

# HOWARD ZINN

*Introduction by* STAUGHTON LYND

*on*

*history*

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HOWARD  
ZINN

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*history*

SECOND EDITION

Introduction by Staughton Lynd

Seven Stories Press  
NEW YORK

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Most of the material in this book also appears in *The Zinn Reader* (Seven Stories Press, 1997) and *The Zinn Reader, 2nd ed.* (Seven Stories Press, 2009).

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Seven Stories Press

140 Watts Street

New York, NY 10013

[www.sevenstories.com](http://www.sevenstories.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zinn, Howard, 1922-2010.

Howard Zinn on history / introduction by Staughton Lynd. -- 2nd ed., A Seven Stories Press first ed.

p. cm.

"Some of the material in this book appears in *The Zinn Reader, 2nd ed.*, Seven Stories Press, 2009"--T.p. verso.

eISBN: 978-1-60980-234-9

I. Zinn, Howard, 1922-2010--Political and social views. 2. History--Philosophy. 3. United States--Politics and government--

Philosophy. I. Title.

D16.9.z57 2011

901--dc22

2011016363

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# Howard Zinn, Historian

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by Staughton Lynd

## BEGINNINGS

A good place to begin an assessment of Howard Zinn as an historian is where he himself began: his master's essay on the Ludlow Massacre of 1914.<sup>1</sup> Howard was about fourteen years old in 1937, the year of the sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, and the Republic Steel Massacre. Later he worked for three years as an apprentice steamfitter. He read "books about fascism in Europe" and admired communist friends who were "ferociously antifascist."<sup>2</sup> It should come as no surprise that this self-taught working-class intellectual chose as his first academic subject what he called "perhaps the most violent struggle between corporate power and laboring men in American history." Ludlow, he added, remains "an obscure event, rarely mentioned in textbooks on American history" such as the *Encyclopedia of American History*, edited by Richard Morris, or Samuel Eliot Morison's *Oxford History of the American People*.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of Howard's death some question has been raised as to whether he was really an historian, and more particularly, whether he was able to produce the paradigmatic product of the academic historian: detailed narrative history based on fully-cited primary sources. His account of the Ludlow Massacre should put that question to rest. It is available in Howard's books *The Politics of History* and *The Zinn Reader*.

But the detailed rendering of a particular event did not satisfy Howard. He makes that crystal clear at the end of his Ludlow essay, where he writes:

How shall we read the story of the Ludlow massacre? As another "interesting" event of the past? Or as supporting evidence for an analysis of that long *present* which spans 1914 and 1970 [the year in which he was writing]. If it is read narrowly, as an incident in the history of the trade union movement and the coal industry, then it is an angry splotch in the past, fading rapidly amidst new events. If it is read as a commentary on a larger question—the relationship of government to corporate power and of both to movements of social protest—then we are dealing with the present.<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Howard's work on the Southern civil rights movement followed Howard's years of apprenticeship at Columbia. Howard and his family moved to Atlanta when he was offered a job there. He taught at Spelman College from 1956 to 1963. Following his abrupt and unjust dismissal in June 1963, he used the year's salary that came with the discharge letter to write two books: *The Southern Mystique* and *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*.

In the book on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, Howard's account of the movement in Albany, Georgia is as taut and detailed as his essay on Ludlow. The difference is that in his writing about SNCC there are fewer footnotes. Howard drew on

personal experience and oral history as well as written sources. His mini-histories of Alban McComb, Hattiesburg, and the Mississippi Delta remain the building blocks for the subsequent work of scholars such as Clayborne Carson, Charles Payne, and Wesley Hogan.

*The Southern Mystique* is in some ways a more interesting book than its better-known counterpart. Recall that in connection with the Ludlow essay Howard asserts that historians must “remove enough of the historical detail” from their accounts “so that common ground can be found ... between another period and our own.”<sup>5</sup> In effect, history must be reported in a way that makes possible sociological generalization.

Living in Atlanta through the years of sit-ins and Freedom Rides, Howard took a further step, formulating a methodology that would inform everything he later wrote. Everyone who knew struggled with the question, What was the best way to end racial segregation? Should it be sought by small, incremental steps that would gradually change attitudes? Or should there be decreed from above across-the-board change in the institutional environment, to which, over the course of time, whites would adjust first their conduct, and then their thinking?

Howard came down emphatically in favor of the second strategy. The example that seemed most compelling was the racial integration of the armed forces, which was only indirectly the product of history from below but most obviously was caused by orders from President Truman. A dozen years later it appeared to be working.

*The Southern Mystique* articulates a sophisticated rationale for this top down strategy. Persons inclined to dismiss Howard Zinn as a shallow popularizer should take a look at the “Bibliographical Notes” to *The Southern Mystique*. There one finds works of history: like Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery; The Strange Career of Jim Crow*; W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*; *From Slavery to Freedom* by John Hope Franklin; and *The Mind of the South*; of sociology: by Ross, Cooley, Mannheim, Merton, and Franklin Frazier; of social psychology: by Harry Stack Sullivan, Kurt Lewin, and Gardner Murphy; as well as classics of the day by Herbert Marcuse and Norman Brown.

The argument of *The Southern Mystique* goes something like this. The search for causes is a fool’s errand: it will go on forever, and can never be definitive. Instead of an endless wandering search for causes, Howard thought, we should focus on the present. Everyone has a hierarchy of values. Racism may well be one of them but it is unlikely to be the thing that anyone cares about most. Change the external requirements of daily life so that whites must engage in equal status contact with blacks in order to achieve their highest priorities, and over time, attitudes will change in response.<sup>6</sup>

After his discharge by Spelman College, Howard moved to Boston and found an academic livelihood in the political science department at Boston University.

