

Introduction: Zinn's World

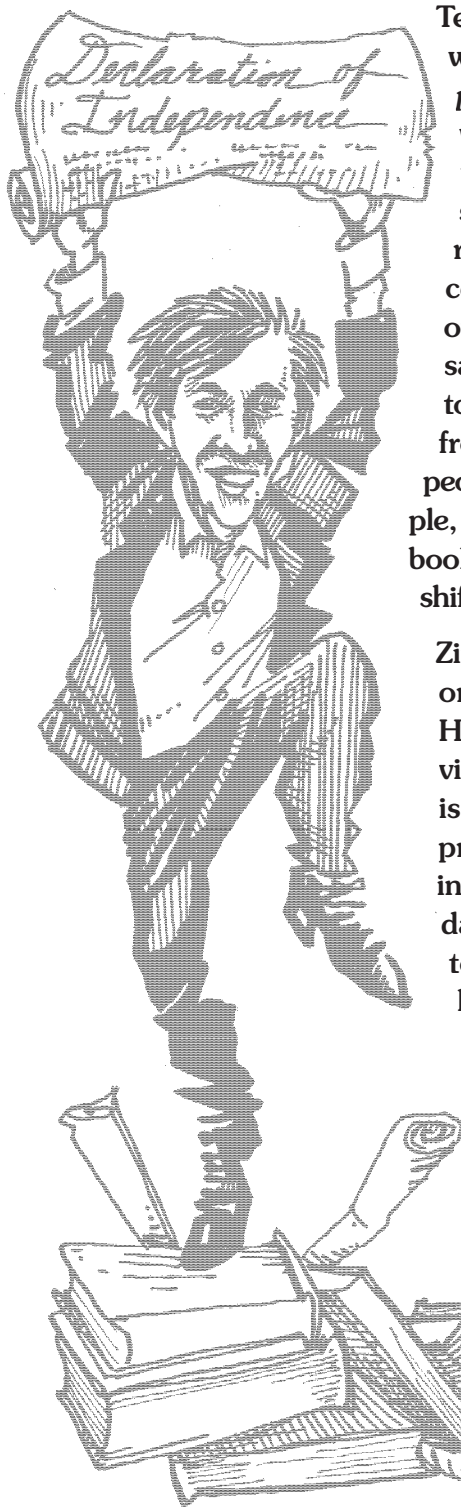
Rebel with a Cause

I start from the supposition that the world is topsy-turvy, that things are all wrong, that the wrong people are in jail and the wrong people are out of jail, that the wrong people are in power and the wrong people are out of power, that the wealth is distributed in this country and the world in such a way as not simply to require small reform but to require a drastic re-allocation of wealth.

*I start from the supposition that we don't have to say too much about this because all we have to do is think about the state of the world today and realize that things are all upside down. Daniel Berri-
gan is in jail—A Catholic priest, a poet who opposes the war—and J. Edgar Hoover is free, you see. David Dellinger, who has opposed war ever since he was this high and who has used all of his energy and passion against it, is in danger of going to jail. The men who are responsible for the My Lai massacre are not on trial; they are in Washington serving various functions, primary and subordinate, that have to do with the unleashing of massacres, which surprise them when they occur. At Kent State University four students were killed by the National Guard and students were indicted. In every city in this country, when demonstrations take place, the protesters, whether they have demonstrated or not, whatever they have done, are assaulted and clubbed by police, and then they are arrested for assaulting a police officer.*

—Howard Zinn,
“The Problem is Civil Obedience,” 1970





Ten years after writing the above words, Howard Zinn published *A People's History of the United States*, which asserts that the history traditionally told in history books is the story told from the standpoint of rulers to justify why they—a tiny percent of humanity—control almost all of the resources. Winston Churchill said, "History is written by the victors." Zinn set out to tell the story from the point of view of the other people in the world, the majority of people, the working, struggling masses. His book set off a revolution—a paradigm shift—in the study of American history.

