

ZINN, Howard. *Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian*.  
Monroe Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993, 164p.

*Michael LaRosa \**

Born in 1922, Howard Zinn has worked as a professional historian of United States History first at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and later at Boston University. Zinn entered New York University as a freshman in 1949 and received his professional training in the post-war period of U.S. economic expansion, Cold War tensions and Civil Rights activism.

In 1980, Zinn broke new ground by publishing *A People's History of the United States*. This textbook offered a radically new version of United States history by presenting the story of the United States from the perspective of Native Americans, women, blacks and workers. This reinterpretation of U.S. history surprised scholars and students and helped define a new wave of scholarship under the general heading of "multi-culturalism" which came to see the importance of the poor and the "powerless" in the evolving story of U.S. history.

*Failure to Quit* is a collection of fourteen essays and lectures by Zinn. Virtually every essay challenges the "official" version of United States history and helps students see the complexities and contradictions involved in the writing and interpretation of history. In the essay entitled "Objections to Objectivity" the author tells the reader that "objectivity" in the writing of history is impossible since all historians bring their own biases, life experiences and values to bear on their individual research agendas. In the author's words, "the chief problem in historical honesty is not outright lying. It is omission or deemphasis of important data" (p. 30). As an example of this, Zinn discusses the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 which pitted mine workers against John D. Rockefeller, owner of the mines where the massacre occurred. The author learned of this tragedy in U.S. history through a Woodie Guthrie song called "The Ludlow Massacre". This massacre appeared in none of the official textbooks that Zinn had been required to study as a student of

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\* University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL-USA.

History at New York University. Apparently, this "event" (the killing of 11 children and 2 women on 20 April 1914) was not important enough to make it into the official textbooks. Zinn insists, particularly in a chapter of his book *The Politics of History*, that the story of this massacre leads to a more thorough understanding of the extent of class conflict and violence in U.S. history as well as the government's, at best, *laissez-faire* attitude toward working persons. In Zinn's words, "the Colorado coal strike (and subsequent massacre) does not fit neatly into the pleasant picture created by most high school textbooks of the development of the American economy" (p. 34).

Throughout his career, the historian, playwright, and activist has helped students understand the importance of ordinary citizens' struggles in creating changes and expanding rights and opportunity in the United States. Thus, Zinn stresses in *Failure to Quit* that throughout the history of the United States, the Constitution, Supreme Court, and Congress have done relatively little to *guarantee* the safety and security of citizens. Zinn uses many examples to clarify this thesis, particularly in the essay "Second Thoughts on the First Amendment", where he writes about the struggle to end slavery in the United States.

Constitutionally speaking, slavery was outlawed with the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. However, as Zinn notes, most whites – especially in the U.S. South – virtually ignored the Constitution (for about 100 years) with respect to the rights of black persons in the United States.

The 14th amendment (1867) guaranteed citizenship for all persons born in the United States, but this amendment, "didn't take on any meaning until black people rose up in the 1950s and 1960s in mass movements in the hardest, toughest most dangerous places for anybody to rise up anywhere" (p. 73). Blacks, and whites – people who put their lives on the line in the South – are seen as the heroes of the Civil Rights Struggle. These people forced the courts and government to react with the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed school segregation (*Brown vs. the Board of Education*) or the 1964 Civil Rights Act which, essentially, outlawed many forms of racial discrimination. With respect to the famous "Freedom of Speech" provision known as the First Amendment, Zinn highlights several occasions in United States history when this amendment was suspended: first, under the Sedition Act of 1798 and again under the Espionage Act of 1917. In both instances, people were jailed for speaking out against the United States government and in the latter case, 900 persons were sent to jail under this Act, in clear violation of the First Amendment.

All of these essays in *Failure to Quit* are provocative and help students understand exactly how historical scholarship can be used (and abused) in

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**defining the "official" past. The omission of an index in this collection is a minor inconvenience. This book should be read by anyone looking for new insights and challenges in reading and understanding the history of the United States.**