Living in the Boston area and making one’s living at a university there may not, for most people, be a formula for solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Howard made it that. After he had been at Boston University about fifteen years, the faculty, the secretaries and staff and the librarians, all organized unions and with various grievances, and at different times went on strike. Howard was cochair of the strike committee of the faculty union. Like the workers of the Gdansk shipyard in Poland, he and a few other teachers urged fellow faculty members to stay on strike until the university administration agreed to a contract not only with themselves, but also with university secretaries, although to do so might have been viewed as a violation of the new faculty contract banning “sympathy strikes.”<sup>7</sup>



Ten years later, when Howard decided to “retire,” at the suggestion of his wife Roz he ended his last class half an hour early and together with a hundred students joined a picket line of workers at the university School of Nursing who were protesting an administrative decision to close the school because it was not making enough money.<sup>8</sup>

## AGAINST ALL WAR

After Howard left the South, the two great themes of his later years were, on the one hand, the People’s History, and on the other hand, his increasingly passionate and comprehensive opposition to United States imperialism and to war.

Howard did not invent the term “people’s history.”<sup>9</sup> Nor did he invent panoramic history of the United States drawn primarily from secondary sources. I can remember the excitement with which, as a high school student, I read *The Rise of American Civilization* by Charles and Mary Beard. Academic historians are still catching up with their idea that the Civil War was “second American Revolution.”

The People’s History is not mere popularization. In *A People’s History of the United States* Howard presents a snapshot of labor history in the 1930s consistent with what he had written about the Ludlow strike. Far from celebrating the advent of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the manner of most labor historians, these pages offer a minority opinion parallel to that of Jeremy Brecher (in his book *Strike!*), Marty Glaberman, Stan Wei and myself. Thus Howard writes:

[I]t was rank-and-file strikes and insurgencies that pushed the union leadership, AFL and CIO, into action.... It was to stabilize the system in the face of labor unrest that the Wagner Act of 1935, setting up the National Labor Relations Board, had been passed.... The NLRB would set limits in economic conflict as voting did in political conflict. And ... the workers’ organization itself, the union, even a militant and aggressive union like the CIO, would channel the workers’ insurrectionary energy into contracts, negotiations, union meetings, and try to minimize strikes, in order to build large, influential, even respectable organizations.

The history of those years seems to support the argument of Richard Cloward and Frances Piven, in their book *Poor People’s Movements*, that labor won most during its spontaneous uprisings, before the unions were recognized or well organized....<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Howard’s concluding vision of a revolt of the guards is no doubt Utopian. But I have personally experienced a situation in which predominantly black guards in a private prison, whom I helped to organize a little independent union, began to make common cause with an almost exclusively black prison population in opposition to white administrators. It was pretty exciting. The Corrections Corporation of America, the largest operator of private prisons in the country, took us seriously. Within a week after the guards’ union won an NLR election, the company began to close the place.

I consider Howard’s greatest achievement between the appearance of *The Politics of History* in 1970 and the death of my beloved friend and comrade forty years later to be his many-sided assault on what William Appleman Williams called “empire as a way of life.”



The young Howard Zinn had emerged from the anti-fascist politics of the Popular Front in the late 1930s to become a bombardier in World War II. He tells us in his autobiography how and why his outlook changed.<sup>11</sup> The bombing plane that drops its payload on human beings (most of them civilians and many of them children) whose suffering the plane crew never sees, or hears, or smells, came to represent for Howard the inevitable horror of all modern warfare. After Hiroshima, Howard came to repudiate that bombing and all the others.

His opening challenge to United States aggression was *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* which appeared in 1967. Notice two things.

First, as with racial segregation, there is next to no attention to the cause of the Vietnam conflict. The rest of us were looking for offshore oil reserves, or tungsten deposits, to explain the disproportionate interest of the American ruling class in this small, impoverished country. Later, after the publication of the Pentagon Papers, Howard wrote that United States policy had been motivated by “tin, rubber, oil, corporate profit, imperial arrogance.”<sup>12</sup> In *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* however, Howard was single-minded in trying to end the war, not explain it.

Second, as with racial segregation, there is a lingering hope, perhaps based on President Truman’s desegregation order, that the federal government could be induced to change its mind. This took the form of an imaginary speech by President Johnson ending United States intervention.

At journey’s end, Howard Zinn had become convinced that only direct action from below by American soldiers who refuse to fight, can end United States imperialism. By the time of his death, Howard was passionately urging that the civil disobedience he had first defended in the context of racial segregation should be practiced by members of the United States military.

Howard was never comfortable with joining organizations or with labels for his forthright affirmations. As an alternative to mass killing, he proposed action that is “focused, controlled, intervening between victims and the evil they face without creating more victims,” and viewed finding such a substitute for war as “the central issue of our time.” Another formulation advocated nonviolence in the form of “underground movements, strikes, general strikes, noncompliance.”<sup>13</sup>

But Howard was not a pacifist. He rejected war under any conceivable set of modern circumstances, because of what he considered its inevitable impact on innocent civilians, especially children. No such war could be just.

Similarly, he was not an anarchist. But it would be hard to find anyone, anywhere, who more passionately advocated disbelief in the official pronouncements of all governments. One such statement was this from 2005:

... [W]e cannot depend on the governments of the world to abolish war because they and the economic interests they represent benefit from war. Therefore, we, the people of the world, must take up the challenge. And although we do not command armies, we do not have great treasuries of wealth, there is one crucial fact that gives us enormous power: the governments of the world cannot wage war without the participation of the people. Albert Einstein understood this simple fact. Horrified by the carnage of World War I in which ten million people died in the battle fields of Europe, Einstein said: “Wars will stop when men refuse to fight.”

This is our challenge, to bring the world to the point where men will refuse to fight, and governments will be helpless to wage war.<sup>14</sup>

After Howard's death, Courage to Resist, a network of persons in the military who refused further service, circulated a flier with the following quotation from him: "As a veteran myself, I know how difficult it is to break out of the stranglehold the military has on one's mind, and how much courage that takes."<sup>15</sup>

## IN THIS BOOK

This book takes us into Howard Zinn's history workshop. It helps us to understand the fundamental attitudes with which he approached the subject matter of his more formal writing.

Some of these pieces were included in previous Zinn anthologies, such as *Failure to Quit*. Several have appeared in print as op-ed articles in newspapers like the *Boston Globe* or articles in magazines like *The Progressive*, sources that the ordinary reader might find difficult to identify and access. Still others are talks that have never been published. All were carefully selected by Howard from a mass of presented material.

