

Democracy Requires Action, Organization, and Risk

Howard Zinn

One of the things that I got out of studying history was to question the notion of democracy. The more history I read, the more it seemed clear to me that progress was not made through the calm deliberations of Congress or the wisdom of the Supreme Court. Whatever progress has been made in this country has come because of the actions of ordinary people, of citizens, of social movement.

Consider economic justice. Obviously, we have not made *enough* progress toward economic justice, but we've made *some* progress. People used to work 12 and 14 and even 16 hours a day and six days a week. But now, it's common to work an eight-hour day. How did that happen? It wasn't done through the Supreme Court. It wasn't done through Congress or through the President.

An interesting thing about the Constitution is that it doesn't say anything about economic rights for people. Whatever economic rights working people have gained in this country, they gained through a long history of labor struggle. The history books mostly ignore this struggle.

Consider the rights of Black people in this country. Slavery ended not because Abraham Lincoln decided it should end. Slavery ended because there was a powerful movement of people that pressured the President and the Congress to end slavery. How did people achieve this? They were willing to break laws and commit acts of civil disobedience. One hundred years later, during



the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Blacks and their allies rose up again in mass movements in one of the hardest, toughest, most dangerous places for anybody to rise up anywhere. They created an embarrassment to the national government that finally began to bring some changes. They made the 14th Amendment (which guaranteed African Americans the right to vote) have some meaning for the first time.



Consider foreign policy. The Supreme Court did not do its job during the Vietnam War. It did nothing about the fact that the war in Vietnam was never declared by Congress and was therefore illegal. A movement had to be created in this country to stop the war. So that's what happened. The movement bypassed the formal institutions of government, and created an enormous commotion and tumult in the country that scared the President and Congress.



That's what democracy is. It's what people do on behalf of human needs outside of, sometimes against, the law. Democracy doesn't come to you only through the existence of formal institutions. It requires all sorts of energy, action, organization, risk, and sacrifice by ordinary people.

Howard Zinn is the author of A People's History of the United States. This was excerpted and adapted by Cynthia Peters from "Second Thoughts on the First Amendment," Failure to Quit, Reflections of an Optimistic Historian, Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993. Reprinted with permission.