

# Howard Zinn: You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train

A Film by  
Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller

2004, 78 Minutes, 16mm and Video



## FIRST RUN FEATURES

153 Waverly Place

New York, NY 10014

(212) 243-0600/Fax (212) 989-7649

Website: [www.firstrunfeatures.com](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com)

Email: [info@firstrunfeatures.com](mailto:info@firstrunfeatures.com)

# HOWARD ZINN: YOU CAN'T BE NEUTRAL ON A MOVING TRAIN

A film by Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller

“I had a modest goal when I became a teacher... I wanted to change the world.”  
–Howard Zinn

*Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* documents the life and times of the historian, activist and author of the best selling classic *A People's History of the United States*. Featuring rare archival materials, interviews with Howard Zinn as well as colleagues and friends including Noam Chomsky, Marian Wright Edelman, Daniel Ellsberg, Tom Hayden and Alice Walker, *You Can't Be Neutral* captures the essence of this activist and thinker who has been a catalyst for progressive change for more than 60 years. As Noam Chomsky said of him, “it is no exaggeration to say he has changed the consciousness of a generation.”

*You Can't Be Neutral* follows the trajectory of Zinn's life from his early childhood in the slums of New York City. In the 1930s Zinn worked in the shipyards and organized workers. In the 40s he met his wife and enlisted in the Air Force, and during WWII dropped bombs on European towns and cities – an experience that was forever to shape his outlook on war and its effects. Moving to Atlanta with his young family to teach at Spelman College, Zinn took a leading role in the early Civil Rights Movement, resisting the Southern power establishment and then the FBI. In the 60s, while teaching at Boston University, Zinn led students in protesting the Vietnam War, and flew to Vietnam on a peace mission where he negotiated the return of American servicemen from the North Vietnamese. Although he had discovered that the Vietnamese leaders were looking for a dialogue with American leaders, his entreaties to the U.S. administration to peacefully engage them were ignored.

As a teacher and writer, Zinn continues to inspire generations of those who struggle for social and economic justice. His landmark book *A People's History of the United States*, an eye-opening history of the United States from the perspective of the disenfranchised, has sold over one million copies since it was first published in 1980, and amazingly sales continue to increase every year. Now in his eighties, Zinn still speaks widely to enthusiastic audiences of all ages.

**Directed and Produced by:** Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller

**Narration:** Matt Damon

**Music Composed by:** Richard Martinez

**Featuring Music by:** Billy Bragg, Woody Guthrie, Eddie Vedder

**Denis Mueller's** work includes *The FBI's War Against Black America*, co-directed with Deb Ellis; *I Would Never Do That Again*, about the experiences of Vietnam veterans and *Citizen Soldier: The Story of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*. Mueller has worked as producer of numerous historical documentaries, including *The Assassination of JFK* and *The Assassination of Martin Luther King*, and a feature length documentary on J. Edgar Hoover. Mueller has received fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, works as a freelance archival footage researcher, and most recently, is working toward a PhD.



**Deb Ellis, Co-Producer/Editor** is an independent media producer in the field for twenty years. Her work includes award-winning *Unbidden Voices*, an experimental documentary about an East Indian woman in Chicago and *Skin Deep: Norplant in Poor Communities* (both distributed by Women Make Movies in NYC); and *The FBI's War on Black America*, co-produced with Mueller. She has worked on many projects about subjects ranging from police brutality to welfare rights, including serving as production manager for the documentary *The End of the Nightstick: Police Brutality in Chicago*, a rigorous examination of brutality and torture within the Chicago Police Department that appeared on the PBS series POV. Ellis currently teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont.

**Richard Martinez, Music Composition** Credits include music for *Bossa Nova* and score for *The Daytrippers*. Other credits include music for recordings by Dave Valentin, B, S & T, and Al MacDowell as well as music for all major networks and cable. He is presently producing music for *Nero Wolfe* on A&E and *For the People* on Lifetime. Music Producer for film score composers Elliot Goldenthal, Michael Small and Wendy Blackstone. Films include *Frida*, *In Dreams*, *Batman & Robin*, *Heat*, *Interview With A Vampire*, *Batman Forever*, *Michael Collins*, *A Time To Kill*, *Alien 3*, and *Drug Store Cowboy*, to name a few.

**Cyndi Moran, On-Line Editor/Project Advisor** is a Chicago-based documentary filmmaker with 15 years experience as a professional editor of commercials, television shows, documentaries, and high definition television. Her documentary (with co-producers Eric Scholl and Peter Kuttner) *The End of the Nightstick*, aired on PBS's acclaimed independent showcase *P.O.V.* Her films and videos have won numerous awards and have been screened in festivals across the country and internationally. She is also a frequent contributor to the Emmy-award winning Chicago arts program, *Artbeat*. Other credits include series editor for 3-time Emmy award-winning *Ben Loves Chicago*, and finish work on the Sundance award-winner *The Return of Navajo Boy*.

## **Quotes about Zinn:**

“In his life and work, in his dedication and courage and searing honesty, Howard Zinn has become a model and inspiration for those who seek justice and peace. His contributions are truly incomparable. It is no exaggeration to say that he has changed the consciousness of a generation.” - **Noam Chomsky**

Zinn is still a vigorous force of nature to be reckoned with; a model of defiance against the status quo of the past and the present. Howard's works inveigh against those who would prefer to accept the more traditional glossy depictions of America's history (or its present) for their own political ends. By telling the truth about our country, with all its terrible mistakes and outright crimes, Howard frees future generations of Americans from recreating the same grievous errors of the past.

**Paul Lussier, Author**

**Last Refuge of Scoundrels (2001)**

Howard Zinn captures what the other historians fail to capture.

**Studs Terkel**

Howard Zinn is one of the heroes of our time

**Martin Sheen**

I think of Howard as the Pete Seeger of the movement of history.

**Bob Moses, former SNCC member**

**Director, The Algebra Project**

He was the best teacher I had, certainly the funniest.

**Alice Walker**