One advantage of these relatively informal presentations is that they help us to remember Howard in his face-to-face persona. Howard was unmatched in his ability to make contact with an audience. He would approach the lectern or the microphone, standing a little awkwardly (he hurt his back working in a warehouse while a graduate student at Columbia) and typically begin with a series of humorous, self-deprecating asides. Then, before long, the listener would be gasping to hang on as he developed his ideas. One experiences this herein in the pieces on Marxism.

But what is of greatest value in this book is the window it provides into Howard Zinn's underlying perspectives. For example, he was indefatigably hopeful. Here he explains that he has hope (as distinct from optimism) precisely because history as it actually occurs is so unpredictable. Since we cannot know in advance whether proposed action A will lead to the desired outcome B, we are duty bound to proceed with A because it *might* help to bring about. Four students sitting in at a restaurant in Greensboro, North Carolina, or a group of Egyptian friends messaging one another on Facebook, could not have known in advance what would be the result of their action, but acted anyway, and turned the world upside down.

Similarly, we should not prematurely write off our initiatives as failures. As Howard writes, "History does not start over with each decade." I attended the founding meeting of Labor Against the War early in 2003. The gathering was held at the hall of a local union of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in Chicago. Since teamsters tend to be associated with unthinking nationalism rather than opposition to war, I asked the stewards what was going on. "It was the Vietnam vets," they told me. "They hit the mike at a local union meeting and said that they had seen this movie before."

I found essay 16, on Columbus, particularly interesting. When I read *A People's History of the United States*, I was blown away by its opening chapter and remembered that beginning when later chapters began to fade in memory. To see the landfall of Columbus through the eyes of the Arawak Indians who swam or paddled out to look up with innocent hospitality

the great ships of these strange arrivals was literally to do “history from below.” Howard tells us that he got letters from all over the country about this book of 600 pages, but most of the letters were about Columbus. In the talk at the University of Wisconsin made available here, Howard quotes more fully than in the book from the Harvard historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, who found Columbus notable chiefly for his “seamanship.” I remembered sitting in a classroom at Harvard where Morison lectured to us ... in his yachting whites!

Howard connects the straightforward fifteenth century racism of Columbus with the implicit twentieth century racism of Professor Morison by means of his vignette of the obscenely explicit attitudes of President Theodore Roosevelt and his circle of fellow ideologues. He helps us to avoid the assumption that working-class soldiers, especially from the South, are bigots, in contrast to the imagined tolerance of their Ivy League officers.

In *Howard Zinn on History* the reader will encounter Zinn preoccupations also explicated elsewhere: opposition to capital punishment, for instance, and advocacy of nonviolent direct action. Additionally, as coordinator of the Mississippi Freedom Schools in the 1964 Summer Project I feel compelled to recommend Howard’s *Nation* essay on the schools, reprinted here. It is both the best thing ever written about that experience and a clarion call for an approach to every kind of education in the United States that would combine talking and thinking about life with action.

Throughout these essays, Howard Zinn’s freshness, sincerity, passion, and common sense radicalism shine through.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude: When a soldier falls in battle, we pick up his gun. When a comrade dies in the struggle for nonviolent revolution, we try to pick up his dreams.

There is a scene in Howard’s SNCC book, and in *Howard Zinn on Race*, about the release of a battered civil rights worker from jail in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Present were two lawyers dressed impeccably; Howard Zinn, moderately presentable; and Oscar Chase, “his face swollen, his clothes bloody.” The FBI agent came out of his office and surveyed the four. Then he asked, “Who was it got the beating?”<sup>16</sup>

Is this a description of academic history? Surely we too need to be more precise and explicit in distinguishing victims from executioners. And then, remembering Howard, we need to do something about it.

Howard Zinn, Presente.

## NOTES

1. I base my description on “The Ludlow Massacre,” appearing in Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History*, 1990 edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970, 1990), pp. 79-101. Howard’s biographer says that the essay set forth “the essence” of the MA thesis. Davis D. Joyce, *Howard Zinn: A Radical American Vision* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 39. Introducing a reprinting of his Ludlow essay as it appeared in *The Politics of History*, Howard says that the Ludlow massacre came to his attention in two ways, “first in a song by Woodie Guthrie called ‘The Ludlow Massacre,’ then in a chapter of the book by Samuel Yellen, *American Labor Struggles*, written in 1936.” Howard Zinn, *Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), p. 183.

2. Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 170-171, 175-177.
3. *The Politics of History*, p. 79. In a column for *The Progressive* magazine, written near the end of his life, Howard Zinn reiterated that the Ludlow massacre was “still absent from mainstream history books.” Howard Zinn, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007), p. 101.
4. *The Politics of History*, p. 100.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
6. Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 7 (cause “not only baffles people, but, worse, immobilizes them”), 9 (except as an academic exercise, there is no need “to probe the fog that inescapably shrouds the philosophical question of causation”), 11 (“there is a magical and omnipotent dispeller of the mystery; it is *contact*”), 12 (“you *first* change the way people behave ... in order to transform the environment which is the ultimate determinant of the way they think”), 93 (“the universal detergent for race prejudice is *contact*—massive, prolonged, equal, and intimate contact”).
7. *You Can't Be Neutral*, pp. 190-191.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.
9. A young man named Harvey Wasserman had previously sent Howard Zinn a manuscript entitled a “People’s History” of the period between 1860 and 1920. Harvey Wasserman, “How the great Howard Zinn made all our lives better,” e-mail to Zinn, Jan. 28, 2010.
10. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 399-402. In Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *Voices of a People’s History of the United States* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), pp. 332-340, 345-349, three “voices” from the organization of the CIO are presented. All are rank-and-file workers. All are women. They are Genora Dollinger, who organized the Women’s Emergency Brigade in Flint, and two of the three “union maids” (Vicky Starr [Stella Nowicki] and Sylvia Woods) whose memories are reported in *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, ed. Alice and Staughton Lynd (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988). Note, too, that Howard’s own experience as a rank-and-file union member, first as a warehouse worker while he was at graduate school, later as a professor seeking to act in solidarity with nonacademic staff at Boston University, was to be “more left than the union.” *You Can't Be Neutral*, pp. 180, 101.
11. See especially *You Can't Be Neutral*, pp. 94-95 (fellow airman who told Howard that World War II was an “imperialist war”), 92-94 and 97 (experience in bombing the French town of Royan with napalm when the German soldiers there were waiting to surrender).
12. “Learning from Hiroshima,” in Howard Zinn, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, p. 54.
13. Howard Zinn, *Terrorism and War* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), p. 23.
14. Howard Zinn, *Just War* (San Giovanni, Italy: Edizioni Charta, 2005), p. 14.
15. E-mail from Courage to Resist, Feb. 3, 2010. To the same effect, Howard Zinn, Introduction to David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: G.I. Resistance During the Vietnam War*, updated edition (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), reprinted in Howard Zinn, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, pp. 173-177.
16. Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, second edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 117.