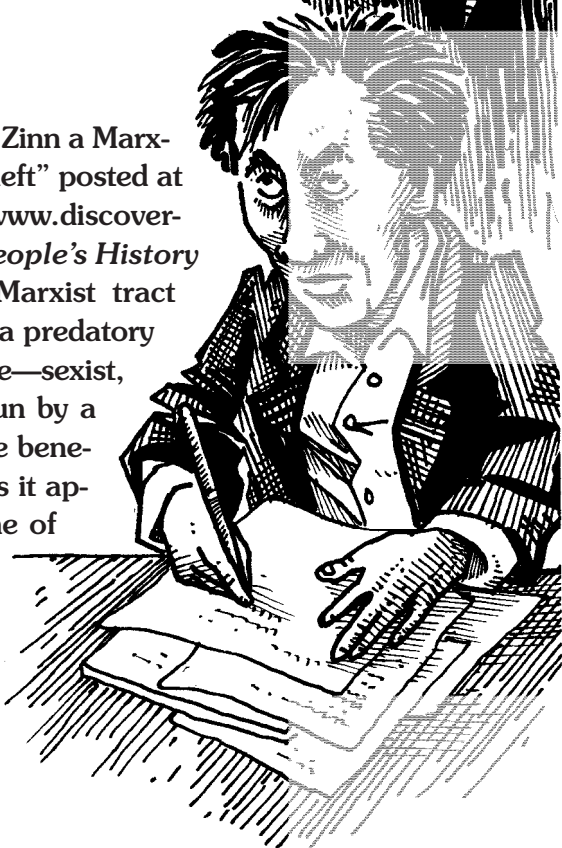
Zinn does not set out to be objective or impartial and does not claim to be. He begins with a definite point of view and a set of beliefs to which he is dedicated, essentially the same principles that were proclaimed during the Enlightenment and in accordance with the "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" articulated in the American Declaration of Independence. Though beautifully stated in the founding documents of America, they are principles that are often scuttled to the margins in the conduct of government and society.

Zinn recognized that any history is selective. The events of the world in any given day could fill many books. Every historian must choose his province that he wishes to explore. Many histories focus on wars and political struggles, some on culture and art. Zinn focuses on the lives and struggles of working people in a developing capitalist society, concentrating on the majority of the population instead of on the thin upper crust of the elites who enjoy the attention of most common historical accounts.

“There was never, for me as a teacher and writer, an obsession with ‘objectivity,’ which I considered neither possible nor desirable,” wrote Zinn in the introduction to *The Zinn Reader*. “I understood early that what is presented as ‘history’ or as ‘news’ is inevitably a selection out of an infinite amount of information, and that what is selected depends on what the selector thinks is important.”

Marx and Zinn

Some detractors have called Zinn a Marxist. “A guide to the political left” posted at Discover the Networks (www.discoverthenetworks.com), calls *A People’s History of the United States* “a Marxist tract which describes America as a predatory and repressive capitalist state—sexist, racist, imperialist—that is run by a corporate ruling class for the benefit of the rich.” The site finds it appalling that the book is “one of the best-selling history books of all time. Despite its lack of footnotes and other scholarly apparatus, it is one of most influential texts in college classrooms



today—not only in history classes, but also in such fields as economics, political science, literature, and women’s studies.”

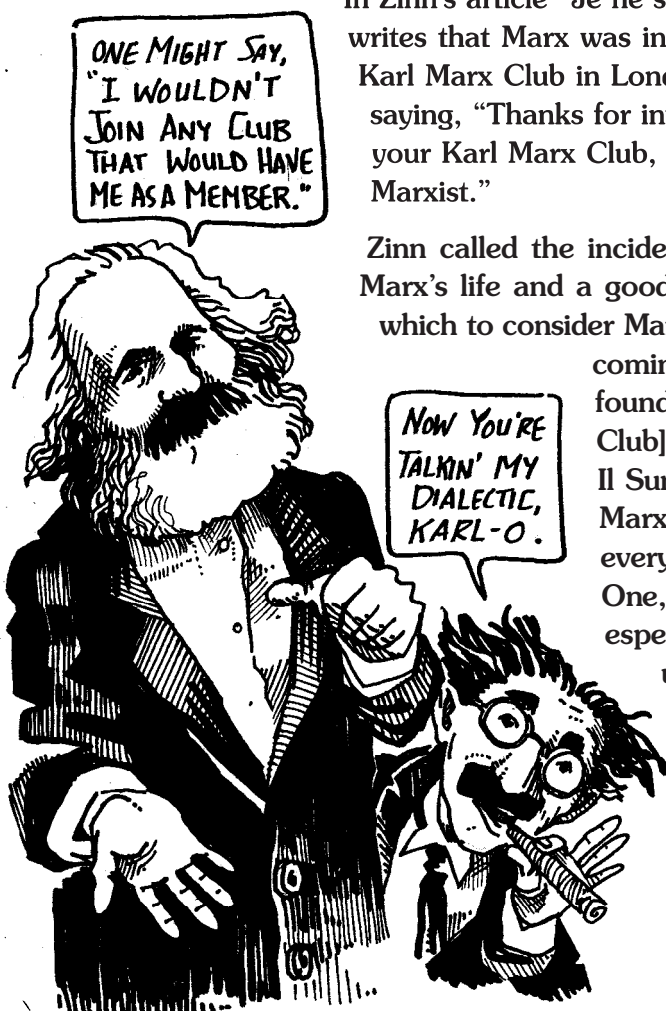
Daniel J. Flynn, the executive director of Accuracy in Academia and author of *Why the Left Hates America: Exposing the Lies That Have Obscured Our Nation’s Greatness*, wrote on the History News Network (<http://hnn.us/articles/1493.html>) that Zinn is an “unreconstructed, anti-American Marxist.” Flynn included Zinn on a list of five thousand “Marxists” he said were teaching in American universities.

