Howard Zinn (Editor)

The power of nonviolence: Writings by advocates of peace

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This book's greatest strength is that it provides a full range of pacifist stances, from those that look at purely private, individual behavior, to those that consider international diplomatic relations. As a feminist philosopher-historian myself, I lament that more writings by women do not appear in the book.

Howard Zinn, long an advocate of peace and nonviolence, has provided us with a valuable and much-needed resource on the pacifist tradition in our post-9/11 world. The work contains classic writings by pacifist luminaries, like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Daniel Berrigan, as well as less well-recognized figures, such as Jane Addams, A. J. Muste, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. A reworking of *Instead of War* (Grossman 1963; Beacon 1965) published in response to the escalating U.S. military presence in Vietnam, Zinn's new collection has many merits. It includes some international writers and women, as well as essays written since the Vietnam War. Each of the essays is clear and accessible to a wide audience. Clearly this was Zinn's intent—to provide a resource that would simply point people in the direction of pacifism in a time of escalating hostility and violence. In fact, some of Zinn's omissions, are precisely those essays which are less accessible to a general readership: Kant's classic "Perpetual Peace," as well as selections by Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Schweitzer. His decision leave out these readings is understandable. *The Power of Nonviolence* is a compact 200 pages, with an average length of 8 pages per essay. In our too-fast-paced world, a shorter, catchier volume is probably a necessity.

The first section of the book includes texts written before 1900: an essay attributed to Buddha, and writings by William Penn, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. The selections from Buddha and Emerson focus on the private behavior and personal moral convictions that increase pacifistic action. Those by Penn and Thoreau begin to turn the spotlight on the link between the personal, moral decision to act nonviolently and a person's relationship to society as a whole. Thoreau advocates civil disobedience during the era of slavery, noting that "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be as violent and bloody a measure, as it would be to pay them and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution" (25).

Part II covers writings from 1900 to 1949 and features indispensable works, written during what may have been the most difficult era in modern social/political history, coming as it did on the tails of the progressivism of the late nineteenth century. Here we find selections by three women who have gained at least some recognition in recent years: Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil. Unfortunately, each of these selections is so brief that the reader barely has enough time to get a sense of just what pacifism is for these women. Addams, for instance, makes two important pacifist moves in *Newer Ideals of Peace* that are not discussed in the short selection included here. She calls for a moral equivalent of war and points to the link between internationalism in America, the women’s movement, and the universal appeal of peace around the world. The selections by men in this section, Nearing, Gandhi, Camus, and Wallace give us a better sense of the source and aim of their pacifism. Nearing refuses to be cornered into violence by the draft when he is convinced that war is irrational and contrary to human social impulses. Gandhi sketches out his famous and influential ideal of attaining inner peace. Camus points to the dilemmas war creates: even when a person wishes to remain neutral, war forces us to choose sides, to be either victims or executioners. And Henry Wallace foresees the impending Cold War and the arms buildup that was integral to it. “The flaw in this policy is simply that it will not work . . . a peace maintained by a predominance of force is no longer possible” (75).

Part III continues the discussion in the Cold War era, and the essays here reflect the fatalism of those years. Here Zinn includes an expanded number of voices and for brevity’s sake, I will highlight just two. Erich Fromm determines that nuclear disarmament is not only possible, but necessary, *and* worth the risk. “At present, we are caught in a position with little chance for survival, unless we want to take refuge in hopes. If we have enough [bomb] shelters . . . we might have only five or twenty-five or seventy-five million killed.” If we want a more promising future, we have to seek “new alternatives to the present choices that surround us” (95). Zinn’s own very fine essay, “Vietnam: The Moral Equation” calls the left to account for failing to recognize its own means/end problem in regard to violence. Since many have their pet example of when using violent means is justified to attain a given end—the American Revolution for self-determination, the Civil War to end slavery, World War II to halt Hitler’s horrific crimes—absolute pacifism isn’t tenable. Zinn, therefore, outlines the conditions under which organized violence is justified. Pure pacifists will wonder if an essay that essentially outlines a just war theory belongs in a book on non-violence. Still, Zinn’s essay points to the wide range of pacifist theories that have to be considered, particularly in the age of terrorism. An individual pacifist may hold an absolute commitment to nonviolence in all cases. But can government leaders assume a non-aggressive foreign policy when its people may come under attack?

Part IV opens with a dialogue between Daniel Berrigan and Vietnamese activist Thich Nhat Hanh, an excellent selection to follow Zinn’s essay. Here Berrigan and Hanh consider how to develop and nurture “communities of resistance” as a peaceful counterforce to violent and oppressive regimes. Hanh expresses the ideals in this peace well: “A community that shows abundance of life, that is an example of the wholeness of life, would be an eloquent sign of the possibility of the future” (142). The book then ends with three post-9/11 condemnations of U.S. military action in Afghanistan in 2001, by Arundhati Roy, Tim Wise, and the world’s Nobel Prize laureates. Each selection recognizes that the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks were brutal and unjustified acts of violence against innocent people. But each berates the U.S. for its retaliation against Afghanistan. Roy invokes *Animal Farm* imagery and logic by titling his essay “War is Peace” and pointing out how many military conflicts the U.S. has been in since World War II, despite its (self-)image as a peaceful nation (twenty-one, to be exact). Wise questions the received wisdom that military action in light of 9/11 is simply realistic and that peace advocacy is naïve. The world’s poet laureates urge an end to aggression against Afghanistan and an effort to “reach a political solution” and “reestablish a legal order to provide for justice and social equality in Afghanistan and in the world” (199).