## Freedom Schools (1964)

*One of the remarkable achievements of the 1964 Mississippi Summer, when people came from all over the country to work with the civil rights movement, was the Freedom School. Thirty years later it still stands, I think, as an extraordinary experiment in educational democracy. My wife Roslyn and I were in Mississippi that summer, and I volunteered to teach in one of the Freedom Schools in Jackson. I wrote this account for The Nation, November 23, 1964. It appeared under the title "Schools in Context: The Mississippi Idea."*

The triple murder last summer in Mississippi probably would not have taken place there had not been plans to set up a school at the Mount Zion Baptist Church near Philadelphia. It was the visit of three young civil rights workers to the burned-out school site which led them to arrest, and then death. That a school should frighten a band of Americans into committing murder is not totally credible; that those particular killers made a deliberate mental connection between their act and the establishment of a "Freedom School" in the area is unlikely. Yet education spells danger to certain people at certain times, and what happened in Mississippi last summer suggests a continued sensing of peril.

This article will be concerned, however, not so much with the danger the Freedom School represented to some in Mississippi but with the promise they opened for the rest of us throughout America. For eight weeks, more than 2,000 Negro youngsters, averaging fifteen years of age but ranging from six to twenty-six and older, went to schools which violated all the rules and regulations of educational orthodoxy. They were taught by teachers who met no official qualifications; they assembled in church basements or on the streets or in the field; they came and went without attendance records, grades or examinations.

It was an experiment that cannot be assessed in the usual terms of "success" and "failure" and it would be wrong to hail it with an enthusiasm which would then lead it to be judged by traditional criteria. But that venture of last summer in Mississippi deserves close attention by all Americans interested in the relationship between education and social change.

The idea, and the term "freedom school," were first brought before the civil rights movement by a slender Howard University student named Charles Cobb, who several years ago interrupted his studies to plunge into the Mississippi Delta as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Cobb pursued his scheme with quiet, slow persistence, and when plans were laid last fall for a big "Mississippi Summer," with 1,000 or more volunteers to arrive in the state, Freedom Schools were on the agenda. Bob Moses, director of the Mississippi project, has a Masters degree from Harvard. He gave the idea close attention, and when Northern students were recruited during the spring many of them were told to be ready to teach.

The man who took charge of the summer Freedom School project for COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations: a union of SNCC, CORE and other civil rights groups in Mississippi) was Staughton Lynd, a young historian whose field, some might have noted warningly, is the

American Revolution. He had spent three years in north Georgia in a rural cooperative community, and then three more years at Spelman College, a Negro women's college in Atlanta. He had just resigned from Spelman in protest against restrictions on the academic freedom of both students and faculty, and was then immediately hired by Yale University. From the orientation session at Oxford, Ohio, in early June to the end of August, Lynd was a dynamo of an administrator, driving into the remotest rural regions of Mississippi to keep the schools going.

At Oxford, the Freedom School teachers were warned about difficulties: "You'll arrive in Ruleville, in the Delta. It will be 100 degrees, and you'll be sweaty and dirty. You won't be able to bathe often or sleep well or eat good food. The first day of school, there may be four teachers and three students. And the local Negro minister will phone to say you can't use his church basement after all, because his life has been threatened. And the curriculum we've drawn up—Negro history and American government—may be something you know only a little about yourself. Well, you'll knock on doors all day in the hot sun to find students. You'll meet on someone's lawn under a tree. You'll tear up the curriculum and teach what you know."

They were also told to be prepared for violence, injury, even death. But they hardly expected it so soon. The first batch of teachers had just left the orientation session for Mississippi when word came that one of the summer volunteers (Andrew Goodman), a white community center director (Mickey Schwerner) and a local Meridian Negro youth (James Chaney) were missing. A publicity stunt, said Mississippi officials. But the SNCC veterans of Mississippi disagreed. "Man, those guys are dead," Jim Forman said.

The summer volunteers got into cars and into buses, and moved into Mississippi. Two hundred Freedom School teachers spread out over the state, from Biloxi in the Gulf Coast up into Ruleville in the Delta, and farther north to Holly Springs, covering twenty-five communities. Day by day, more and more Negro kids came around to the schools, and the expected enrollment of 1,000 rose to 1,500 then to 2,000.

One of the Jackson Freedom Schools opened in early August in a church basement just a short walk from the state COFO office on Lynch Street. Its combination of disorder and inspiration was very much like that of the other schools in the state. The "faculty" was more experienced than most: a young high school teacher of English from Vermont acted as "coordinator"—a combination of principal, janitor, recreation supervisor, and father confessor. Another youthful junior high school teacher of mathematics was from Brooklyn; there was one college professor of history who had taught for a number of years in a Southern Negro college; also, an enthusiastic young woman named Jimmy Miller, whose husband, Warren Miller, had written in *The Cool World* about young Harlem Negro kids. The teachers lived in spare rooms, or spare corners of rooms, in Negro houses of the neighborhood.

Two days before the school was set to open, in close to 100 degree heat, the teachers canvassed the neighborhood for students. Each asked one of the Negro youngsters hanging around the COFO office to go along with him, so as to establish from the start that they were friendly visitors walking up on the porches, knocking on the doors, asking: "Do you know about the Freedom School starting on Wednesday over at Pratt Memorial Church?" No, they mostly didn't, and so the information passed across the threshold: "It's for teen-age boys."



and girls, to learn about Negro history, and the Constitution, and the civil rights movement and mathematics, and maybe French and Spanish, the way they don't get learning in the regular school." Kids on bicycles stopped, and one friend told another, and the word was passed on.