Upon learning he was included on this list, Zinn rejected Flynn’s claim, noting that even Marx himself claimed to not be a Marxist.

In Zinn’s article “Je ne suis pas Marxiste,” he writes that Marx was invited to speak at the Karl Marx Club in London, but he declined, saying, “Thanks for inviting me to speak at your Karl Marx Club, but I can’t. I’m not a Marxist.”

Zinn called the incident “a high point” in Marx’s life and a good starting point from which to consider Marx’s ideas without be-

coming a Pieper [the founder of the Karl Marx Club] or a Stalin or a Kim Il Sung or any born-again Marxist who argues that every word in Volumes One, Two, and Three, and especially *Grundrisse*, is unquestionably true.”

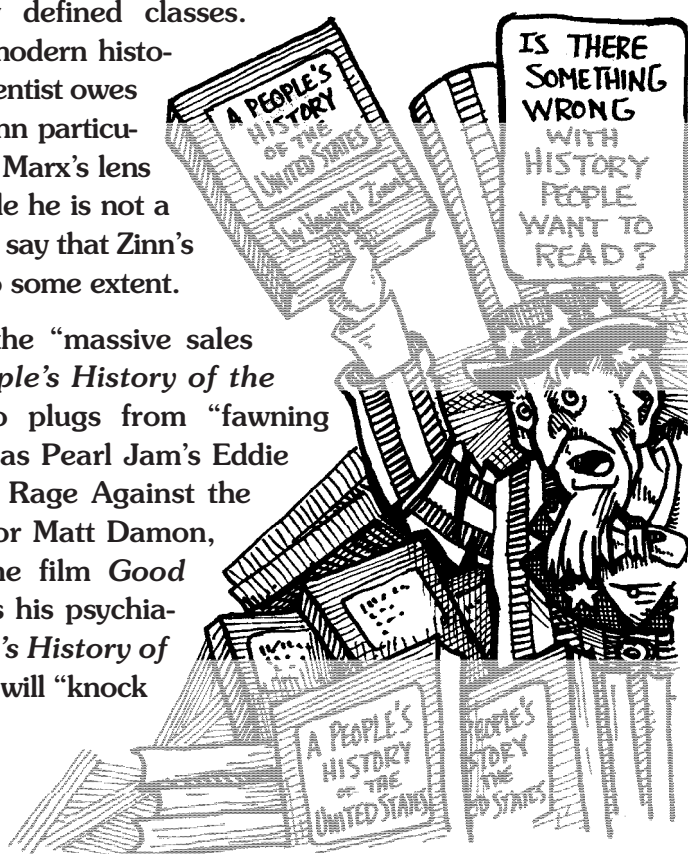


Zinn continued, “For a long time I considered that there were important and useful ideas in Marxist philosophy and political economy.” But Marx was also “often wrong, often dogmatic.” He was “sometimes too accepting of imperial domination as ‘progressive,’ a way of bringing capitalism faster to the third world, and therefore hastening, he thought, the road to socialism.” On the other hand, Marx “had something to say not only as a critic of capitalism but as a warning to revolutionaries, who had better revolutionize themselves if they intended to do that to society.”

Though Zinn does not consider himself a devotee of Marxist ideology, he clearly owes a debt to Marx in terms of his view of history and his analysis of the forces involved in human progress. Marx began his book, *The Communist Manifesto*, by saying: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Marx analyzed history in terms of the evolution of societies, an idea adapted from Hegel that was relatively new in Marx’s time. And Marx viewed that progression through the lens of economics and economically defined classes.

