going on.

There was a poll showing that a bare majority of Americans support sending more troops to Afghanistan.

You have to remember this—it is not easy for people to oppose sending troops to Afghanistan, especially once they have been sent and once the decision has been made. It's not easy for people to oppose what the president is saying, and what the media are saying, what both major parties are working for. So the very fact that even close to a majority of the people are opposed to sending troops to Afghanistan tells me that many more people are opposed. I have a fundamental faith in the basic decency and even, yes, the wisdom of people, once they make their way through the deceptions that are thrown at them. And we've seen this historically. People learn.

I was struck in your television special by what the labor leader Cesar Chavez had to say about organizing his fellow farmworkers.

CESAR CHAVEZ (PLAYED BY MARTÍN ESPADA): I'm not very different from anyone else who has ever tried to accomplish something with his life. My motivation comes . . . from watching what my mother and father went through when I was growing up; from what we experienced as migrant farmworkers in California. . . .

It grew from anger and rage—emotions I felt forty years ago when people of my color were denied the right to see a movie or eat at a restaurant in many parts of California. It grew from the frustration and humiliation I felt as a boy who couldn't understand how the growers could abuse and exploit farmworkers when there were so many of us and so few of them. . . .

I began to realize what other minority people had discovered: that the only answer—the only hope—was in organizing. . . .

Like the other immigrant groups, the day will come when we win the economic and political rewards which are in keeping with our numbers in society. The day will come when the politicians do the right thing by our people out of

political necessity and not out of charity or idealism. That day may not come this year. That day may not come during this decade. But it will come, someday!

Do you believe it will come?

I do. I can't give you a date, but I have confidence in the future. You know why? You have to be patient. Farmworkers were at one point in as helpless a position as the labor movement is today. But as Cesar Chavez said, we learned that you have to organize. And it takes time, it takes patience, it takes persistence. I mean, think of how long black people in the South waited.

More than two centuries, and then another century after the Civil War.

I don't think we'll have to wait a hundred years.

So populism and people power aren't really a left or right issue. It's more "us versus them"—bottom versus top?

It's democracy. You know, democracy doesn't come from the top. It comes from the bottom. Democracy is not what governments do. It's what people do. Too often, we go to junior high school and they sort of teach us that democracy is three branches of government. You know, it's not the three branches of government.

I'd like to end with a woman in your film who showed us the power of a single voice, speaking for democracy. Born into slavery, largely uneducated, she spoke out for the rights of people who didn't have any. She was an unforgettable truth-teller.

SOJOURNER TRUTH (PLAYED BY KERRY WASHINGTON): That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! . . . I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most sold

off into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? . . .

Then that little man in the back there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Why did you include that excerpt?

Because it's so empowering. Because here is this woman who was a slave, oppressed on all sides, and she's defiant. She represents the voice of people who have been overlooked. She represents a voice that is rebellious and, yes, troublesome to the powers that be. ~