No one paid attention to details like age requirements, so that at the opening of school sixty kids showed up, from six to nineteen; Jimmy Miller marched the six to ten children out to a corner, to read with them, and teach them freedom songs, and sound out French words whose English equivalents they had not yet discovered, and painstakingly correct their spelling.

With the older ones, fourteen to nineteen, any idea of going in an organized way through an outline of Negro history or American government was soon dropped. Beyond a core of seven or eight who came faithfully every morning at nine and stayed until mid-afternoon, there were a dozen others who came and went as they liked. So the history professor started each day from where the mood struck him, from some point on which he thought the students' recognition might be fastened just long enough to pull them onward.

One day, it was an editorial in the morning's *Clarion-Ledger*, charging that civil rights workers were teaching people to break the law. "What do you think about that editorial? Is it true? If you could write a letter to the editor about it, what would you say? ... Here's paper and pencil, go ahead. We'll pick out one or two and *really* send them to the editor." This was not education for grades, not writing for teacher's approval, but for an immediate use; it was a learning surrounded with urgency. And the students responded with seriousness, picking apart the issues: Are we for the law? Is there a higher law? When is civil disobedience justified? Then the teacher explored with them the differences between statutory law and constitutional law, "natural" law.

On another day the teacher told his students about the annual fair he had visited the previous afternoon. It was held in Neshoba County where the bodies of the three murdered civil rights workers had just been discovered. A strain of tension and fear pervaded the crowds that day at the fair. Gov. Paul Johnson had said: "It is not Mississippi's obligation to enforce federal statutes." A representative of the John Birch Society had said: "I am for the Constitution, for freedom, for the open Bible." The students were asked: Do you disagree? Aren't you for the Constitution? For freedom? The discussion became heated. Distinctions were drawn, and became more and more refined, all by the students themselves, the teacher just listening: "Which Constitution does he mean, U.S. or Mississippi? ... Maybe we're for different *parts* of the U.S. Constitution ... Well, maybe we're for the same part, but we *interpret* it differently."

Teachers and students ate lunch together in the church basement, sang together, then separated into various activities. In a creative writing class, a teen-age girl named Lillie Mae Powell wrote a poem "The Negro Soldier":

One day while I was visiting a certain  
City this is what I saw. A Negro  
soldier with a broken arm who  
was wounded in the war.

The wind was blowing from the



North; there was a drizzle of  
Rain. He was looking from the  
Last place; his arm was in a sling.

The Negro soldier didn't go  
Home. He was looking to the east  
And to the west. His broken arm  
was in a sling.

The Jackson Freedom Schools faced only mild harassment. Early in the session, while canvassing for more students, two teachers—one a slim, blonde Skidmore undergraduate—were picked up by the police, held for several hours, then discharged. Violence spluttered around the COFO office in Jackson one ugly Saturday night: a young man building bookshelves for a Freedom School bookmobile on the street across from the office was clubbed to the ground by a white man who fled in a car; a dance hall where teachers and students were spending the evening was sprayed with bullets by a passing car, and a Negro boy was wounded; crosses were burned. But by Mississippi standards, Jackson was peaceful.

In the rural areas of the state, the danger was greater. A church used as a Freedom School in the little town of Fluckstadt was burned to the ground (when the teachers arrived on the scene, fifteen youngsters were waiting under a tree for class to begin). A Northern doctor who spent the summer in Mississippi with the movement told of the two white girls who lived along in a hilltop house out in the country, 30 miles from Canton, and held a Freedom School there. In McComb, so dangerous that the Justice Department pleaded with the Mississippi project not to send anyone in there, a Freedom School was started by a Washington, D.C., speech teacher, a young Negro named Ralph Featherstone. Two days after the first contingent arrived, a bomb exploded in the midst of sleeping SNCC workers. But 100 children came regularly to attend the McComb Freedom School.

Violence took the headlines, but behind it a phenomenal thing was happening in Mississippi: 2,000 young people were having experiences that would—for some in a small way, for some drastically—change their lives.

The kind of teaching that was done in the Freedom Schools was, despite its departure from orthodoxy—or, more likely, because of it—just about the best kind there is. For the teachers were selected not by any mechanical set of requirements but on the basis of general intelligence, enthusiasm and the kind of social conscience that would drive them to spend a hot summer in Mississippi without pay. They taught, not out of textbooks, but out of life, trying to link the daily headlines with the best and deepest of man's intellectual tradition.

Their object was not to cram a prescribed amount of factual material into young minds, but to give them that first look into new worlds which would, some day if not immediately, lead them to books and people and ideas not found in the everyday lives of Mississippi Negroes. They didn't always succeed, but even their failures were warmed by the affection that sprang up everywhere between teachers and students, both aware that they talked with one another inside a common cradle of concern.

One afternoon in Jackson, a visiting folk singer brought the students of a Freedom School out into the sun-baked street back of the church, formed them into a huge circle, and taught them an Israeli dance chant imploring the heavens for rain to help the harvest. Older Negro

passed by, sat on porches, listened to their children utter strange words and dance the strange dance. The young ones seemed to understand; they were beginning, for the first time in their lives, to reach beyond their street, beyond their state, to join in some universal plea.

A Stanford University professor of English told how hard he had to work to make contact with these young boys and girls, so different from his regular students. But it came. He walked into class, put them at ease with some foolery, got them to talk about the events in the morning newspaper. Then: "Who would like to read a story?" One girl stubbornly had her back to the class. He asked her to read and she turned around. "She then read this story by Eudora Welty, 'The Worn Path,' and read it beautifully; it could have been a stage performance. And this was back of the church, the only place we had for my class, with the noise of traffic all around."

When the girl finished reading, the teacher asked the class: "Did you like the story?" There was a chorus: "Yes!" "Why?" They responded. He told them about subject and plot, about description and dialogue, how in general one analyzes a story. He asked how the story made them *feel*, and one said sad, and another said it made her laugh, and he asked how could a story do both at the same time, and spoke to them of *irony*. "God, how they understood!"