This book's greatest strength is that it provides a full range of pacifist stances, from those that look at purely private, individual behavior, to those that consider international diplomatic relations. As a feminist philosopher-historian myself, I lament that more writings by women do not appear in the book. Lydia Maria Child, Julia Ward Howe, and Lucia Ames Mead in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America were deeply committed to both social equality and political justice that would make war unnecessary. Their work and that of other influential women certainly could have been included. Mead in particular was a pre-League of Nations theorist who made an important distinction between international disputes and war. We may always have disputes among nations, she observed, but this does not mean it is justified to resort to war. Just as human sacrifice, dueling, slavery, lynching, and capital punishment have been outlawed in the majority of industrialized nations, so too can we dismiss war as a viable option when faced with international conflicts.

The most important thing, however, is that this book and others like it exists at this troubled and war-torn time. We are familiar with the rhetoric and strategies of war, even when it does not affect us. But how much do we know about the theory and practice of building and maintaining peace? How many schools teach our children one iota about the peace movement in this country? Zinn's book provides us with a resource for reviewing our own conceptions of how pacifism can and cannot, will and will not work. And newly released editions of the history of the peace movement in America provide us, and our children, with an understanding of the development and growth of pacifism on our soil. Charles Chatfield has issued a new edition of *The American Peace Movement*, suitable for the general reader as well as college and advanced high school students. This book provides good background on the basics of pacifist arguments as they respond to and shape the political realities around them. And this new edition does a much better job of recognizing women leaders in the peace movement than the 1992 edition did. For younger readers, Michael Meltzer's new edition of *Ain't Gonna Study War No More* provides an excellent explanation of pacifism, its religious roots, and its political ideals. Meltzer's biggest strength may be his clear discussion of the stance of conscientious objectors. In a culture that feeds violence to our kids—via stalk-and-kill video games, rock and rap music, and fantastical, whole-scale war movies like "The Lord of the Rings"—a book of this sort is critically important. And kids of all sorts are exposed to this pervasive violence in popular culture. One twelve-year-old budding feminist I know gave up on the Harry Potter series, because it was too predictable and "all about boys, boys, boys." The Tamora Pierce books that she discovered instead feature girls as heroes and adventurers. But even here, the action often ventures toward violence. The latest installment at the time of this writing, *Lady Knight, Protector of the Small*, is Pierce's response to 9/11. The heroine, Kel, must rescue all the children in the kingdom from a tyrant who holds them captive and will destroy them all if he isn't hunted down and killed himself. Kel is the one who does the job, bloody though that job may be, and the book ends happily ever after. When asked to square Pierce's story with Meltzer's book, our budding feminist responded:

Lady Knight shows the caring and protective "mother" side of Kel, who puts her life at stake for the ones she was sent to protect. In this book, Tamora Pierce proves that though war is exciting and thrilling it is also frightening and sorrowful. It really explains why soldiers that go to war—let alone come back—are heroes for their courage. Pierce proves that it takes a lot of courage to go to war.

Ain't Gonna Study War No More is a book of peace, hope, justice, nonviolence. It is a book that can take history and twist it into a point of view that is worth thinking about twice. One point of view that many people wish to seek is peace. Meltzer proves that though we have "freedom and justice for all" we don't have peace with many countries.

These are the unedited words of one girl from a semi-rural American community, who, as a Tamora Pierce fan, is part of a kids' counter-culture. (I've come to learn that Pierce has something of the cache for middle schoolers that Gothic subculture had for the late-adolescent crowd in the '90s.) But this girl is also a part of the patriotic mainstream, encouraged to see the soldier as a hero. The questions that don't get asked in books like those Pierce has authored—as well as in real life, unfortunately, is whether their heroes *need* to go to war. Kel, the Lady Knight, can have visions of the Great Mother Goddess, and prove her mettle in the ghoulish trance-state of the "chamber of ordeals," but she can't find a way to confront an evil tyrant without resorting to all-out warfare and, ultimately, assassination?

This is a serious matter for pacifists to face: In the wake of pervasive evil, how *do* we enact nonviolent policies? Can the community of nations use diplomacy to rout out the leader of a "rogue state," assuming they've correctly identified said leader? Or is the only answer to fight terror with a full-blown "shock and awe" attack? Just what level of coercion is acceptable in such cases for those of us who call ourselves pacifists? The writers in Zinn's collection would answer each of these questions differently. One thing that the majority of pacifists would say, however, is that a unilateral, pre-emptive attack has no place in today's political and military world. Pierce and her escapist young readership know that Lady Knight is a character whose wisdom works only in the fictional world she inhabits. Would that our world leaders could be as wise and recognize that the militaristic fiction *they* are now creating is utterly unsustainable.

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