Practically every modern historian or political scientist owes a debt to Marx. Zinn particularly makes use of Marx’s lens on history. So while he is not a Marxist, it is fair to say that Zinn’s view is Marxian, to some extent.

Flynn attributed the “massive sales figures” of *A People’s History of the United States* to plugs from “fawning celebrities,” such as Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder, the band Rage Against the Machine, and actor Matt Damon, whose hero in the film *Good Will Hunting* tells his psychiatrist that *A People’s History of the United States* will “knock you on your ass.”



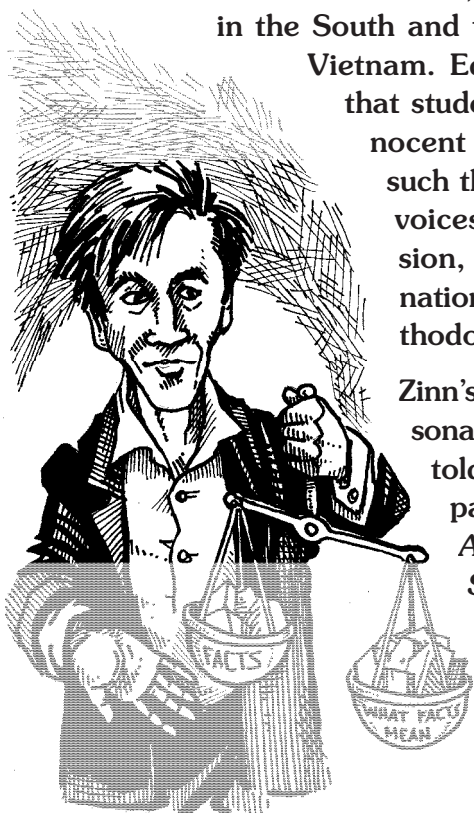
Flynn castigates Eric Foner, the *New York Times* book reviewer, for saying the book should be “required reading” for students. Noting that Amazon.com rated the book among the top sellers at major universities, Flynn wondered if the remarkable popularity of the book on college campuses was a result of “coercion” from teachers assigning the book to students.

Flynn calls Zinn’s work “biased journalism,” and to his way of thinking, there could be no better attack on Zinn’s writing than to mark it with the dishonorable stain of bias. Flynn concludes, “This slanderous tome and its popular and academic success are monuments to human credulity and delusion, and to the disgraceful condition of American letters.”

An interviewer from the *Boston Globe* asked Zinn if his writing was “fiercely partisan.” Zinn explained, “Long before I decided to write *A People’s History*, my partisanship was shaped by my upbringing in a working-class immigrant family, by my three years as a shipyard worker, by my experience as a bombardier in World War II, and by the civil rights movement in the South and the movement against the war in

Vietnam. Educators and politicians may say that students ought to learn pure facts, innocent of interpretation, but there’s no such thing! So I’ve chosen to emphasize voices of resistance—to class oppression, racial injustice, sexual inequality, nationalist arrogance—left out of the orthodox histories.”

Zinn’s view of history is passionate, personally involved. It is a people’s history, told by a participant, not a cold dispassionate outside observer. Reading *A People’s History of the United States* is a transformative experience, changing the way we understand and appreciate past events and culture.