He bridged what they read and how they lived. He read to them from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This was written, he said out of a Negro boy's personal experience. "Now I tell you a story of my personal experience." And he told of a wartime incident involving himself and Negro soldiers, in Charleston, South Carolina. And then, to the class: "Who else wants to tell a personal story?" The next day, one girl brought in a story which, he realized, was prose as good as that written by any Stanford freshmen he had encountered. And so literature was read and created at the same time.

In these classes, discussions of democracy, of the philosophy of nonviolence, were hard academic. In one Jackson school the class met to elect delegates to a convention of all the Jackson Freedom Schools. An older fellow named Jimmy, age 24, had been hanging around the class for the past few days. He spoke breezily of having recently spent three years in jail for a knifing. The teacher suggested that Jimmy sit up at the desk and chair the meeting. He laughed and complied, "OK, now, I'll choose the delegates," he announced. There were objections from all over the room: "We've got to *elect* them!"

"What kind of resolutions are we going to propose to the convention?" a girl asked. One was suggested: "If any kid is treated brutally in school in Jackson, all the kids in the Jackson schools walk out; we'll have a chairman in each school; we won't act just on say-so; we'll get written affidavits and witnesses before we take action. It's something like a student union."

The teacher was curious: "Do students get beaten up in your schools?" A girl answered: her principal had beaten a boy until he bled.

Jimmy then told how he'd been beaten by a teacher when he was younger. And how he and some friends had then found the teacher alone and taken revenge. "We had a nice understanding after that." He hesitated. "But I don't know what I'd do now. You know the nonviolence we're talking about. If it happened now I might beat him. Or I might just laugh and go away. I was young then and full of hate. At that time, I see something I want. I take it. Now, I *ask*. It's the movement I guess ... I want my son to come up different."

Role playing was used very often in the Freedom Schools. "Kids that age are natural actors," a teacher explained. "And it puts them in other people's shoes. We don't want to w

easy arguments over straw foes. They have got to be tough thinkers, tough arguers.” The teacher listed on the blackboard Barry Goldwater’s reasons for voting against the civil rights bill: (1) It is unconstitutional. (2) No law will end prejudice (“We cannot pass a law that will make you like me or me like you.”). (3) It can’t be enforced. (4) It violates the idea of State rights. The class went over the arguments, with one boy portraying Goldwater, and defending his points powerfully, another trying to break them down.

Outside on the street, in front of the building, an energetic, redheaded teacher was pointing to a blackboard propped up in the sun, the kids sitting in rows in the shade of the building. “OK, we can build any kind of community we want now. What will the rules be?” This was an hortatory kind of teaching, but a kind the schools fostered: constantly talking with students not just about what *is*, but about what *should be*.

A Harvard graduate in literature who had taught in Israel worked in a Vicksburg Freedom School.

It was hard. Youngsters hung around the school, slept there. Every morning, they were like corpses on the floor. To start class, you had to clean them out. The school was cramped, noisy. We used role playing a lot. Kids would portray three generations of Negro families, and we learned history that way. We sat in a circle rather than the usual classroom format, to stress the equality of teacher and student. I read to them from Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* and from Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream*, then had them write speeches as if they were Senators urging passage of the civil rights bill. I tried to extend the idea of oppression beyond race. If you pick on a small kid with glasses and beat him up, aren’t you acting the same as these white segregationists? I asked them.

One teacher spent a whole hour with his students discussing the word “skeptical.” He told them: “This is a Freedom School and we should mean what we say. We should feel free to think as we want, question whomever we like, whether it’s our parents, our ministers, or teachers, yes, me, right here. Don’t take my word for things. Check up on them. Be *skeptical*.” For these youngsters it was a new way of looking at the classroom. They told how in the high school in Jackson the rooms were wired so that at the flick of a switch the principal could listen in on any class in the school. Teachers were afraid to discuss controversial subjects.

The blonde girl from Skidmore College taught French to teenagers in her Freedom School. “I try to do the whole class in French, use pantomime a lot ... I soon realized these kids had never had contact with a white person before; maybe that’s the greatest thing about the whole experience. If nothing else is accomplished, it’s been a *meeting*, for both student and teacher.... We have a Freedom Hour at eleven every morning. They run it themselves, make their own rules.” She was asked if the Freedom Schools were not, in fact, *indoctrinating* the children. She paused. “Yes, I suppose so. But I can’t think of anything better to indoctrinate them with. Freedom. Justice. The Golden Rule. Isn’t there *some* core of belief a school should stand by?”

A green-eyed, attractive Radcliffe graduate, interpreter now for an international agency whose field was Latin American history but who had not a day of teaching experience or education courses to her credit, went to work in a Freedom School:

My kids were 9 to 13. I told them about the Spanish background of Negro slaves in the United States, about the Caribbean islands and the slave plantation system as it developed there, and compared that system with the one in the English colonies. I spoke to them about life in Brazil, about the multiracial societies in Latin America where people get along fine. I told them about the problems of kids their age in Venezuela, in Puerto Rico (where I've spent some time). Yes, it did something for them psychologically to know that there are people in the world worse off than they are!

Without a strict curriculum to follow, the schools capitalized on the unexpected. A class held out in the sun would take advantage of passers-by, draw them into discussion. One day three Negro women came by who'd just been trying to register to vote and had been rebuffed. The teacher beckoned: "Come over here and tell my students what happened." And so the children learned about the registration procedure, about voting, about what to tell their parents about going down to register. One of the middle-aged women, her anger still fresh, told them they must become educated if they wanted to change things.

It was risky, teaching without an ordered curriculum. And because it was risky, the Radcliffe girl said, it led to treasures.

I could experiment, do what I wanted, try things completely new, because I had no one to answer to, no reports to make. Nothing could happen to me or to these young people that would leave us worse off than before. And I could go off on tangents whenever I wanted, something I'd be afraid to do in a regular school setup. Wherever thoughts and discussion led, we followed. There was nothing we didn't dare turn to.

The road from study to action was short. Those who attended the schools began to come to mass rallies, to canvass for registration of voters, to question things around them for the first time. In Shaw County, "out in the rural," when the regular school began its session in August (Negro schools in the Delta open in August so that the children will be available for cotton picking in the fall), white Freedom School teachers were turned away from the regular school cafeteria, where some students had invited them to a lunch. The students then boycotted the school and flocked in large numbers to the local Freedom School.

