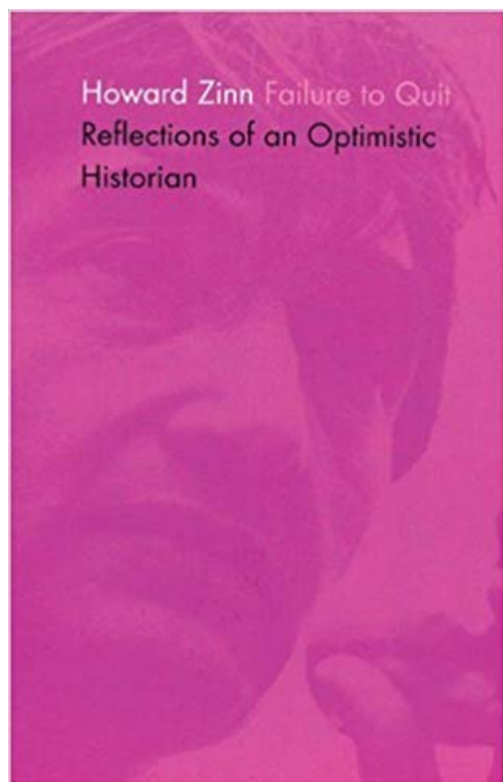


Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian (Radical 60s) *by* Howard Zinn



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Author: Howard Zinn

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A selection of Howard Zinn's most popular and accessible essays on history and politics. In this lively collection of essays, now with a new afterword, Zinn discusses a wide range of historical and political topics, from the role of the Supreme Court in U.S. history to the nature of higher education today.



Reviews of the **Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian (Radical 60s)** *by* Howard Zinn

Kale

Great book with lots of Zinn's usual wisdom. A unique touch was a McGovern campaign button attached. Well worth reading, especially about "selective enforcement" of the Constitution. (Every copy doesn't have the McGovern button, of course. Just this one.)

Beanisend

Howard Zinn (1922-present) wrote an interesting collection of essays in a book titled FAILURE TO QUIT. The title is based in turn on a charge brought against Zinn for demonstrating at a government building. The book will hopefully inspire readers to quit believing media nonsense and apprehensively conventional historians who are too cowardly to carefully investigate or research anything that interferes with their phony agenda.

This begins with an interview of Zinn re his life, career as a college history teacher, and impossible dissident. Zinn was not raised by a wealthy family, and his father worked hard to support his family. Zinn was raised in a poor Bronx neighborhood, and he had little chance to attend college. Zinn recounted his experience as a U.S. Army Airforce bombardier during W.W. II. Zinn related how he gradually thought about his military function on a U.S. bomber. He mentioned that he realized that his dropping bombs often included the death of innocent victims. His comment about a bombing mission in Hungary which was reported in the U.S. media as resulting in few if any casualties. When he later visited the area, he discovered the bombing mission resulted in considerable destruction, death, and tragedy. Zinn did not know exactly when he opposed war, but he knew that the mechanical and technical advances of warfare increased the terrible consequences of war which is too often ignored.

The second section of this book dealt with Zinn's optimism which this reviewer does not share. However, the undersigned was impressed with the anecdotes in this chapter. Zinn mentioned that his job working in a ship yard attracted his interest in labor history which Zinn correctly chided U.S. historians for ignoring in spite of books and sources to the contrary. Zinn stated that the improvements in labor and working conditions since the end of the 19th. century were reasons for hope. Zinn alerted readers to the Ludlow Massacre (1914) which occurred in Colorado. Zinn cited coal executives using company police and National Guard troops to intimidate coal miners and their families when they complained about excessively long hours, terrible living conditions in company towns, and dangerous working conditions. After one violent episode after another, mothers and small children were killed. Finally, the company executives relented on the status of the coal miners when these concessions could have been made without tragic violence. Zinn commented that current decent working conditions should not be taken for granted and that labor history gives readers a better appreciation of the sacrifices made by many men and women who would be so pleased with conditions as compared to the end of the 19th. and early 20th. century.

Zinn's chapter titled "The Problem of Civil Obedience" should be carefully considered. When the "Law and Order" folks warn about anarchy, Zinn comments on the death and crime when there is law and order. Zinn had some interesting comments when Americans exercised civil disobedience such as the American Revolution and the Abolitionist Movement. Zinn was clear that just because folks voted, this was obviously no guarantee of freedom. As Zinn wrote on page 51, "Totalitarian states love voting." The use of voting can result in majoritarian tyranny and violence against target defendants.

For those who want to be authentic dissenters, the section titled "The Supreme Court is Not Supreme" offers good guidance for effective dissent. Zinn made the point that seven years after the Bill of Rights were ratified, criminal libel and sedition laws were passed in 1798 imposing prison terms on those who criticized government officials. The same nonsense was repeated in 1917 and 1918 during and even after U.S. entry into W.W. I. Yet, after all the death and destruction, folks asked what was it all about. Presidents, U.S. representatives/senators, Supreme Court Justices, etc. take an oath to support and defend the U.S. Constitution. Zinn remarked that these same folks have forsaken their oaths when one realizes that the Bill of Rights are part of the U.S. Constitution. On page 61, there is an interesting anecdote re a film maker who, during W.W. I, was sentenced to a ten year prison term for producing a film titled THE SPIRIT OF '76 re the American Revolution. Since the British were U.S. "allies" during W.W. I, this was treason. The case reached the U.S. Supreme Court with the interesting title THE U.S. VS SPIRIT OF 76.

