

What would Howard Zinn do?

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What would the late historian Howard Zinn have been doing in the classroom last week after being called out as a fraud, his name dragged around three years ago by a man who was then Indiana's governor and now president of one of the state's major research universities?

"He would teach the controversy," said Nadine Dolby, a Purdue University professor watching as a beloved teacher from her days at Boston University was publicly upbraided by the president of her present university. "That's just what he'd do."

The past week's storyline featuring Zinn and Purdue President Mitch Daniels would be a controversy ripe for a seminar, having taken on a life of its own. At issue was a 3-year-old email correspondence uncovered and reported last week by The Associated Press, in which Daniels, as governor, told Statehouse officials he wanted to be sure that Zinn and his book, "A People's History of the United States," had no place in Indiana schools.

Daniels' view was hardly novel when it came to Zinn, who sold more than 2 million copies of the 1980 book that attempts to tell American history through the eyes of the oppressed, the ousted and the also-rans. In his own book, "Keeping the Republic: Saving America by Trusting Americans" (2011), Daniels devoted a half-page to running down Zinn's "decidedly slanted version of American history that downplays the triumphs of our Founders and free systems."

And it wasn't difficult for Daniels to find a host of others willing to run down Zinn, too -- a reiterated stance that hasn't necessarily played well in academic circles where comparative histories are dealt as currency.

Whether Zinn deserves a pedestal or history's back door is clearly open to debate. Either way, Daniels has been under fire ever since in his new job for something he rolled out in his old job.

As an Inside Higher Ed piece by Scott Jaschik, who cited a fair amount of scholarly criticism of Zinn's work, put it: "What the Daniels critique doesn't include is that many of these historians agreed with Zinn's premise that American history as traditionally taught represents too narrow a set of perspectives."

To Dolby, a curriculum studies professor in the College of Education, her professor's story is one of dissent. She calls Zinn a role model when it comes to professors. And she recounts several stories about her time in class and beyond with Zinn in her 2011 book, "Rethinking Multicultural Education for the Next Generation." Here's her take.

Dolby: One of my concerns is that in this whole conversation and the way the emails have come to light and the way it's been represented, I'm afraid he's become a caricature and that he's been misrepresented. And he died a few years ago, and he's no longer with us, so he can't represent himself. ... When he started doing his writing in the '70s, these were not radical ideas. To characterize him that way is just incorrect in the context of the history of the day. These were ideas that were floating around. He didn't invent women's history or African American history. These were movements that were well underway. What he did was pull them together and give them voice in a way, and he made them accessible to people. You can buy

"People's History" in a regular bookstore. You don't need academic training ... to get some sense that the voices of people matter and matter to the sense of who we are as a country.

Question: Why do you think he's become a caricature now? Why has he become this polarizing figure, then?

Dolby: I didn't think he was a polarizing figure. I see he's being portrayed that way in the emails. But I don't see him that way, because I see him in a more complex way. ... The president of a major research university should understand that academics clash and criticize each other sometimes. That's part of the process. Does that get unnecessarily vicious sometimes? Yeah, it does.

Q: Isn't Daniels essentially saying that exact same thing? Isn't he clashing now like the academics do, saying he thinks Zinn doesn't belong in the classroom -- that he's twisting American history?

Dolby: I'm concerned that calling a respected scholar something like that is beyond the realm of civil discourse at a university. ... That's the sort of language that concerns me because it pulls attention away from his ideas, which are very powerful. They're about people coming together to make change. We see that in the women's suffrage movement, we see that in the civil rights movement, we see that in the antiwar movement, we see that in the gay marriage movement. That was a grass-roots movement that now has created incredible change. In fact, the Supreme Court said very clearly, we want to follow public opinion, and public opinion on this is changing. To discredit those ideas is very disturbing to me.

Q: What was Zinn's presence in class?

Dolby: He was a very funny man and warm man. Told jokes all the time. Very self-deprecating. And very humble. When it came to his students and students who disagreed with him -- and a lot of students in our classes disagreed with him; it was the mid-'80s, Reagan and all that, a very conservative era -- he didn't sit there and shut them down. ... He would lecture for a little while, maybe a guest speaker, and then it was an open forum for students to talk and challenge him. He enjoyed being challenged. It kept him fresh and it kept him on his toes and it kept him connected to the next generation. He always wanted to connect to young people.

Q: Can you see where a then-Gov. Daniels might have been coming from on this one?

Dolby: I can't understand that at all. To me, dissent is the highest form of American democracy. The whole thing is built on dissent. ... You don't have to agree with that dissent, but you have to respect that if we don't have it, we've lost the fundamental structure of this country. To me, that's really dangerous. ... What did he call what Howard did ...?

Q: Anti-American.

Dolby: That's the kind of rhetoric people in power use to try to silence conversations. We saw that in Iraq, right? It was anti-American to protest. And then what happens 10 years later? Oh, there were no weapons of mass destruction. That rhetoric is just a strategy to keep people from feeling afraid of dissenting, when actually dissenting is what we need.

Q: Imagine you're back in that class, and this controversy over him comes up, what's Zinn's class like this week?

Dolby: He would teach the controversy. That's just what he'd do. Let's talk about it. Let's look at these emails. Let's look at my book. And let's look at whether Mitch Daniels wrote about me, and let's look at that book. And let's talk about it. That's what he'd do, because that's what he did all the time, every single class.

Q: What about Zinn outside the classroom?

Dolby: I was part of a lot of the activist movements, particularly the anti-apartheid movement in the '80s. And he was there. ... He wasn't a detached academic who sort of wrote about these things but didn't put his heart where his mouth was. He put everything there, because he cared very deeply that these things were wrong -- that apartheid was wrong. Obviously. That's easy to say in retrospect. But, that was the early '80s, and there were people who didn't really think it was so bad.

That's the thing. A lot of times we look back and we remember how radical it was to confront apartheid. Now, everyone looks back and knows it was wrong. It was so radical to oppose the Iraq war. Most of the public doesn't think we should have gone in. That's why dissent is so important, because it creates an atmosphere in which people can explore alternative ways of thinking.

That's something I took from Howard. That's what Howard taught. That's why he still matters.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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