The Freedom Schools' challenge to the social structure of Mississippi was obvious from the start. Its challenge to American education as a whole is more subtle. There is, to begin with, the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in any community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions. But beyond that, other questions were posed by the Mississippi experiment of last summer.

Can we, somehow, bring teachers and students together, not through the artificial sieve of certification and examination but on the basis of their common attraction to an exciting social goal? Can we solve the old educational problem of teaching children crucial values, while avoiding a blanket imposition of the teacher's ideas? Can this be done by honestly accepting as an educational goal that we want better human beings in the rising generation than we had in the last, and that this requires a forthright declaration that the educational process cherishes equality, justice, compassion and world brotherhood? Is it not possible to create a hunger for those goals through the fiercest argument about whether or not they are

worthwhile? And cannot the schools have a running, no-ideas-barred exchange of views about alternative ways to those goals?

Is there, in the floating, prosperous, nervous American social order of the Sixties, a national excitement equivalent to the excitement of the civil rights movement, one strong enough in its pull to create a motivation for learning that even the enticements of monetary success cannot match? Would it be possible to declare boldly that the aim of the schools is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for race and national hatred, and to turn all educational efforts into a national striving for those solutions?

Perhaps people can begin, here and there (not waiting for the government, but leading it) to set up other pilot ventures, imperfect but suggestive, like the one last summer in Mississippi. Education can, and should, be dangerous.

## Nonviolent Direct Action (1966)

*The experience of the civil rights movement forced me to think about the process of social change—about the alternatives of violence and parliamentary reform, and about the principle that was at the heart of the Southern movement for equal rights—non-violent direct action. I presented this paper at the 1965 annual meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association in New York, and it was published in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, January 1966.*

In 1937 sociologist Robert S. Lynd wrote a little gem of a book entitled *Knowledge for What?* in which he attacked the divorce of scholarship from the problems of his day. The book has just been reissued 27 years later. In the interim the world has experienced Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Birmingham, yet the accusation in that book against the world of scholarship remains exactly as true in every line. Social scientists for the most part still are not focusing their research directly on the world's urgent problems. True, they are accumulating data on these problems, but too often they avoid moving too close to the presentation of solutions because at that point controversy enters. So the scholarly monographs and the social evils keep rising higher and higher in separate piles, parallel to one another with such Euclidian perfection that we begin to despair they ever will intersect.

I would like in this brief paper to at least initiate a discussion on the uses of power, not as an academic exercise, but in relation to what we see around us and to what we hear, which grows more and more these days the sound of crowds in the streets.

The health of society, I assume, is dependent on a balance between people's expectations and the fulfillment of those expectations. Both the Buddhism of Gautama in the East and the Stoicism of Epictetus in the West in their emphasis on resignation as a means to happiness were fitted to the limits of a crude technology. Today the momentum of science has created worldwide waves of demand which *can* be fulfilled. Quiescence and resignation are no longer pertinent, and the clamor everywhere for change, though expressed in passion, is reasonable.

There is little question any more that change in our social institutions must come. Never before in history has there been such a consensus in objectives all over the world, nor such a variance of method in trying to achieve these objectives. Most men everywhere agree they want to end war, imperialism, racism, poverty, disease and tyranny. What they disagree about is whether these expectations can be fulfilled within the old frameworks of nationalism, representative government and the profit system. And running through the tension between agreement and disagreement are these questions: How much violence will be necessary to fulfill these expectations? What must we suffer to get the world we all want?

We have three traditional ways of satisfying the need for institutional change: war, revolution, and gradual reform. We might define war as violence from without, revolution as violence from within and gradual reform as deferred violence. I would like to examine all three in the new light of the mid-twentieth century.

Assuming that change always involves a degree of dislocation and of social cost, man

problem is then how to achieve maximum desirable change at minimum cost. War at best has been a haphazard way of deciding this question, for the impetus of war piles up the dead with little regard for social consequence, so that even those wars fought against the most obvious of evils, such as the Civil War (with Negro slavery at stake) and World War II (with global slavery at stake), brought in the first case the uncontrolled gushing of what Edmund Wilson calls "patriotic gore" and in the second the needless bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. At its worst, war has been mass slaughter without even the saving grace of a definable social goal. The Trojan War was the first and classic case, and that element of idiocy has persisted in all wars in varying degree.

Up to the hydrogen bomb, it was still possible to weigh cost and consequence. Now we can throw away the scales, for it should be clear to any rational and humane person that there is no piece of territory (not Berlin or Viet Nam or Hungary), there is no social system yet put into operation anywhere by man (not socialism or capitalism or whatever) which is worth the consequence of atomic war. If war ever in its shotgun way represented a method of achieving social progress, the illimitable scale of warfare today removes it forever as a justifiable method of social change. John U. Nef of the University of Chicago put it this way in his book *War and Human Progress*, which he wrote soon after World War II:

The only justification for war is the defense of a culture worth defending, and the states of the modern world have less and less to defend beyond their material comforts, in spite of the claims of some to represent fresh concepts of civilization. The new weapons have made nonsense of defensive war. Peoples have been left without any means of defending except by destroying others, and the destruction is almost certain to be mutual.

What of revolution? Here the balance of achievement and cost is less haphazard, though still far from rational. The four great revolutions of modern times (the American, the French, the Russian and the Chinese) though all erratic in their movement towards social progress, in the end, I believe, justified the relatively small amount of violence required to fulfill their ends. But today, can we still look to revolutions as the chief means of social change, and as a useful means, whereby great change can be achieved at relatively small cost?

In some exceptional instances, yes. But, as a general rule, it seems to me that the conditions of the contemporary world have removed the feasibility of revolutions in the ordinary sense. There are several reasons for this. One is that the power of weapons in the hands of the ruling elite makes popular uprisings, however great is the base of support, a very dubious undertaking. The other consideration, and probably more important, is that revolutions like wars no longer can be contained. They almost always involve one or more of the great nations of the world, and are either crushed by an outside power (as were the Hungarians in their revolt) or are prolonged to the point of frightful massacre (as the revolt in Viet Nam was met by the intervention of the French and then the Americans, and as the revolt in the Congo was stymied by Belgians and other forces). The Cuban Revolution was an oddity; it was able to subsist because it brought into the picture not one but both the two leading world powers. There, even in success we can see the perils posed by revolution in the contemporary world, for the Cuban Missile Crisis almost set off a global disaster.