Zinn has another view of the U.S. Supreme Court. Zinn argued that rights are taken and not given. Readers should know that an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court can take many years and that often the U.S. Supreme Court Justices refuse to hear a case if it is to "contravertial." Zinn mentioned incidents where dissenters raised such a furor that attention had to be paid which resulted in reforms which may have never happened if these dissenters had waited for a decision (probably a bad decision) from Supreme Court Justices.

Zinn also had a section titled "Second Thoughts on the First Amendment." Zinn commented that violations of First Amendment Rights were done in the name of national security. Zinn raises the question of whose national security and that such claims of national security were bogus. Some political authorities were simply trying to avoid national embarrassment. Those who claim Americans should do what the government tells them to at all times, would be interested in a comment made by Gertrude Scholtz-Klink. She was in Hitler's government as a bureaucrat, and when asked why the Germans accepted National Socialist and Hitlerian policies, she remarked, "We always obey the law. Isn't that what you do in America?"

Zinn's section on "Just and Unjust Wars" is useful. He cited Einstein's remarks on war after Einstein saw the terrible mass killing during and after W.W. I. Zinn remarked that historians should write more about The History of Kindness rather than The History of War. Zinn remarked that just prior to the first Gulf War (1990-1991), James Baker made several flights to Geneva to tell the Iraqis there was no negotiations, and war was the only option. Zinn's comment that Baker was trying to get frequent flier miles was amusing when the same comment could have been made without the trans Atlantic flights.

Zinn had a section titled "Je Ne Suis Pas Un Marxiste" (I am not a Marxist). Zinn stated that Marx refused attempts to lead or join Marxist clubs when he lived in London. Zinn also commented that Marx could be dogmatic and doctrinaire. Yet, Marx's critics overlook some of Marx's writing, and an argument could be made that Marx may have "mellowed with age." Zinn then had interesting comments about the do gooders calling him (Zinn) a Marxist. Zinn was proud that he was included among 5,000 supposed Marxist professors, but he said he also felt lonely that the number was not larger.

The last section of the book is titled "The Perils of Plato" which is an essay re I.F. Stone's book titled THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES. Zinn remarked that Stone showed the apparent inconsistency between Plato's THE APOLOGY whereby Socrates was a defiant dissident against his accusers. Yet, Socrates claims the State of Athens as his parent in THE CRITO. Zinn shows the abuse of such terms of Fatherland, Motherland, Uncle Sam, etc. Zinn cites Henry David Thoreau who remarked that people enjoyed life due to their own effort, the interactions with others, and the benefits of individual achievement and NOT the government. Too often the government interferes with happiness and freedom.

Zinn also chided Stone's detractors. Since Stone's detractors could not get the feds to get a contract against him, they tried to smear him or get book publishers to shun Stone's work. Zinn had an amusing anecdote about the fact that Socrates did not leave any written work which may have resulted in Socrates' death. The Athenians took the phrase "publish or perish" too seriously.

As mentioned above the undersigned does not share Zinn's optimism. However, this reviewer should reconsider. If Howard Zinn who is almost 22 years older than the undersigned can be optimistic, maybe this reviewer can recover his optimism. While this reviewer does not agree with all that Zinn wrote or thinks, FAILURE TO QUIT is a book that informs readers of what is omitted but should be included in college history books. Let the students read and dispute the book's conclusions. Debate can add to knowledge.

James E. Egolf June 1, 2009

Balladolbine

Howard Zinn personifies the qualities that make a great historian; he is at once an activist and a chronicler, someone who knows that history is made out on the streets not behind the ivy covered walls of privilege. This essays and interviews contained in this small book all stand as positive evidence that the common people--the dirty masses, as conservative historians would call them--are the true foundation of history.

As enlightening as this book is, it is at the same time an alarming expose on the grossly prejudiced view of history--triumphalist history as it is sometimes referred--which is all too often constructed as a justification for and an apologetic to the injustice of the past and the crimes of the future. While some hold to the presumption that history, like the law, presides in some otherworldly state of objectivity, unassailable by mere human judgement, but as Zinn points out in the essay "The Problem is Civil Obedience", "The Law is not made by God, it is made by Strom Thurmond" (50). Thus, like the law, history is only as fair and objective as the people who write it.

Consequently, I would rather cast my lot with someone who worked their way through college, served in world war two and saw first hand the utter pointlessness and brutality of war, marched in the struggle for civil rights in the 60's alongside his students, and became a historian out of a desire to tell the true story of American History, warts and all, than accept the views of historians born into privilege, who never worked a day in their lives, avoided service in wars that they are all too quick to justify, and have lived their lives inside the protective walls of Harvard, Yale and Princeton. But that is precisely why so many hate Zinn and his writings, because he refuses to accept the safety of the status quo in historical inquiry, which leads to the exposure of what are often chapters in American history that many would rather forget or ignore.

There are none more indispensable to the cause of freedom and justice than those dissident voices like Howard Zinn, who despite the threats, censorship, and repression continue to tell the history of the forgotten and question the authority of America's self-appointed defenders of culture, which is nothing more than a construct of history steeped in dogma, denial and lies.

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