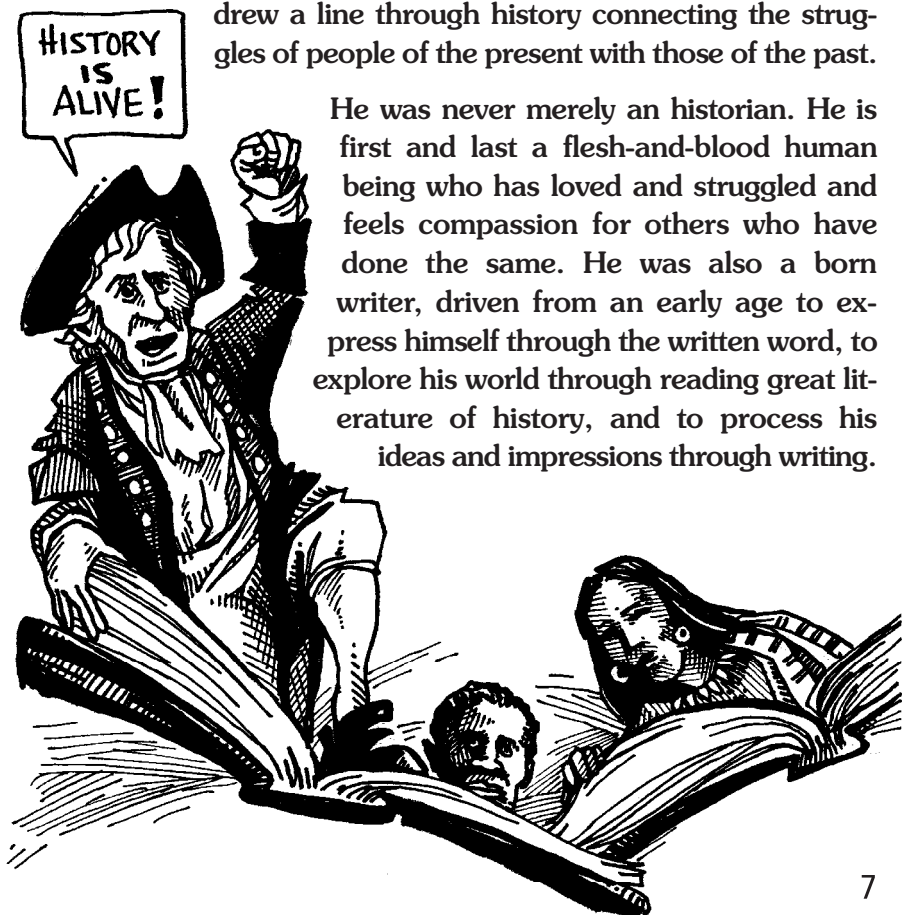


Howard Zinn: A Life in History

In the world of Howard Zinn the subjects of history are intertwined with the lives of the ordinary people one encounters on the street during the course of a day. In his own life he has never separated the history he wrote about or taught in classrooms from the reality of his own existence and that of other people in the world. He does not take the stance of an objective historian who imagines himself to be standing outside of history, evaluating it dispassionately. On the contrary, he is driven by his passion, and his perspective on history is personal. For him life and history are one.

For Zinn, there is also no clear separation between the present and the past. History is an ongoing story. Zinn's version of history is a great adventure, more like a great novel than a dry textbook. As a history professor, he often turned to historical fiction instead of textbooks to bring history to life for his students. As William Faulkner put it, "the past is never dead; it isn't even past." Zinn drew a line through history connecting the struggles of people of the present with those of the past.

He was never merely an historian. He is first and last a flesh-and-blood human being who has loved and struggled and feels compassion for others who have done the same. He was also a born writer, driven from an early age to express himself through the written word, to explore his world through reading great literature of history, and to process his ideas and impressions through writing.