This removal of both war and revolution as methods of ushering in the inevitable change



would seem to leave us with the stock-in-trade of Western liberals: gradual reform. Here the United States is the prime example of peaceful accommodation, harmonizing gracefully with the requirements of change.

There is a double trouble with this pleasant solution: it does not square with the facts of the American past, and it does not fit the requirements of the American future. Let me explain what I mean.

It is remarkable how many persons, both in the United States and abroad, accept the legend that our country is the quintessential example of peaceful, progressive development as opposed to the violent change characteristic of other parts of the world. Yet the United States was born in violent revolution, and then solved its chief domestic problem not by reform but by one of the bloodiest wars in modern times. Its history has been punctuated with bursts of violence. Each outbreak was a reminder, quickly forgotten, that the changes we made through gradual reform were not fast enough or large enough to match the growing expectations of sections of the population: the slow steps made against slavery, for instance (the abolition of the slave trade as agreed to in Philadelphia in 1787, the Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850) were all failures, and the Civil War resulted.

Congress did not move fast enough to alleviate the pains of exploitation for the new industrial working class of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and so the period from 1877 to 1914 saw a series of labor explosions unmatched in their ferocity in any country in the world: the railroad insurrections of 1877, the Haymarket killings of 1886, the Homestead strike of 1894, the textile strike at Lawrence in 1912 and the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado in 1914. What, if not the failure of American reformism, explains the growth of the Socialist Party to a million supporters in 1912, the emergence of the Industrial Workers of the World as a radical, militant labor union devoted to the abolition of the capitalist system? It took the hysteria of world war to help crush both these movements.

How successful was the reform of the Progressive Era of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson when the whole structure they built up to keep the economy intact (Federal Reserve System, Federal Trade Commission, antitrust legislation) collapsed in 1929, and ushered in another decade of violence (bonus marches and marches of the unemployed, of sit-down strikes and clashes between workingmen and police) and again ended not in prosperity but in war? Is it New Deal reform or war expenditures that keep today's economy from collapsing into another period of violent conflict? Can we really say that the history of our nation is one of carefully phased reform measures, of peaceful evolution towards domestic prosperity and national peace?

And now, in this last decade, we suddenly have learned that what we thought was gradual progress towards ending race prejudice in the United States was not nearly sufficient. It has taken mass demonstrations in Montgomery, Alabama; mass arrests in Albany, Georgia; the violence of the Freedom Rides; the bombings in Birmingham; and the murders in Mississippi to make us aware of the failure of piecemeal reform to establish racial justice in America.

There are lessons in this, I believe, far beyond the race crisis in the United States, and I want to explore some of them. My point is that gradualism, even in that presumed mecca of reform, the U.S.A., never really has matched the push of events, and that today the momentum of world change has made it even less able to do so. Thus, *none* of the traditionally approved mechanisms for social change (not war, nor revolution, nor reform)

adequate for the kind of problems we face today in the United States and in the world. We need apparently some technique which is more energetic than parliamentary reform and yet not subject to the dangers which war and revolution pose in the atomic age.

This technique, I suggest, is that which has been used over the centuries by aggrieved groups in fitful, semi-conscious control of their own actions. With the Negro revolt in America, the technique has begun to take on the quality of a deliberate use of power to effect the most change with the least harm. I speak of nonviolent direct action. This encompasses a great variety of methods, limited only by our imaginations: sit-ins, freedom rides and freedom walks, prayer pilgrimages, wade-ins, pray-ins, freedom ballots, freedom schools, and who knows what is on the horizon? Whatever the specific form, this technique has certain qualities: it disturbs the status quo, it intrudes on the complacency of the majority, it expresses the anger and the hurt of the aggrieved, it publicizes an injustice, it demonstrates the inadequacy of whatever reforms have been instituted up to that point, it creates tension and trouble and thus forces the holders of power to move faster than they otherwise would have to redress grievances.

The crucial problems of our time no longer can be left to simmer on the low flame of gradualism, only to explode. Poverty, for instance, will not be attacked on the scale which is required until the ease of the well off is punctured in some brusque way. And in this shrinking world, for how long can the United States contain its vast wealth inside the national membrane and spend billions on useless products while a million people starve in Calcutta? Once people begin to measure the distribution of wealth on global lines there may well be a clamor against the deformed concentration of it in one country of the world. Jet travel makes the world smaller than the Roman Empire. Then why shouldn't the parallel existence of opulence in America and India be as much an object of concern as the parallel existence in Rome of the opulence of emperors and the misery of slaves? And how else will horror be expressed under conditions of today except by some form of popular protest?

Consider another issue: with the possession of nuclear bombs proliferating in the world and with the mathematical probability of war by error increasing, can we depend on the normal parliamentary processes for concerned people to express to the powers of the world the revulsion against war? Should we not have an increasing number of those little bands of pacifists, from Bertrand Russell to the ones who sailed into the Pacific on the *Golden Rule*?

Also there is the problem of freedom for dissenters, which exists in East and West, North and South, in communist and capitalist countries, in the old nations and in the new nations. How else but by Poznan uprisings, by demonstrations and civil disobedience, can such freedom be maintained and extended?

For us in the United States, it is hard to accept the idea that the ordinary workings of the parliamentary system will not suffice in the world today. But recall that Jefferson himself, watching the Constitution being created, and thinking of Shay's Rebellion, spoke of the need for revolutions every twenty years. And Rousseau, at the very moment representative government was beginning to take hold, pointed to the inability of anyone to truly represent anyone else's interests. And Robert Michels, the Swiss sociologist, 150 years after Rousseau, showed us how an "iron law of oligarchy" operates within any government or any party to separate top from bottom and to make power-holders insensitive to the needs of the mass. No matter how democratic elections are, they represent only fleeting and widely separated

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