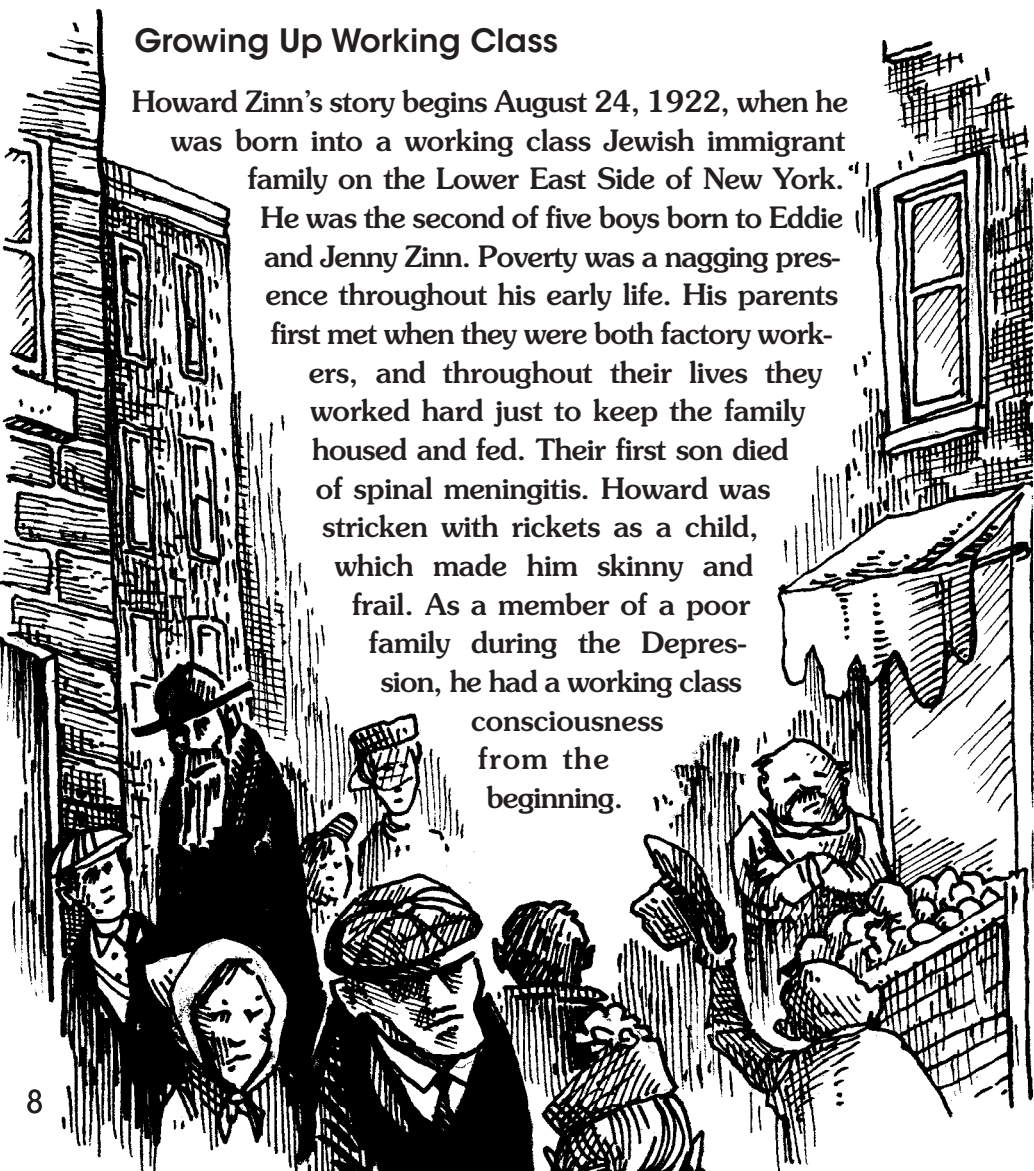
He was a teacher, who opened doors of the mind to thousands of students who passed through his classes. And he was an actor on the stage of history. Not merely a neutral bystander, he was an activist who dove into the struggles of his world and became one of the movers of history, who left a mark of his own, and encouraged others to do the same.

Zinn's life as an activist, his art as a writer, and his work as a teacher and historian are fused into one organic whole. By looking at his life, it is possible to develop an understanding of his ideas and his legacy as a historian. His life incorporates his history and vice versa.

Growing Up Working Class

Howard Zinn's story begins August 24, 1922, when he was born into a working class Jewish immigrant family on the Lower East Side of New York.

He was the second of five boys born to Eddie and Jenny Zinn. Poverty was a nagging presence throughout his early life. His parents first met when they were both factory workers, and throughout their lives they worked hard just to keep the family housed and fed. Their first son died of spinal meningitis. Howard was stricken with rickets as a child, which made him skinny and frail. As a member of a poor family during the Depression, he had a working class consciousness from the beginning.



His father had come to America from Lemberg, a city in Eastern Europe that had at different times been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Today it's known as the city of Lvov in the Ukraine. Howard's mother was from the Rabinowitz family of Irkutsk, Siberia, next to Lake Baikal near Mongolia. When people have commented on his Asiatic features, he has suggested, half seriously, that it may be because his ancestry traces back deep into Asia near Mongolia. Howard's parents were Jewish, he says, but neither of them was particularly religious.

Eddie Zinn worked various factory and labor jobs, as a window cleaner, pushcart peddler, necktie salesman, and WPA (Works Progress Administration) worker. He eventually settled into the dull drudgery of waiting tables at restaurants and weddings, and became a member of the waiters union. Young Howard sometimes worked with his father at New Year's Eve parties. He loathed it, especially the demeaning attitude of the bosses and customers toward the waiters.

Zinn's father never escaped poverty. "All his life he worked very hard for very little," Zinn wrote in his autobiography. "I've always resented the smug statements of politicians, media commentators, and corporate executives who talked of how, in America, if you worked hard you would become rich." The implication that if you were poor it was because you hadn't worked hard enough was a lie, to Howard. He had seen his father and many others who worked harder than big time businessmen or politicians, but Eddie Zinn and others among his class never escaped poverty despite their diligence.

